



BRITISH BODYGUARD ASSOCIATION

JOURNAL



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By: Anna Averkiou
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“NO COMMENT”? NO BUSINESS

Staying under the radar and avoiding the media is second nature for most security professionals – but increasingly they are finding themselves unwittingly in the media spotlight.

It's one thing to actively court press attention – and indeed, some have become so familiar as part of an “A-Lister” entourage, they have become celebrities themselves. For many however, media attention following anything from an incident outside a local nightclub or a disgruntled ex employee through to a badly behaved celebrity or a complex K&R situation, is not only unwanted, it could threaten the viability of their business.

More than ever before, security professionals need to not only understand the media, but in some circumstances actively engage with it to protect your business reputation and that of your clients.

The first thing to appreciate is how much the media landscape has changed in recent years. In the past we relied on print, radio

and television for our news and rules of engagement were straight forward. Today, social media and smart phones have transformed the way we consume news; and the ease with which anyone can upload pictures and videos of and comment on incidents means very little escapes unnoticed.

The first indication that anything has happened is usually via Twitter and with over 288 million monthly active accounts, nothing spreads faster! As we saw during the Arab uprisings, it's not just for mindless gossip about celebrities. Twitter is also where the majority of journalists will look for stories – and they WILL find out what's going on. The phone-hacking scandals, rise of the “citizen journalists”, celebrity sycophancy and obvious product endorsements, belie the reality that the majority of

journalists abide by a strict code of professional conduct and genuinely want to get at the truth and inform. It is therefore important to be accountable and the primary source of information about what's happened and what you're doing about it.

The traditional approach of regarding journalists as the enemy and greeting any queries with “no comment” will give the impression you have something to hide and will more than likely result in negative press. They will also end up talking to other more willing sources – possibly a competitor who may not be particularly complimentary or helpful.

As pressure mounts for a response, you and your team could find yourselves the subject of intense scrutiny. It's incredible how ▶

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quickly assumption and rumour can and does ruin lives and businesses because there is no accurate information available from source.

So what needs to change?

As with any operation, the key to successfully using and engaging with the media - particularly when things go wrong – is preparation. It is crucial to factor the media into your risk planning from the start because protecting your organisation’s image could prove to be just as important as ensuring all the operational procedures are in place. Too often it is tacked on at the end or not at all, and this is when people get caught out.

In the same way that you do risk assessments, establish media strategies to deal with different theoretical situations if they arise. Imagine how they might play out in the press and what resources you have to deal with inquiries. What can and can’t be said taking into account contractual, data protection, legal issues as well as the sensitivities around possible victims, relatives and a general duty of care for your staff.

Operational considerations include how you and/or your team will communicate the most up-to-date-information to the person charged with speaking to the press. It is vital that everyone is on message. You might want to consider preparing emergency news release and web page templates in advance that can be published quickly if needed.

It is a dangerous and false economy to hire media/marketing staff with little or no experience because they

are cheap and seem to understand about social media. It takes experience and editorial maturity to anticipate and deal with crises – particularly with the sensitivities surrounding the security sector. This will help ensure that not only are your media relations managed properly - but that your reputation stays intact.

One of the big difficulties for the security sector is the need for discretion and in most cases you will have signed NDAs. I recommend getting to know your clients’ PR/Comms people and understand their media strategy so that any response to an incident can be coordinated with your viewpoint considered. You may want a clause re media relations included in any contract. Either way, you don’t want to be left having to deal with defending your reputation on your own or indeed having to suffer in silence whilst the world and his wife discuss the merits or faults of your security arrangements on social networks.

Most importantly, make sure that your whole team are aware of appropriate responses and their responsibilities when dealing with the media - particularly when there are sensitivities involved. If you really can’t say anything, explain that you can’t give details but provide reassurance that the situation is being dealt with quickly and appropriately and, if agreed as part of the planning process, suggest they talk to the client’s PR.

Many celebrities want publicity – but on their terms. Others would prefer not to have it at all. More



often than not, their PRs alert the paparazzi to where they will be – and altercations will always make the news. Again, work with them in advance.

Cultivate good relationships with journalists. Get to know them and establish your credentials before an incident happens to be taken seriously when it does. There IS collusion between the press and PRs –and indeed the intelligence and emergency services when necessary – but that can only work when there is mutual trust and reasonable grounds to do so.

It’s worth monitoring social media to see what’s being said about your clients (particularly those who are well-known) in order to

anticipate likely media questions. Consider who is saying it? Are they a potential threat? Is your client worried at all about the on-going “chatter”? It will also provide an indication of what journalists are likely to ask. Put yourself in the shoes of those affected by the incident and your stakeholders – what would they want to know?

It’s advisable to provide media training for senior executives to ensure they are not only able to deal with journalists’ questions but can come across with the right mix of confidence, reassurance and empathy. Having been in the background for so long, speaking in public can be quite daunting, but body language, clothes and tone of voice all have an impact on how you

will be judged by a critical public which now expects transparency and honesty in the light of many recent scandals.

Dealing with a crisis is a challenge for anyone and whilst transparency is the antithesis of the quiet professional’s protective posture, honesty is vital. You don’t have to give away state secrets, but integrating a proper media strategy into your contingency plans will give you the tools to engage, acknowledge and demonstrate that everything possible is being done to resolve the matter, without compromising the safety of the principle and the team as a whole and well as safeguarding the future of your business.

Anna has more than 25 years’ experience as an international journalist with news organisations such as the BBC, CNN, ABC, Reuters and Associated Press TV – often working in hostile environments. She has a particular interest in security and crisis media management and now provides bespoke consultancy and training around the world to help a wide range of private, public and third sector organisations understand and engage effectively with relevant media.

