

# Personality and authenticity

PR professionals need to avoid the use of corporate speak when engaging with their audiences

**T**he post-recession era has been characterised by intense scrutiny of corporations by government, NGOs and the media.

The world is on high alert for any suspected misdemeanour, be it greed (the banks), environmental damage (BP) or dubious practices (News International). In this digital age, every customer has a public voice with which to alert others to corporate misbehaviour.

But has the response of corporate PR professionals to this increased pressure been effective?

Many seem to have retreated to the bunker of defensive corporate jargon and bland, faceless statements. *Real Business* recently asked readers: 'As times get harder, have you noticed how our movers and shakers come up with ever more deceptive phrases to gloss over difficult situations?', noting that overspun corporate language makes the listener 'want to reach for the whiskey glass and the loaded revolver'.

Few will take such extreme measures but it does beg the question: in response to increased scrutiny, have we gone too far in practising the dark arts of spinning, to the degree that people have stopped listening?

The select committee appearance by the Murdochs was a lesson in removing personality and humanity from comms. Although James Murdoch's performance may be regarded by some as a triumphant exercise in message control, his answers were robotic. In a situation that required humanity – and a personal, believable response to serious allegations – all we saw was bland corporate posturing.

If the rise of digital media and Twitter in particular tells us anything, it is that comms is all about the power of true human voices. Twitter is not just about sharing information – it is about opinion, belief and authenticity.

Twitter followers will attest that it is more engaging to follow Harry Wallop



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than just *The Daily Telegraph* Twitter feed – you not only get the news, but also what Wallop thinks about it. Good tweeters link their news with their views, allowing a sense of personality to shine through loud and clear.

As we move to a media landscape shaped not just by traditional journalists but by bloggers, tweeters and citizen publishers, news is becoming more opinionated and partisan – it is news with personality.

The *quid pro quo* is that businesses must reveal their own personalities to cement connections with their audiences. The need to get the 'corporate line' right must be balanced with comms that build a real sense of authenticity and human values.

Rohit Bhargava, inventor of the new theory of *Likeonomics*, says: 'We all want to do business with people we like.' Bhargava lists 'honesty, simplicity and being human' as the core attributes of likeability, but notes that businesses are prone to removing these elements when engaging with their audiences.

The *London Evening Standard's* City Spy column, ever-watchful for dodgy PR practice, pounced on a recent release that had completely removed any trace of the spokesperson's personality – although the spokesperson in question was David Beckham.

Putting classic corporate speak into the mouth of a footballer, the release claimed that when speaking about the launch of his H&M clothing range, Beckham said: 'The final piece in the jigsaw was a retail partner who has the vision and capability to distribute these products globally. In H&M, we have found the perfect partner to collaborate with going forward.'

The *Standard's* response? 'Note to PROs: if you're going to make up celebrity quotations, at least make it sound like them.' Without personality, our words are falling on deaf ears.

Ros Hunt is managing director of corporate affairs at Cohn & Wolfe

## Views in brief

### Which brand has gained most, reputation-wise, in the wake of the riots?

Twitter. First with the latest on the riots, it enabled eyewitness accounts within seconds and brought to life some of the tragedies behind the riots, while Facebook or BBM were seen as channels for looters to facilitate disorder.

### How would you deal with an assault from UK Uncut on your clients?

Internal comms is a critical element of managing any activist attack. It was apparent when UK Uncut staged a sit-in at Fortnum & Mason in April 2011 that staff had not been briefed on how to deal with this kind of situation. As a result, its customers were also left in the dark.