

Communications Issues

Issue 29



A Community Service of Harley House Consultants Inc.

A New Era of Media Outreach?

Introduction

Harley House is committed to promoting discussion of cutting-edge issues in government communications. We are engaging community leaders and practitioners through interviews and our ongoing consulting work. We are also reaching out to members of the media and consumers of government communications to get their views. A lot is changing in your work environment and it is exciting to be part of that transition.

New Opportunities

One of the intriguing elements of “the new normal” in Ottawa communications is the government’s stated position on media and media relations. Press Gallery “pariahs” are gone. Journalists are back to being cornerstones of our democracy and professionals to be treated with respect.



And it looks, by and large, to be playing out that way in practice. Unmuzzled scientists and experts are indeed doing unscripted interviews in many departments. Ministers, themselves, are regularly subject to press conference grillings. People, it seems, really do have a right to information and the fourth estate is resuming its former role in making it happen.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t pockets of resistance.

Stories circulate of some Deputy Ministers still signing off on every departmental tweet or posting. But the political will seems to be there, and the bureaucracy is trying hard to change its controlling communications ways.

The jury is still out on what this will actually mean for departmental communications strategies. Back in the days of typewriters and whiteout, com shop account executives were expected to cold call reporters with story ideas on a regular basis. It was part of the profession. There was a legitimate symbiotic relationship happening with journalists.

Are Media Outreach Programs Even Possible?

But do government communicators actually know how to develop and deliver a media outreach program anymore? Is it still actually possible? And if it is possible, what does the bureaucracy have to do to make it work for them in the future?

The answer to the first question is “some do, but not many”. A few departments and more arms-length agencies have kept up proactive relations with journalists over the years. But more have lost the ability to actually engage with a reporter in any meaningful way. The age of emailed questions and emailed answers has reduced many media response shops to keyboardists and approvals specialists.

Is it actually still possible to run a media outreach program anyway?

It’s a legitimate question. I put it to a senior member of the Press Gallery over a few beers recently, and he admitted that “big media” is less and less open to pursuing non-critical or non-crisis stories than it used to be.

Making Communicators Better Managers—Making Managers Better Communicators



2. A New Era of Media Outreach?

The hollowing out of North America's major news rooms means that there is less room for creativity and too few reporters developing real specialty knowledge of departmental businesses.

Getting Your Stories Covered

So here are eight Harley House tips on using proactive media strategies to promote your department's accomplishments for Canadians in the current, difficult environment:

1. Don't try to sell story ideas about plans and priorities. They are boring and few Canadians care or believe you will actually deliver.
2. Pitch stories on actions and accomplishments that are producing results for Canadians.
3. Go local – the big networks probably don't have time for you unless you have a crisis or a big new announcement, but local outlets are still anxious to talk about action in their sales areas.
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5. If there are beat reporters left in your area of work, or columnists who repeatedly cover your issues, know who they are and get in touch.
6. Identify and contact specialty publications. They will be eager to talk.
7. Are you keeping up with web and social media leaders? They count and might be more accessible than old-world journalists.
8. Expand your knowledge of your departmental businesses. There is an interesting story idea behind almost every desk in your department. You just have to find it and figure out why it matters.
9. Media train your departmental spokespeople. Some do it in-house and some contract out. Either way, the basics on the role of a departmental spokesperson are a must. Once your departmental managers are comfortable with a few boundaries and techniques, they will be more willing participants in an active relationship with journalists.

A Price to Pay

The good news is the muzzles are coming off and effective communication with Canadians is no longer just a risk (there will always be risk), it is a requirement.

But guess what? It's going to cost you to meet these new requirements. Communications shops have to significantly increase their knowledge of departmental businesses and to spend the time to analyse them through a strategic coms lens.

This takes time and effort on a regular basis. We all hope the new normal will mean the end to stifling approvals processes, but that effort and more will have to be re-invested in analysis, networking and outreach if you are going to take advantage of new media opportunities.

In Conclusion

What are your views on media outreach and other changes facing the government communications community? Let us know. Keep the dialogue moving. We are committed to aggregating community views and offering our take on developments as we all move forward.

(Phil Hurcomb is a former ADM-level communications leader in the federal public service. He is a Senior Associate with Harley House Consultants Inc.)

"At Harley House Consultants Inc. we believe that effective communications involves meaningful, constructive and thoughtful engagement with internal and external stakeholders. You have to be strategically positioned to provide timely, complete, honest, open and sincere information about the policies, programs and services of the Government of Canada."

For more information about how to improve the effectiveness of your consultation and communications strategies,

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