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Fighting fires and building bridges

Last year a major Australian charity woke up to a public relations nightmare. Its research findings, the subject of major coverage in the national media, were publicly challenged by another research organisation, which demanded that the charity be called to account for both the data and the conclusions it drew from the research. The conflict itself became the subject of media coverage.



Karen Masters from Upstream Australia

The issue of how research findings are reported in the media can be controversial. Research News invited three public relations professionals to respond to a hypothetical situation involving the reporting of research results. They are Karen Masters from Upstream Australia, Liz McLaughlin from Horizon Communication Group and Andrew Kirk from Hill & Knowlton.

The hypothetical situation

Your client has carried out research for a major employer to discover the attitudes to and impacts of the new industrial relations laws on young people in Australia. It has conducted a national random telephone poll of 1000 young people.

Meanwhile, a competing agency has conducted research about the same topic using mobile phones, online panels, tracking blogs and focus group work. That researcher's client has published results which include estimates of the numbers of young people negatively affected by the laws. The estimate is almost double that of the number negatively affected in your client's survey. Their results have been released to the media and have attracted prime time television and front page newspaper coverage.

After examining the publicly available data from the other research study, your client believes that there are major methodological flaws in the study and that the findings are not supported by the data. Your client wants to enter the media debate.

Karen Masters, general manager, Upstream Australia

How would you advise your client to respond?

Responding to a media situation like this one will very much depend on the purpose of the research, so having a clear understanding of the background drivers for the study will be important and will influence the strategy for publicising the research in the first place.

The fundamental difference between these pieces of research is the number of young people negatively affected. In this case, the client's research paints a more positive picture of the impacts of the new IR laws on young people, and as such is more likely to appeal to the federal government. It may be possible that the government might even be interested in helping announce the research. For example, partnering with the federal Minister for Industrial Relations to announce the research would potentially attract more media and working closely with the federal government to develop a joint storyline that links the research results to government policy and is confirmed by official government statistics would add further credibility. It would also reduce the likelihood of the two pieces of research being directly compared.

The key point is that in a case where two pieces of conflicting research are being announced at the same time, it's important to ensure your story is more credible and stronger than your competitors, and that could be achieved through strength of message, authority of the spokesperson and the credibility of third party support or endorsement.

If your client is aiming for a retraction in the media, how do they go about achieving one?

A 'retraction' wouldn't work. We would not recommend this as a strategy. The journalists are only reporting on a set of findings which are accurate according to the research they were given.

If the differences between the two organisations come down to research methodology, how can this be dealt with in the media? Is the media interested or equipped to deal with this level of detail?

In terms of the research methodology detail, it needs to be seen to be credible. All media will want to be sure that the statistics they report are correct. Both companies must be able to demonstrate that.

Do you have overall comments about how research organisations should deal with the media when releasing results and how both sides of a debate should deal with differences in opinions relating to research findings?

It's important to establish the context of any piece of research so that commentators recognise the importance or significance of the material and the impact it could have on Australians in general.

Journalists only publish credible, authoritative research. Research companies need to ensure that the research results that they are releasing are perceived by the media as being bona fide facts or statistics.

It's also worth mentioning that it's not always the facts and figures that are important, but the interpretation of that research and what it means to people in their everyday lives.

Andrew Kirk, general manager, Hill & Knowlton

How would you advise your client to respond?

Based on the information provided, we'd counsel the client not to use the media to respond. The media have covered the research extensively and as such, must have confidence in the methodology used as all good PR consultants will include the research methodology on the media materials. Media will normally ask about the research methodology if it is not clear - especially sample size and how it was conducted.

Going out with conflicting research following is unlikely to get media pick-up

as they will not wish to run a story which contradicts one they did recently - even if you believe your methodology is better.

Also, we would advise not to publicly denounce a competitor. It will look like an attempt to weaken a competitor's story, create tension in the industry and expose the client to criticism.

If your client is aiming for a retraction in the media, how do they go about achieving one?

We do not believe that the client would get a retraction from the media. The media will only provide a retraction if they have reported something inaccurately. In this example, the media have not done anything wrong. They have used research provided to them which they believe is valid.

If the differences between the two organisations come down to research methodology, how can this be dealt with in the media? Is the media interested or equipped to deal with this level of detail?

Some journalists will be interested but for many the story will be old news. Journalists who regularly cover these stories will have a greater understanding of the issue than those who cover general news, and may be equipped to deal with the detail. However, the bigger issue is whether audiences will care. The media publishes news of interest or importance to its audiences - if the general public aren't demanding more information on the story then it will fade very quickly from the public eye.

Do you have overall comments about how research organisations should deal with the media when releasing results and how both sides of a debate should deal with differences in opinions relating to research findings?

Think about the kind of story your results tell because most people will want to know what your results mean for them. If it's an analysis of attitudes or behaviours, have they changed? If they've stayed the same, frame them in the context of something that should have changed them. Every story needs to include a 'what', followed by a 'why'. For example, Australians are buying fewer large cars, with many commentators attributing this to the rise in petrol prices. The rest of the story is supporting material.

Use language that you'd use in normal conversation with people who don't work in the industry. This means limiting use of facts and figures to supporting evidence only. For most people the findings themselves aren't important; what's important is what the results mean for them. This is just as relevant for releasing results as for dealing with differences in opinions.

Research results can make great news stories. Remember that the important thing for most Australians is to explain how your research will have an affect on them.

Liz McLaughlin, managing director, Horizon Communication Group

How would you advise your client to respond?

I never recommend that you fight battles in the media.

In this case you have the interesting question of what 'side' you're on - being pro the industrial relations laws or against them? Are the two organisations, or their supporters, on the same side, or on different sides? That will definitely influence the situation.

If you are on the same side it would be very worthwhile to go to the other organisation and have a discussion with them on how interesting it is that

the results are so very different.

If you are on opposing sides it may be useful to release your information and generate further debate. To achieve this it would be important to involve independent third parties who could engage in the debate and add some more credibility to your research findings. Having the client just saying 'their research is wrong and mine is right' isn't very strong. I'd be looking at drawing some academics, or someone with some degree of authority and independence into the debate.

If your client is aiming for a retraction in the media, how do they go about achieving one?

Getting a retraction is highly unlikely. It will only happen if the media's information is completely wrong, and from the hypothetical we don't know if that's the case. The issue is that the other organisation has used different methodologies.

If the differences between the two organisations come down to research methodology, how can this be dealt with in the media? Is the media interested or equipped to deal with this level of detail?

The media should have been provided with some context with the results as well as how the research was conducted in the first place. However, media are under significant time constraints and unfortunately do not always check the reliability of statistics.

Do you have overall comments about how research organisations should deal with the media when releasing results and how both sides of a debate should deal with differences in opinions relating to research findings?

It is always valuable to help the media increase their knowledge and it would be worthwhile for researchers to provide journalists with some simple information about how to determine whether data that is presented to them is reliable and more importantly valid.

By Jesse Blackadder, editor, Research News.

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