



Managing the
unmanageable?

A study of the challenges & responsibilities confronting
Heads of Media Relations in FTSE100s

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Head of Media Relations

1

Introduction

It is a generally accepted fact that the media is one of the key drivers of corporate reputation. Everyone consumes the media - analysts and investors, regulators and governments, employees, customers - and people's perceptions of a company are, to a large degree, shaped by what they read, hear or see.

However the media environment that companies must navigate their way through has changed considerably over recent years. The immediacy of the wire services, online news and television news has raised the temperature of business reporting, with markets responding just as fast to misinformation as they do to valid information. Furthermore broadcast coverage of business has also increased quite

significantly and press coverage of business news has now moved beyond the business pages and into the 'front half' of the paper. Stories about business are therefore more widespread and they are reaching a wider audience.

The skill and professionalism with which a company manages the media, particularly the business and financial press, can therefore have a significant impact on its reputation. It therefore follows that the individual who heads up an organisation's media or newsroom function - and who therefore has responsibility for orchestrating and managing a company's media coverage and profile - has considerable, if indirect, influence over the way in which an organisation is perceived.

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Purpose of the research

But what does the Head of Media Relations role involve, what skills and qualities are needed, what are the challenges of dealing with the media in today's big companies, and what are the emerging issues and other key developments? Watson Helsby, an executive search firm which specialises in all the key public and media relations, corporate affairs, government relations and financial communications/IR disciplines, set out to provide answers to these questions by undertaking a research study amongst senior media heads in FTSE100s.

The purpose of the study is to provide a detailed analysis of the role/function and to gather enough information to produce a definitive Job and Candidate

Specification for the Head of Media Relations role. This can be found on page 20.

In the absence of any recent salary survey specific to the role, this project has also acted as a useful supplement to our existing remuneration data, enabling us to produce an up to date salary analysis.

Eighteen FTSE100 companies participated in the research, which was conducted in the last quarter of 2004. Inevitably job titles vary between organisations, but for the purposes of this report, the term 'Head of Media Relations' is being used.

This is the latest in a series of regular research reports produced by Watson Helsby which are focused on the key disciplines into which we recruit.

3 Executive summary

Maximising positive stakeholder impact

Given the undoubted influence of media coverage on the behaviour of the financial markets, and the equally important connection between media coverage and stakeholder sentiment/loyalty (particularly that of employees), the Head of Media Relations has responsibility for, arguably, the most influential channel of communication to a company's stakeholders. Employees, a company's most important stakeholder, tend to believe more from what they read and hear externally, than they do from internal sources. This is a role, therefore, whose importance (to a company's reputation) cannot be overestimated and it is critical that it is managed by an exceptionally adroit and highly skilled media relations professional.

A relationship of inestimable value

A fact not always appreciated is that the Head of Media Relations' personal and professional qualities will influence the way a company is reported on. The Head of Media Relations is a company's principal interface with the media, and no matter how objective a journalist is, there is no doubt that if they do not like the individual concerned, or do not respect them, they will be less inclined - even subconsciously - to produce favourable comment and copy about the company concerned.

The opposite also holds true. A journalist is more likely to give a company the opportunity to put its case, or to accept an assurance that a story is baseless (or significantly different to what other sources are telling them), if the relationship is founded on trust and respect. It will, in other words, be given the benefit of the doubt, a luxury that is unlikely to be afforded to companies whose media relationships are poorly managed.

The research highlighted another valuable and under-appreciated facet of the role. Journalists can be a source of valuable intelligence and insights, particularly concerning competitive activity. The Head of Media Relations, and his/her team, are therefore in a unique position to obtain information that is not readily available to anyone else - including senior management. This intelligence gathering dimension of the role is highly valued by CEOs, especially in bid situations. But a journalist is unlikely to share his/her inside knowledge with someone they do not trust, or with whom they do not share a good rapport. A high calibre Head of

Media Relations will have fostered the relationships that give him/her access to this kind of information.

The Chief Communications Officer

A less welcome development for many CEOs is the fact that media coverage of an organisation is now much more centred on an individual, and that individual is normally the CEO. Participants reported that managing the profile and reputation of the CEO has become a key component of their roles. In this respect the personality of the CEO and his/her attitude towards the media can make a big difference. A naturally open, communicative and charismatic CEO will normally make the Head of Media Relations' job a lot easier. The media can be attracted to a charismatic leader and this can create an environment in which it is easier to get strategic developments covered favourably and in which, put simply, the media are better disposed towards that CEO.

Encouragingly, most participants (70%) expressed the view that CEOs have come to recognise that engaging with the media is a critical part of the job, even if it takes them out of their comfort zone, as it frequently does. Worryingly, only 50% of the sample believed their CEO to be 'media literate'.

Business goes tabloid

Several participants spoke of their CEO's frustration with the media and one made the telling point that CEOs like to be in control and that the one thing that is totally beyond their control is the media. The task of getting the CEO to engage with the media has not been made any easier by an increasingly aggressive and cynical financial and business media which is increasingly prone to tabloidise and personalise business issues.

A number of factors have driven this trend: pressures from editors who believe that contention is essential in any decent story, and who are also expected to deliver more exclusives with less journalistic resource; the absence of editorial sanction for 'inaccuracy'; the increasing youth and inexperience of supposedly specialist reporters, who are paradoxically expected to cover more sectors. The tighter regulatory environment governing what companies can say about themselves also means there is a much shallower pool of news for reporters to work with, so they have to push the information that much harder to make their stories stand out.

The challenges of managing the media in a big organisation

As a result of this, managing media relations for a big organisation now presents additional challenges which did not exist a few years ago. These include:

- With levels of trust diminishing, the number of 'off the record' chats between senior PRs and journalists is decreasing. It seems that journalists today (there are obviously exceptions to this growing trend) are more prepared to break confidence and more willing to sacrifice relationships in pursuit of hot stories. This short-termist approach is in direct contrast to journalist relationships of the past
- A tendency amongst younger journalists, who are more interested in pursuing a more colourful version of the story in their head, to ignore or overlook anything that might contradict this story
- Related to this the number of journalists calling with 'tabloid intent' is growing
- The increasing use made of the media by other groups, such as NGOs and shareholder activists, who are constantly 'selling in' their own stories and 'briefing against' companies. In itself this is not an issue, but it is compounded by the fact that the media are often only too willing to report on the views of marginal groups against the interests of companies
- The challenges of engaging with, and managing, broadcast journalists. They cover economics, interest rates etc as well as business sectors and have little interest in meeting press officers or even CEOs for briefings
- Greater regulation, new accounting standards and the increasing demands of compliance have made the role a lot more complex. Stock Exchange regulations governing disclosure are so tight now that knowledge of what information is and isn't 'price sensitive' is almost a specialist subject in itself
- Internally, the expectations of the senior management team - who can be extremely sensitive to negative media coverage – need to be managed. The Head of Media Relations will often be held responsible for inaccurate and unfavourable comment in the media, comment that makes the CEO/senior management team unhappy, if not irate. He/she therefore has to be extremely robust, since, to quote one participant 'you take a kicking from management and media alike'.

A more demanding candidate profile

In light of all of the above, the role and candidate description (see page 21) of today's Head of Media Relations is much more expansive and demanding than it used to be. Today's candidate needs an exceptional list of attributes:

- Intellectual agility and the ability to think on one's feet in order to deliver the right answers to questions while under considerable pressure. Most financial/City journalists are highly intelligent and adept at using all sorts of techniques to obtain information. The person at the interface has to be as clever and sharp as they are, otherwise they could easily be outwitted or out-manoeuvred
- An intimate knowledge of journalism and journalists and a good understanding of their needs and requirements, the pressures they are under and the behaviour that this is likely to engender
- Editorial insight and excellent news judgement. An ability to take any issue/story and predict how each and every media will run it and, as a result of that intuitive prediction, make management decisions or provide advice on the best way forward
- 'Media savvy' - a sensitivity to the motives of journalists, a nose for what lies behind a seemingly innocent question, an awareness and understanding of the bear traps
- Financially literate with a good understanding of how the city operates and a good knowledge of the investor relations agenda. A significant part of the media relations job is driven by the financial calendar.

Another aspect of the role that emerges from the research was just how combative it can be. It is often necessary to engage with journalists in a robust fashion since they will not give much quarter themselves. They can also become 'angry and unpleasant' if they do not get what they want, or what they have been instructed to get by their editor.

Remuneration

Remuneration levels are now beginning to reflect this more demanding specification. At the top end of the scale companies are now paying significant packages to their media relations heads. A fifth of the sample earn salaries in excess of £150,000 which, to put it in perspective, is more than some Communications Directors of FTSE100s are earning.

The enemy within

A background in journalism is considered a useful asset, since some level of exposure and inside knowledge of how the media operates is invaluable. However, respondents were divided in their views as to whether a journalist could make the transition straight into a Head of Media Relations role (see page 29). It is also difficult to move from a position where gleaning information and putting it into the public domain is the principal purpose in life, to one where one has to make an entirely different judgement as to whether that same information should even enter the public domain.

The research confirms that the role is beginning to be viewed in a different light. Several participants remarked that their CEO has openly admitted that they (the Head of Media Relations) have an unenviable job, which is nonetheless incredibly important to the fortunes of the organisation. As such it is an appointment in which the CEO is now likely to be closely involved, since the relationship between the two will be critical. This would not have been the case five years ago, and demonstrates the degree to which the status of the role has changed.

There are certain conclusions that can be drawn from this research and these are:

i) For a FTSE100, and indeed any other high profile organisation, it is a mistake to resource this role with anything other than a high calibre and experienced media professional. The risk to a company's reputation and its 'license to operate' is too great to treat it as anything other than a key role with a specialist skill set. It is more important to put someone in the role who has an in-depth knowledge of the media and who can learn about the company, rather than someone who has an in-depth knowledge of the company and can learn about the media.

ii) A Head of Media Relations has to deal with a unique set of pressures. It is not a role for the faint-hearted. There are few roles that are so exposed – the results of their work are there online immediately, broadcast rapidly or in the paper the next day. However well they have handled a situation, it is impossible to know exactly how the story might turn out the next day, if only because a journalist will almost always talk to other sources.

iii) A Head of Media Relations can be most effective when he/she works in a culture which supports the media team, promotes a proactive approach to media management and acknowledges the risks of dealing with the media.

iv) A direct relationship with - and the ear of the CEO - coupled with a media literate senior management team which is prepared to engage proactively with the media, are prerequisites for success in the role.

4

Why the role is so important

‘A lot hangs upon the role we do, both to the CEO and the company.’

Negative media coverage, particularly if it is sustained, not only inflicts reputational damage but also harms company morale and causes massive internal irritation. It prompts questions from the board and generally diverts management time away from the business.

A good press office cannot eradicate this problem - but it can help minimise it, if it is smart, well informed, fast on its feet and has nurtured strong relationships with the media.

However, before elaborating on the benefits the role can bring to an organisation, it is important to recognise that there are some inescapable realities that impose limitations on what the role can achieve; limitations that can sometimes be forgotten by senior management.

What it can't do

All participants emphasised that the tone of media coverage and comment is ultimately related to performance. If a company's performance is poor, no amount of proactive media relations and no amount of relationship building with the media will fundamentally alter the tone of the reporting.

The best that can be done, and the best that can be expected of the role, is to minimise the levels of negative coverage and to take some of the edge off it.

‘If performance is bad there is a limit to what you can do.’

‘Any comment you want from the media is inexorably linked to performance.’

Moreover no company, even if it is performing well and meeting or exceeding targets and expectations, will receive consistent and universally positive media coverage. The natural inclination of the British press is to find a negative story if it possibly can - and no organisation is immune from this.

‘The British Press is pretty savage. You cannot get 100% good coverage 100% of the time.’

The media cannot be controlled; they can only, at best, be influenced.

That said, a smart, professional and highly effective media relations team can help differentiate a company from its equally proficient peers, a fact that is not always fully appreciated or understood. In common with the overarching corporate communications/affairs role, its perceived value is sometimes diminished by the, at times, unquantifiable nature of the benefits it brings.

The company ‘rep’

It is a simple statement of fact that the person who is an organisation's principal link with the media (i.e. the Head of Media Relations) represents that company to the media. Their standing with the media and the journalists with whom they have regular contact will therefore inevitably have some influence on the way a company is reported on.

‘The way that a company is portrayed in the media is partly due to the relationship with the media person who is the day-to-day interface.’

‘Your relationship with a journalist is critical to the coverage of the company.’

No matter how objective a journalist is, there is no doubt that if they do not like, or respect, their company contact, they will be less inclined to produce favourable comment and copy about the company concerned. Conversely, while a good relationship with a journalist does not guarantee positive coverage, the company may at least get the opportunity to put its case before a story is written or, in unclear circumstances, receive the benefit of the doubt.

A good relationship means that I will get called before they write. We get listened to.'

A journalist is more likely to accept an assurance that a story is baseless, or significantly different to the one that other more hostile sources are telling them, if there is trust in the relationship. The benefit for a company in such a situation is impossible to quantify, but it can be substantial.

Intelligence gathering

The media function performs an important intelligence gathering function and can provide valuable insights into the external environment in which big companies have to operate.

'The interface where the aspirations of the boardroom meets the cynicism of the outside world.'

Journalists are a source of information, particularly concerning competitive activity, and the Head of Media Relations (and his/her team) are talking to them every day. The Head of Media Relations, and his/her team, are in a unique position to gather intelligence and information that is not generally available to anyone else in the organisation - including senior management.

'I will pick up industry stuff that others don't know.'

'The CEO is reliant upon us to tell him what is going on in the outside world - he can't do it himself.'

'Senior management want to know about media gossip and expect you to know it. They don't have time to read the newspapers.'

Providing advice on how the outside world, as filtered through the media, perceives a company is also a vital facet of this intelligence gathering activity. It is a 'service' that can act as a useful reality check to the senior team. It is, in effect, a case of holding a mirror up to them.

'Journalists are a useful group of people that sum up how you are perceived by others and play it back to you.'

'There is an insatiable appetite for news about the company and market from the senior management team.'

This benefits the organisation, and particularly the executive team, in the following ways:

- Providing intelligence (and an external perspective) on how certain activities and decisions - and the form in which they are communicated - will play out in the media. Senior management will frequently factor this into the decision making process.
- This can be particularly important in the context of 'set pieces', such as results presentations and announcements where it is imperative that a company does not give out messages that could be misinterpreted.

'What story do we want to tell and how will a particular form of words land.'

As one participant observed, it is akin to:

'...managing the share price through words.'

It can help guide, and certainly inform, tactics in takeover bids as well as other activity related to acquisitions and disposals.

'Without those relationships we wouldn't have known half of the information we do about what X (identity withheld) are spinning.'

Impact on employees and other stakeholders

Given the connection between press coverage and 1) employee sentiment 2) investor sentiment and 3) brand loyalty, the group media function can have a significant influence over what is arguably the most influential channel of communication to a company's key stakeholders. The impact of positive and favourable media coverage on employee and internal morale should never be under-estimated.

'Don't forget employees. They are interested in the affairs of the company and tend to believe more from reading about what is said and written externally, than they do from internal sources.'

Also a feel good factor for employees, who get a lot of sentiment about the company from the outside.

'We need to ensure that the headlines and dramatisation of the media are pre-empted and not replicated internally.'

'Both of them (the Chairman and CEO) believe it is the direct line of communications to their three most important audience.'

Equally the media can help influence the regulatory landscape and spur politicians into action, by mobilising opinion to a level that regulators feel unable to ignore.

'Usually, before any regulation manifests itself, it is normally preceded by some move within the media which says something ought to be done. This helps build up a head of steam and then a regulator has to investigate it. Then a select committee looks at it, then someone says it should go in the energy bill.'

5

Reporting line and accountability

The Head of Media Relations invariably reports to the Director of Corporate Affairs/Communications. Surprisingly, almost all participants remarked that their Corporate Affairs Director does not get involved in press or media management and that, as a result, they are left with almost total autonomy. The reasons for this vary, from the need for the corporate affairs director to advise on a much wider range of issues and stakeholders than just media, to a basic lack of interest.

Consequently, and this is key, most Corporate Affairs Directors are quite happy to let their Head of Media Relations talk directly to the CEO and do not interfere. In fact the timescales can be so short that a direct relationship between the CEO and the head of media relations is an absolute imperative.

'He has no media experience and therefore lets me speak to the CEO about media issues.'

'90% of media contact is through me.'

'She does not want to do the media, she is not interested, so all engagement is done by me.'

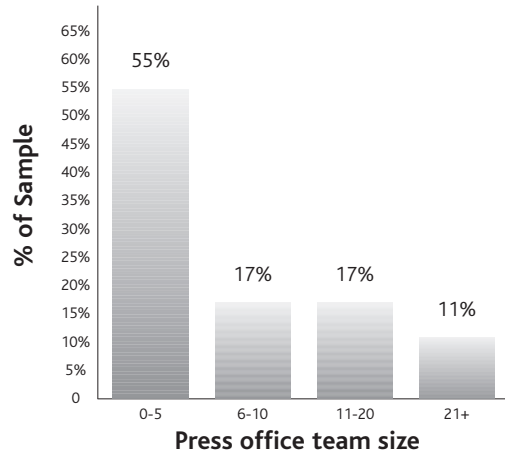
'I do all the media work, I have complete autonomy.'

6 Size of the press office team

The numbers below relate to the central Group press office/media relations function.

Ironically, the leanest teams are in the large, multinational blue chips. These companies supplement their central press office resource with in-country media relations specialists, so the total global media relations headcount will be higher than the figure quoted here.

The bigger teams tend to be in UK focused organisations, where some of the central press office personnel have regional or brand responsibilities.



7 The CEO and the media

There are few CEOs who openly embrace the British media, which is notorious for being more hostile to business than that of any other country. For many it is a necessary evil – frequently ill-informed, mischievous, destructive and increasingly hurtful and personal in its criticism. They dislike the ‘business as soap opera’ approach to reporting and their natural preference is to avoid talking to the media altogether, particularly when a company is receiving negative press.

‘They do get scared when it happens and become more buttoned up.’

‘There are certain pressure points for CEOs and salary is a key one. It is personal and they take it personally.’

Participants spoke of their CEOs’ frustration with the media and made the telling point that CEOs like to be in control and if there is one thing that is totally beyond their control it is the media. The nearest that a CEO can get to control of the media is saying nothing and this is rarely the right option since the media will take ‘no comment’ as a license to speculate.

For foreign CEOs of UK companies, whose numbers swell every year and who have no experience of a hostile media like the UK’s, it can be an exceptionally steep learning curve.

However there is no getting away from the fact that business media coverage is now much more centred on personalities. This preoccupation with personality has helped create a new business environment, one where the personality and profile of the CEO has become an important determinant of a company’s reputation.

‘Realistically you have to have a credible and recognisable face to the business and that person has to be the person in charge. Branson and Stelios have changed the paradigm and nobody can change that’.

The benefits of a communicative CEO

Given this state of affairs, the personality of the CEO, and his/her attitude towards the media, can make the job of the Head of Media Relations either a lot more difficult or a lot easier. Either way it matters.

'A charming, charismatic, confident CEO who is simply unafraid of dealing with the media can make your job a lot easier. Conversely if you are working with someone who is more shy, more abrasive, sceptical, then your job is much more about the internal advocacy of media relations.'

A naturally communicative, charismatic CEO can make a significant difference in a number of ways:

- The media can be attracted to a charismatic leader (albeit they must be credible and not just have a big personality) and this can create an environment where it is easier to get strategic developments covered favourably and where the media are, put simply, better disposed towards that CEO.

'If CEO's are historically abrasive or fractious, it doesn't help create the environment where you can place good stories.'

- The media will be less inclined to write negative copy if a CEO is open, friendly and communicative. However this has to be sustained and not employed in an expedient manner.
- The 'no comment' approach - often favoured by more reticent leaders and company lawyers - rarely pays dividends.

'It creates a vacuum that will be filled by negativity and conjecture.'

A strong charismatic and media literate CEO who is more relaxed about talking to the media will be more attuned to this possibility and more confident about overruling the advice of lawyers.

Attitudes are changing...

Although not all CEOs can be charismatic and naturally communicative (and none should strive to be something they are not) they have to accept that one of the key responsibilities of their role is to engage with the media.

'The CEO these days has to be the Chief Communications Officer; particularly when the going gets rough, and he recognises that.'

Encouragingly the evidence from this research suggests that CEOs are fronting up to this responsibility (over 70% of participants said that their CEO readily engages with the media) and that they now recognise it to be an important part of the job.

The motivation for this will depend on the CEO – often it will be no more than a dislike of negative coverage, particularly when it impacts on share price – but it represents an advance from the days when the media were routinely ignored or dismissed as 'scribblers'. Some do it willingly and with enthusiasm.

'Our CEO is very media savvy and prepared to invest considerable time in talking to the press.'

'He likes journalists and takes them seriously in interviews.'

'The attitude to the media in recent years has changed. It is now seen as a stakeholder group that need to be interacted with, rather than just managed.'

Others (from the 'necessary evil' school of thinking) do it more reluctantly. It may take them out of their comfort zone and be seen as a distraction from running the business; but nonetheless they still invest a considerable amount of time in the activity.

'His own involvement is done more out of duty, which he will happily stand up for.'

'He does not enjoy, nor is he particularly interested in, engaging with the media but understands that it needs to be done.'

'He doesn't like doing it but recognises that it is necessary. He does have a programme that he wants to happen. He doesn't like broadcast – it takes him out of his comfort zone.'

However a CEO and his/her advisor must always remain aware of the dangers inherent in engaging with the media. As with politicians, CEOs have to live by what they say and they will be assessed and judged accordingly. The media will 'quickly see through bullshit' and they will be merciless if they catch the merest scent of hypocrisy.

They must also be wary of the dangers of over-exposure. The media has a well-known preoccupation with colourful personalities, for obvious reasons. Building someone up, only to knock them down later, is not a phenomenon exclusive to celebrities.

'Love affairs don't last.'

And, as one participant rightly pointed out:

'If you allow the CEO to become the personification of the business, what happens when he or she goes?'

CEO 'media literacy'

On the evidence of this study, CEOs (and senior management teams) are becoming more 'media literate'. At least 50% of the participants interviewed expressed the view that their CEO possesses this quality. A universal definition of 'media literate' is not readily available, but with the help of participants we have defined it as follows:

An understanding of what motivates journalists (what 'presses their buttons'), what they are after and why, and knowing where they are coming from; and as a result of this, an ability to interpret and analyse media coverage in the context of this understanding.

'Just because coverage is not 100% positive, it can still be a good result. A media literate CEO will understand context and why things have happened as they have.'

A media literate CEO is not only astute in his/her news judgement (what is interesting and noteworthy with regard to the company), but will also be 'savvy' about the overall news agenda and the ways of the media. They will understand, for instance, that a story left in the hands of a sub-editor may carry a headline that is wholly inconsistent with the thrust of the story itself, often undermining the impact intended or giving a misleading impression of the content of the piece.

Unlike others, who do not possess this quality, they do not expect the media to run 'good news' stories regardless - they appreciate that there is a broader context in which these stories will be received and interpreted.

8

The changing demands and behaviour of the media

The media environment through which companies must navigate their way has changed considerably in recent years, and participants were united in the belief that it is now much more difficult to secure balanced coverage. The media generally is more cynical and suspicious of business and this is partly related to the global distrust of business in the post-Enron era.

'The UK media tends to assume that business should be treated with suspicion at the very least.'

One of the less welcome consequences of this scepticism, and often moralistic stance, towards establishment institutions, is that the UK media are often only too willing to report on the views of marginal or 'unaccountable' pressure groups and campaigners against the interests of big business.

The media marketplace has also become much more competitive as media outlets and sources of news have increased and fragmented, both offline and online. The growth of specialist business outlets, from those aimed at the City – such as Bloomberg and CNBC – to those aimed at the 'day traders' and small shareholders – such as Sky Business and Working Lunch provides a good example of this.

A development of particular significance has been the growth of the wire services, which has had a considerable impact on those media that report financial and business news. The immediacy of their technology normally allows them to be first with a story, a development that has forced the key financial press, particularly the FT, to rethink their offer.

'If you are following the news you will have seen everything. So what is it that the FT offers you that you haven't already heard?'

As a result, all the recognised business and financial media outlets have to work harder to stand out. 'Stand out' is normally achieved by more sensational (which normally means negative for those companies affected) and groundbreaking stories and/or superior analysis. But most of the financial media are having to do this with less journalistic resource, since the (expensive) economics of news-gathering have led to cutbacks. The pressures on City Editors and others responsible for content, who are expected to deliver more 'exclusives' and superior analysis with less, or at least younger and more inexperienced, journalistic resource, have therefore intensified.

Below we have noted three key developments, all relating to trends in journalist behaviour, that inevitably influence the manner in which companies are now reported on:

(i) The editorial view that contention is essential in any decent story has put intense pressure on journalists, who know that they must come up with groundbreaking and preferably more controversial stories in order to stand out.

'In the UK there are sometimes thirteen or fourteen journalists writing about one story and therefore fighting to get differentiation.'

'Journalists are all looking to differentiate themselves.'

(ii) The emergence of a new breed of journalists who are younger, more aggressive, more informal and much less deferential towards companies. Their line of questioning is much more aggressive and for them the burden of proof has shifted to companies.

'They are very forthright and much ruder in print about companies and personalities than ever before – there is much less kow-towing to senior business figures.'

‘There are a lot more younger journalists who don’t listen carefully. What they play back is not what you discussed, because they have a more colourful version of the story in their head.’

(iii) Journalists, often the younger and more inexperienced ones, are now expected to cover more industry sectors following the retrenchment referred to above. Consequently participants believe that there is less understanding of specific sectoral issues and an increasing trend to write about generic, cross-sectoral stuff to cover up for a lack of in-depth understanding of certain sectors.

The effect of these trends – suspicion and hostility, the need to differentiate and the difficulty of covering several sectors – has in many cases led to the tabloidisation of business issues and a tendency to treat business as a soap opera. Several participants believe that journalistic standards have declined and that there is a greater incidence of lazy and/or inaccurate (and critically the absence of sanction for inaccuracy in some cases) journalism. This manifests itself in the tendency to personalise issues and pick on easy targets (i.e. directors’ pay).

‘Others will hear a rumour, come to a conclusion on a story and write it anyway, particularly if they have to file four or five stories a day.’

‘There is a greater pressure on journalists on the Sundays to create news and headlines. Their role is to break news, rather than report it as it breaks. This leads to more inaccuracies, since they will wing it with a story. And by the time the correction has come out it doesn’t matter – it won’t match the size of the original piece.’

On the evidence of our research, even the FT is no longer regarded as “quite the paper of record it once was”. Several participants spoke of a distinct shift towards a more tabloidised approach, manifesting itself in:

- The type of stories to which it gives precedence
- The way it treats stories coming out of businesses
- The style of headline writing

‘It has certainly tabloidised itself to an extent and, coupled with the shorter tenure of many journalists, the sectoral knowledge has diminished.’

‘The FT has become more aggressive. It now has an ethos of driving for and breaking stories, rather than just reporting them.’

‘Management don’t even feel safe with the FT anymore.’

The role of the Head of Media Relations, the principal link between the corporation and the media, has inevitably been impacted by these developments. We have attempted to highlight the main changes as felt by participants.

The effect on the Head of Media Relations role:

- The amount of ‘off-the-record’ chat between senior PRs and journalists is decreasing, due to a diminishing level of trust. It seems that some journalists are more prepared to break confidences and more willing to sacrifice relationships in pursuit of hot stories.

‘Which bit of conversations will be reported – will things be respected as confidential?’

- A tendency to be slightly more neurotic, since the number of journalists calling with 'tabloid intent' is growing. This is something that participants accept they have to live with, and they recognise that they have to be able to brief effectively on a background basis with all aspects of the media.

'This has made me more cagey - until I am convinced that the story is not going to be tabloidised.'

- It is often necessary to engage with journalists in a robust fashion since they will not give much quarter themselves. The younger ones, in particular, can become "angry and unpleasant" if they do not get what they want, or have been told to get by their editor.
- More time spent managing expectations of what can be achieved in the media and injecting a note of realism, both internally and externally.

'The challenge is finding that equilibrium of what is realistic for journalists to expect and what is realistic for your bosses to deliver.'

- The perceived shift towards irresponsible and inaccurate reporting, which often causes massive internal irritation, particularly if the coverage has been personal, makes the Head of Media Relations' job of getting the CEO to engage with the media more difficult. All it serves to do is undermine all his/her cumulative efforts and is therefore counterproductive.

'It is a really hard sell on our part when that is what the outcome is.'

'It brings down the wrath of the CEO.'

- Journalists, particularly those who lack a sector specialisation and therefore deep knowledge of a specific sector (a growing trend referred to above), increasingly talk to investors and analysts and managing this 'grapevine' adds another dimension to the role.

'You need to know which journalist goes to which analyst.'

- There are more calls to deal with due to the increase in the number of news and information outlets.
- A higher turnover of journalists and the tendency of unknown sector generalists to write about a company make it difficult for the media relations function to both build relationships and keep tabs on a particular journalist's agenda.

'The people who are liable to write about you are constantly shifting.'

9

What makes the role so tough?

'It's bloody scary some of this stuff. You have to make snap decisions about whether to say something that will help the story, but that at the same time may not be consistent with the agreed corporate line.'

A peculiar set of pressures and challenges

In addition to the challenges posed by an aggressive, cynical and at times less trustworthy media, the head of media relations also has to contend with a host of pressures and demands that make the role a great deal more exacting than it used to be. This fact has not gone unnoticed by some CEOs, who see their Head of Media Relations as a key figure with an exceptionally difficult job to do.

'It is a much harder job to do than people understand, because you are the central meeting point between so many stakeholders. You have to balance the give and take within that, so that everyone gets something from it. It is like managing a little ecosystem.'

Below is a summary of the factors - some of which are new, others of which are just much more intense - that make the role more pressurised and demanding:

- It is a tireless, all consuming, 24/7 role, from which you can never really escape. The Head of Media Relations is permanently on call since news never really gets put to bed at the end of the day. This is especially so in a multi-national company.

'It's like a news desk, capturing stories from all over the world, 24 hours a day.'

- Quarterly reporting and the work that goes into the preparation of trading statements.

'Quarterly reporting, the bane of our lives, since we are either in a closed period or just going into one.'

'We don't report quarterly, but we might as well do, given the effort that goes into trading statements.'

- The increasing use made of the media by other groups, such as NGOs and shareholder activists. These groups have become very media savvy and are constantly selling in and briefing against companies.

'Some shit hot people using the media to get what they want'.

- Media coverage is now much more personalised. This creates extra pressures, and means that the job is as much about managing the profile and defending the reputation/integrity of the CEO, as it is the company.

'Managing your way through the choppy waters of your CEO being disliked.'

- As a result of the increasingly short-termist and simplistic use of analysts' metrics/forecasts to judge company performance, the levels of scrutiny on a business are changing. This scrutiny creates pressure, since executives are more under the microscope and these pressures get played out in the press.
- Greater regulation, new accounting standards and the increasing demands of/for compliance have made the role a lot more complex. Stock Exchange regulations are tighter and consequently it is much easier to be in breach of them if you don't know what you are doing.

'The practice of media relations is much more regulated than it used to be.'

'New accounting standards have meant that we are controlled by lawyers and accountants.'

- The tighter regulatory environment governing what companies can say about themselves also means there is a much shallower pool of news for reporters to work with, so they have to push the information that much harder to make their stories stand out.

- The extra burdens imposed by Sarbanes-Oxley for companies with a US listing have required new, transparent processes previewing all media announcements, including non-material ones. This stems from the view that people buy stock using many sources of information. Press releases can be interpreted as a source of corporate information and thus come under the same obligations. Consequently, formal processes – to enable an audit trail of the content of all releases – have had to be created.

'We must be able to account for and verify every piece of information we put out externally.'

- Business, as a subject that the media considers of interest to its readers/viewers, has moved up the agenda. This has driven a merging of general interest news and business news. Journalists are now being asked to write about a broader range of subjects, which creates additional pressures, such as attempting to prevent certain items of news getting in to the front sections of the paper.
- Managing the expectations of senior management teams who can be extremely sensitive to negative media coverage, particularly if they feel it is unjustified or if it is of a personal nature. The responsibility for educating senior management as to 'why things turn out in a certain way', or why the levels of influence that one can have with a particular story or journalist can vary substantially, is a constant challenge for many practitioners.
- Although not a problem afflicting all practitioners in this study (because it depends on resource), several referred to the impracticality of setting a proactive media agenda, when they are constantly fire-fighting.

'Such a deluge of daily stuff that it is difficult to step back and think about a more systematic, proactive programme.'

'Constantly getting knocked off course by news stories that come out of nowhere.'

- Some participants spoke of the worsening political dimension of the role, with directors (and Chairmen) giving unhelpful background briefings, often 'off-the-record', supporting their own particular agenda. Warring factions in the boardroom mean that consistency of messaging across the top of the organisation is harder to achieve and this also has an impact on the kind of briefings you can give the media.

'There is no point in giving a profile to a CEO, who unbeknownst to him, may not be around in three months. How do you play it?'

What keeps you awake at night?

The answer to this question provides an insight into the unique set of pressures that the head of media relations has to contend with. There are few roles that are so exposed and where the results of that person's work are so available the next day for all to see. However well they have handled a situation, it is impossible to know exactly how the story might turn out the next day, if only because a journalist will almost always talk to other sources.

'You never know how the story might turn out the next day.'

'Going out on a limb to propose a particular course of action, in the face of resistance, and then waiting to see how it turns out in the papers.'

'Thinking I might have made a mistake. Is it going to come out right, have I overstepped the mark? Did I take a risk doing that off the record? Is it going to come back and bite me?'

'Not being up to speed on something breaking in another part of the world.'

'Feeling that I have missed something. There are so many announcements – disclosure is a nightmare. So many processes have to be gone through.'

10

Why use a financial PR consultancy?

The findings of this research further reinforced the findings of Watson Helsby's last study, 'PR Director, or Chief Reputation Officer?', confirming that the use of external consultancy support is on the wane. This is largely as a result of the higher quality of in-house teams but also due to unfavourable perceptions of the value that consultancies can add.

Agencies don't have the reputation they used to. Standards are being raised all the time and they are failing to keep up with these.'

This section is confined to the financial PR consultancy sector, since most, though not all, of the sample still see value in keeping a financial PR consultancy on retainer. The agencies most frequently mentioned and that probably constitute the premier league of financial PR consultancies are: Maitland, Brunswick, Finsbury, Financial Dynamics and Citigate DeweRogerson.

'Our results are done by a very small team in the IR department who do a fantastic job at a fraction of the price you would shell out for a consultancy. More plcs should follow this model.'

Although there was some scepticism about strength in depth, quality of service and value for money they are perceived to provide valuable advice that cannot be sourced internally. The benefits they bring are summarised as follows:

- Range and volume of media contacts and their broader and deeper journalist knowledge. Consultancies will frequently act as an advocate with media commentators and comment writers outside the client's usual sector followers

'Some of their media contacts are better than mine.'

'They are mixing with the media on a daily basis; they know what is going on.'

- Journalists will frequently tell a third party things that they would not tell an in-house team

'Journalists won't tell me everything.'

- To provide third party advice and to act as a sounding board on messaging, media materials, speeches and Q&As, particularly during results.

'To bounce off messaging on a quarterly basis.'

'They know what the city is looking for and how city journalists will reach react to results.'

- Advice on best practice, particularly how to present and communicate the results. Several participants pointed out that a financial PR firm is managing results for set pieces on a frequent basis and will therefore have an insight into latest thinking and about how they should be handled.

'We do four sets of announcements per year. They do thousands.'

- Specific issues and crisis management. For instance advice on how to handle compensation issues
- All of the top firms will have extensive bid experience. The knowledge gained from this experience encompasses the process itself, planning the campaign in terms of who the company should talk to and what it is going to say, how to avoid breaching the 'Takeover Panel' rules etc.
- Providing advice and expertise on Stock Exchange regulations and other rules governing communications of information to the city. They will or should understand the limits of what a company can say. This can be described as quasi-legal advice.

'You would expect someone in a PR Consultancy to have been more involved in this area than we are.'

- An external perspective.

'We can be too internally focused – they stop the ivory tower approach.'

What consultancies are not used for any longer, with certain exceptions, is actual media relations work.

'They do not speak to journalists, journalists want to speak to the company directly.'

In summary, what a financial PR firm is valued for, above all else, is the reassurance and guidance it provides (confidence factor) in waters that are frequently choppy, hostile and muddied. Sound, strategic advice around the communication and positioning of good and bad news and a valuable second opinion, will always be valued and sought.

'Someone that has been in the trenches a bit, who can advise you what to say in what situations.'

11

Role and candidate description

Purpose of the role

The research identified some diversity and range of opinion on this subject, which was surprising for a function whose fundamental 'raison d'être' one would expect to be universal.

However, on the following there was some consensus:

- To manage the company's relationships with the media (as principal interface and representative), maximise profile and positive coverage and minimise negative coverage/downside
- To promote corporate brand and reputation, through the positive and creative communication of stories relating to product, services and people
- To protect corporate brand and reputation, by identifying and predicting issues that will negatively impact the company and using experience and contacts to provide a shield against them.

- To promote understanding of the company and its strategy – effective media management can help close the gap between perception and reality.

'Seeking to ensure that the media understand what we are doing and that they have a sympathy with it.'

Other definitions of the purpose of the role included:

- To help protect the share price by winning favourable comment from the media who in turn inform and influence shareholders
- To communicate positive views of the company to employees, investors, customers, government and other opinion formers.

'Managing the rumour mill and the gossip is therefore part of the purpose of the role.'

- To use the media to help create a favourable environment in which to place stories which will, in turn, help the company to achieve its business objectives

Pre-requisites for success

- The head of media relations must be considered completely safe and trusted by management to operate on own initiative on a daily basis. Trust is a key requirement in every respect since the head of media relations will be trusted with some of the company's biggest secrets.

'We come under monumental pressure and must have the full trust of management directors and the ear of the CEO.'

- Direct relationship with, and the ear of, the CEO.

'The CEO should want to have a relationship with the person who is talking to the FT every day.'

- Judgement and intuition. These qualities can really only be acquired by experience and gained with time

'A lot of the art of media handling – who to keep sweet, who to keep at arms length, knowing what stories for what paper, that you should never try to make a journalist your bosom buddy – can only come with experience.'

'You just know when they (journalists) are going down the wrong track and your antennae will tell you what to do.'

- Credibility within the business and the respect of managers within the businesses

'You have to be respected if you are sticking your nose into a different areas across the company. You have to punch above your weight in the business.'

- An empathy with, and profound understanding of, the senior executive team and their needs, motivations and business objectives

- A media literate senior management team who are prepared to engage positively with the media.

'There is no traction with the media unless there is a hell of a lot of weight behind the media function. By weight I mean involvement and support.'

Key Responsibilities

- Leading a 24 hour media operation, to ensure dialogue is maintained for both day-to-day communications and sporadic crises. This can be a significant responsibility depending on the size of the team, which can be up to 40 people if there is a big regional team. It includes development, training, budgeting and cost control, delegation, direction, advice on tactics and crisis management, sorting out thorny HR/personnel issues, team building and away days.

Also, where appropriate, to orchestrate the media relations across the group, internationally, by co-ordinating a virtual team of media specialists.

'I have teams in Asia, San Francisco, New York, Africa, France, Spain and Portugal.'

- Develop and manage the systems that underpin a best practice media function and press office, including:

- Press lists
- Database management and contact system
- Press coverage analysis
- Up to date evaluation tools and message analysis to accurately measure the effectiveness of the group's media relations

This will also include type of call response, prioritisation of incoming calls (can be up to 1,400/week for companies that are constantly in the news or public eye) and clarity around 'who people should go to'.

'The basic running of a press office – segmenting journalists is important, as is how we contact them and what we send them.'

- Develop the media communication strategy and lead the implementation of the programme. This encompasses audit of current perceptions, key message strategy, objectives, relationships that need to be developed and the key media/journalists that have to be influenced.

'We plan the way in which we will engage with the media and we need to be absolutely clear about why we are doing it.'

- Driving and running the relationship building programme with key journalists and leading opinion formers as well as broader media channels, such as broadcast, magazines, electronic media and tabloids. This is a long-term exercise but it is important to learn about their prejudices and opinions as well as what their editors think about the company and associated issues. It will involve 'schmoozing' and planned hospitality programmes (e.g. football, arts)

'Human nature being what it is, they are far less inclined to shaft you if you enjoy a reasonably regular drink with them. But you have to have something intelligent to say and you have to have something they want.'

A good relationship with a journalist will, in most instances, help the company enormously. If there is trust, a journalist will be more likely to accept an assurance that a story is baseless or significantly different to what other more hostile sources are telling them. A good relationship will also help gain you access to valuable intelligence and gossip that journalists are frequently in a unique position to provide. This often helps inform and influence tactics and can be particularly useful in a bid situation.

'I will pick up industry stuff that others don't know. It is often very valuable, providing warnings in advance etc.'

- Daily, including weekend, liaison and contact with the media (normally motivated by a constant stream of issues), responding to queries and questions relating to a number of issues including:
 - (i) sector or industry stories that are being written or about to be published ('trying to move the story in your favour')

(ii) market rumours

(iii) requests for CEO/FD profiles etc.

The incoming calls often reach a fever pitch on Friday afternoon when journalists from the Sundays are beginning to file their stories.

'At 4 pm you know whether it's going to be a great day or a bad day. Sunday can be a nightmare.'

- Intelligence gathering and feeding back media sentiment to the CEO and other senior directors, as well as judging and reporting on what is influencing the media view.

'Every morning at 7:30 I report on what the media are saying to the CEO and COO.'

- Media monitoring and issues management and identification – an early warning to the company on issues that may have an impact on corporate strategy or reputation. A large part of this is monitoring media coverage and comment (industry, competition, the company itself, broader economic and political environment) and making sure that the executive team are aware of issues, opportunities etc. This helps flag areas where resource and effort may need to be focused.
- If a company has a broad range of reputational pressure points (brand, regulation, legal, CSR, controversial sponsorships), the head of media relations has to work with the relevant departments to prepare messaging, Q&As and general media strategy, both to identify and to guard against these pressure points and to exploit advantages that could be leveraged.

'Issues identification and alerting, making sure people are on the same page – there is a lot of internal management in this job.'

- Strategic and tactical management of the CEO's profile as well as those of other key executives, including Chairman, CFO and business unit heads.

This involves:

(a) Developing and delivering a schedule of meetings for the key executives referred to above, with City Editors and other key editors (e.g. Personal Finance Editor) and correspondents. This will be both planned and at times tactical/reactive.

'This is mainly relationship building, but if someone has written something a bit offside we are likely to get them in quickly.'

This is not always a straightforward task since it often requires difficult judgements, weighing up the need to keep journalists onside against other more strategic/long term considerations that may irritate journalists.

'I am not putting X (identity withheld) into an interview yet. The time is not right. But restricting access can be a difficult thing to do.'

(b) Briefing CEO and other directors on handling specific press meetings and broadcast interviews (messaging, Q&As, style and tone); helping them to think about making points in an engaging way, looking for news angles.

'Preparation for, and the handling of, TV interviews, is quite different from the preparation for and handling of Broadsheet briefings.'

'Prepping the CEO for an interview with the Observer the other day took two hours.'

(c) Organising media training, particularly for the broadcast media, which tends to be an area of weakness for some CEOs and certainly an area in which they are less comfortable. Management of the CEO's profile will also include defensive action, for instance explaining or justifying his/her remuneration package.

'It is my responsibility to ensure that the CEO is not ridiculed in the press.'

- Providing the CEO and other directors with advice on media management and general media issues.
- How things will play out – how the media and outside world will react to a particular story or message
- What are the big stories around that a company's news will feed into
- Defining and articulating corporate strategy (key message development) in a way that will get traction with the media
- What to ignore and what not to
- Counselling them on messaging and positioning, both at a strategic and a tactical level - what is the story/where is the story ('What story do we want to tell?')

'You have got to find something less bland than the Q&As that the lawyers have produced.'

- Media management around the results, trading statements and announcements (acquisitions, disposals, board personnel changes). This involves:
 - Drafting and editing IR materials
 - Developing key messages with CEO
 - Q&As
 - Developing and writing the CEO's script for the newswire conference call and key messages and suggested soundbites for city editor calls and broadcast interviews
 - Co-ordinating and orchestrating IR, legal, finance and company secretary (who will all have their own Q&As)

- Crisis management and damage limitation, particularly in the context of negative coverage or exposure of something that is meant to be confidential (i.e. leaks). The Head of Media Relations will be held accountable for what is written or broadcast in the media, and for recommending an appropriate level of company response.

'Managing rumours and alarm is a very large part of what we do.'

There will always be, at any time, a number of issues which could 'blow up in the face' of a big company. Some will be identifiable (e.g. profit warnings) and some will not. Crisis management and damage limitation and, in parallel with this, keeping management calm, is a key component of the role.

- To nurture creativity in the team to ensure that they look for opportunities in the broader news agenda to promote the company and that they are creative in the choice of media vehicles to get the message across.
- Acting as a communications consultant to the different businesses within the Group on all media related issues and ensuring that key managers are equipped to deal with the media.

'I act as a catalyst to help the store managers think about how the media can work for them.'

This, of course, means that the head of media relations must CONSTANTLY know what is going on in the different parts of the business.

- To ensure that media relations is integrated with other areas such as IR, internal communications and government relations and making sure that all the 'dots are joined up'. This is particularly important at times of crisis.

Candidate specification

(i) Experience and skills:

- Intellectual agility and the ability to think on your feet, to deliver the right answers to questions whilst under considerable pressure (an answer that will almost certainly determine the tone and favourability of coverage in the following day's newspapers), while all the time remaining aware of the potential bear traps.

'You can't allow yourself to get cornered by a journalist. You need to be intellectually agile.'

- An intimate knowledge of journalism and journalists.

'To be accepted you've got to understand their business. And if they think you are one of them, you're onto a winner.'

This boils down to:

- Excellent knowledge and relationships with the main players in the scene, plus City editors
- What makes a story and how a journalist will build a story
- How journalists work, what shapes their attitudes, how to parry their prejudices or turn those prejudices to the advantage of the company
- Seeing the company through the eyes of the reporter/editor, so that the company's behaviour in, and in response to, particular situations will be shaped so as to elicit favourable media judgements at best and balanced, or least hostile judgements at worst

'For Q&As particularly, you need to get inside a journalists head and predict what they will focus on, how they will react and what they will say.'

'Very hard to get them off a scent, even if they are wrong, once they think they have scored a hit with a story. You need to help them out of a cul-de-sac sometimes, often persuading them it is one in the first place.'

- A good understanding of how to deal with the wire services and TV/Radio journalists. The latter, in particular, will rarely be available for the sort of chat that newspaper journalists engage in. They cover every business sector plus economics, interest rates etc, and have little interest in meeting press officers or even CEOs for briefings.
- An empathy with, and understanding of, journalists' needs and requirements, the pressures they are under and the behaviour that this is likely to engender, for instance the demands of a tough City editor.

'Sometimes a journalist will write something that is totally different in tone to the conversation you had, because of pressure from their editor.'

'What a journalist wants is someone that can help him/her write a leading story.'

'Just going to the FT at results with a purely financial story will not achieve their objectives.'

- Media savvy – sensitivity to the motives of journalists, an instinct for good and mischievous enquiries, a nose for what lies behind a seemingly innocent question, an awareness and understanding of the bear traps.

'The ability to quickly assess whether a journalist is on a fishing trip or not.'

'Also have to be aware of the diarists who will do a reinterpretation of the news story. An added twist!'

- Editorial insight and excellent news judgement, which encompasses:
 - Understanding which events, that maybe trivial from a business perspective, can have explosive potential
 - Knowing how a story will play out (the reception it will receive)
 - An awareness and instinct for how the information you are giving a journalist will be interpreted. What the potential outcome will be, and therefore how to put the corporate line across succinctly
 - Having a nose for a story
 - Knowing how to make a boring story interesting
 - The ability to package your message for different audiences/media: tabloid, broadsheet press, broadcast, online
 - Having a feel for which method of communication is appropriate: press releases, exclusive briefing, round tables etc.

In summary it is an ability to take any issue/story and predict how each and every media will run it and, as a result of that intuitive prediction, make management decisions on the best way forward. It is well encapsulated in the following quote:

'Knowing what is the right story and what is the right thing to do, i.e. which journalist to speak to, when, what the messages should be, how it should be handled. For instance, would a lunch meeting be the best way.'

- Being 'plugged in' to the media gossip mill is undoubtedly an important qualification. If the head of media relations is excluded or detached from this they will not be in a position to provide the intelligence and inside track that senior management increasingly need and value.

'Senior management want to know about media gossip, who is going where, and expect you to know about it.'

- Understanding the CEO and how he/she is likely to behave with a particular journalist
- A well informed understanding of the regulatory (for instance Stock Exchange Regulations) environment, which is increasingly putting a straight jacket on what companies can say and when. The practice of media relations is much more regulated now than it used to be and so much information is price sensitive. For those companies with a dual listing in the US, Sarbanes Oxley means that a UK FTSE company must be able to account for and verify every piece of information it puts out externally.

'Say the wrong thing and you could be in breach of Stock Exchange Regulations and suddenly send the share price down.'

'I have to know these things, because sometimes I have to make decisions and difficult judgements out of office hours, when there is no one to call to check.'

- Financially literate, a good grasp of the IR agenda and an understanding of how the city operates. A significant proportion of the head of media relations' job is driven by the financial calendar. Developing messaging for the big set pieces requires a fundamental grasp of the metrics that apply to the industry and company concerned, an understanding of the metrics that are of interest to specific media, why they are of interest and an ability to communicate this information coherently. Credibility with the CEO and FD, the IR team and the company's bankers and other advisors is dependent upon this.

- A deep understanding of the industry sector, the competitive environment and the business is also a pre-requisite for credibility. A wider understanding of the political and economic environment (employment levels, interest rates, political issues and pressures etc.) is also necessary.

'Journalists often try to tie company stories into the bigger picture, where they can make as sweeping a statement as possible.'

- Since the Head of Media Relations and their team have to produce a considerable amount of written material (press releases, positioning statements, Q&As), writing skills have to be of a high quality. It is critical that the individual can write quickly and well on a variety of subjects and in a number of different styles, both for internal (board papers advocating a course of action) and external consumption. Although journalists rely much less on press releases than they used to, how things are presented to journalists in written form is very important. Writing is their craft and they will think poorly of companies that cannot write properly.

'The poor articulation of company strategy means that you're not making the most of the potential for positive reporting, and hackneyed quotes won't get used. So writing skills can affect coverage, both volume and favourability.'

- Good team management skills and the confidence to deal with personnel issues. This is a significant challenge for many practitioners, and since staff costs normally represent the biggest part of the budget, it has to be a high priority.
- He/she needs to be a good advisor, since a lot of time in this role is spent with the senior management team. It is not just a question of giving good advice, but getting them to accept it. This requires a combination of qualities, some of which have already been covered above (e.g. news judgement and intimate knowledge of the media), but others include:

- Influencing skills. For instance the ability to think on your feet, to form sound and definitive judgements quickly, and make a recommendation for a course of action at board level in the face of scepticism and resistance. Or, in a crisis, having rapidly identified the issues and formed an appropriate response to them, the influencing skills to secure a consensus for the positions you are recommending
- Related to the above, eloquence, conciseness, incisiveness, strong advocacy skills
- The ability to brief accurately and in a manner that inspires confidence
- Pragmatic and flexible – to know what is worth fighting for and not to 'sweat the small stuff'
- A strong instinct, the courage of one's convictions, not easily swayed
- Negotiating skills combined with a preparedness to take calculated risks. For instance deciding to talk off the record and negotiating the ground rules on sensitive stories.

(ii) Personal qualities:

- High levels of intelligence/very bright. The Head of Media Relations has to become an expert very quickly, in a broad range of subjects.

'Suddenly we all had to become pensions experts.'

Expert means the ability to assimilate and distil complex information, master briefs extremely quickly, see the key issues and communicate these in an intelligible way, taking into account reputational implications. Furthermore, most financial/city journalists, are highly intelligent and the person at the interface has to be as smart, clever and sharp as they are, otherwise it is quite possible that the individual (and therefore the company) will be outwitted or out manoeuvred.

'You have to deal with a very clever bunch of people (journalists) on your own terms and not let them out manoeuvre you.'

Also a journalist will be more respectful towards an individual who knows what they are talking about, has views of their own and does not always merely repeat the company line.

- It is important to be interested in journalists as well as the challenges they face. Several participants also noted that it helps enormously if you like them. This should not be confused with trying to be their best friend.

'It is essential that you like journalists – they like dealing with people they like being with.'

'Don't see them as the enemy, see them as stimulating company.'

'We all know what happens when you fall out with a journalist. He/she will portray the company in an unfavourable light if you're antagonistic toward them.'

- It is impossible to be an effective Head of Media Relations without being a 'news junkie' or a 'current affairs junkie'. He/she must read and listen to the media widely, be aware of and understand the issues of the day, who is writing what, what preoccupies journalists etc. This is important for two reasons, first to exercise better news judgement (you have to know what is making news, in order to position a story that is relevant to the broader news context) and second to gain the respect, or at least, acceptance of journalists.

'You need to be a news junkie. You cannot operate on the level of a senior journalist if you are not as well plugged in as they are.'

'You have to know what other news is out there to make your news more saleable.'

- Excellent relationship building skills, which are essential to success in the role, both externally and internally. Good relationships and trust are key to obtaining information from a journalist that may be useful to a company. Likewise it is essential that the head of media has the relationships and sources of information around the business that provide them with accurate and up to date news/intelligence.
- Perhaps the most important attributes, all related, are resilience, robustness, tenacity and courage. The pressure can be monumental and the head of media relations needs to be resolute and thick skinned. He/she also needs to have a 'stomach for a fight'.

The pressure comes from two sources:

(i) Journalists (who are under considerable pressure themselves)

It is frequently necessary to engage with journalists in a fairly robust fashion, since they will not give much quarter themselves. This requires strength of character and tenacity.

Journalists can become angry and unpleasant if you don't tell them what they want. A verbal 'slagging off' is not unusual.'

'The British press can be pretty savage.'

(ii) Senior management

The Head of Media Relations will often be held responsible for vicious, inaccurate or unfavourable comment in the media, comment that inevitably makes the CEO/senior management team unhappy, if not irate.

'You need a thick skin, management can be bloody rude.'

'Got to be resistant because you take a kicking from management and the media.'

'You need the hide of a rhino. In this job you are constantly soaking up pressure and constantly under attack from all quarters.'

In these situations, the ability to remain calm and unflustered, whilst under considerable pressure is critical. The pressurised situations are different in this job and he/she is much more exposed; get it wrong and you could have a disastrous headline/story the next day. The Head of Media Relations' ability to remain unflappable in the face of these pressures also has another important dimension; that is to reassure the team.

'When you run a team you have to be calm, since that will come across and influence the others.'

- High levels of stamina, self motivation and self discipline. This is an incredibly demanding, hard working and all consuming role which, given the importance and influence of the weekend business and finance sections, never really allows a switching off period.

'The level of availability and contactability is much greater. There is no escape.'

'The news doesn't get put to bed at the end of the day. Sometimes you have to get hold of someone to sanction a quote at midnight.'

- Well organised, good planning skills, the ability to multi-task and reprioritise quickly and think one or two steps ahead.

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Transition from journalist to Head of Media Relations

A background in journalism is, in the opinion of most of the respondents, a useful asset. Cognisant of the fact that the path from financial journalism into an in-house media function is a reasonably well trodden one, we asked respondents a question which had two elements to it:

- Is a background in journalism an advantage?
- Does a journalist make a good Head of Media Relations?

In answer to the first of these questions, the general consensus was that a background in journalism, whilst not necessary, can be an advantage.

'You don't need it, but by God it helps.'

Some level of exposure and inside knowledge of how the media operates has to be an asset - and at very least it helps to have an ex-journalist on your team.

'In my role I think it is irrelevant, but it is good to have a mix of skills in your team – they do bring good creative writing skills and a nose for a story.'

There were a number of reasons put forward as to how and why previous journalism experience helps, some of which are self-evident. In summary these are:

- It is an advantage when building relationships and attempting to engage more deeply with journalists, giving them the confidence that you know what you are talking about.
- Knowledge of what makes a story and how to package it. Journalists will normally bring news sense and news judgement.
- An understanding of what a journalist is trying to do and where he/she is coming from. In other words, an ability to 'think like they do' and to 'get into their heads'.

An ability to predict how a story will play.

- The respect and ear of the CEO for their knowledge and understanding of a dark world that CEOs don't usually understand. Ex-journalists are inevitably perceived as having a greater degree of insight into this world than others.
- An absence of fear when it comes to dealing with journalists, as well as an appreciation of the pressures that a journalist is under. Understanding the behaviour and motivation that these pressures engender can be particularly valuable.

However, as several respondents remarked, it is a transition that does not always work successfully and there is certainly no shortage of cases where the 'experiment' has not worked. Some find it very difficult to adjust to a large company, particularly one that values process above instinct and intuition. They are not 'corporate' by nature - and corporate life is very different. They also have to adjust to a completely different set of responsibilities and may find it difficult not to empathise with their ex-colleagues, which can be dangerous.

'Many journalists I know are flawed in the way they see their responsibilities.'

'They may be overly disposed towards the needs of journalists, rather than the company.'

There are also a number of other factors, mentioned by participants that work against a successful transition, namely:

- Journalists are accustomed to analysing and publicising the actions of others, without being required to advocate a course of action. It is difficult to move from a position where gleaning information and putting it into the public domain is the principle purpose in life, to one where one has to make an entirely different judgement as to whether that same information should even enter the public domain.

Providing advice to a CEO in a pressurised situation when the stakes are high is not something that a journalist will previously have experienced.

Analysis is not a problem, but the advice is.'

- They are accustomed to having the upper hand and moving to the other side of the fence, where this is no longer the case, can be a painful adjustment.
- They have a much wider range of internal stakeholders to keep happy, and they will have to deal with people who are not as media savvy as they are. Managing this frustration - people not taking their advice on issues that they consider themselves an expert – can be difficult and hard to accept.
- Having come from an environment which is driven by deadlines, journalists tend to be weaker on planning and strategy.
- They are not always good team players as they have been used to working alone and often in competition with colleagues.
- They suffer (unless they have made the transition at a senior level) from a lack of management experience. Consequently they often make poor managers, a flaw that is often amplified by ingrained habit, behaviour and attitude.

'I am now a senior manager with no previous management experience.'

- The deference, amongst senior management, for the insights they bring begins to diminish over time.
- Their 'contacts' dry up very fast in a manner that they do not anticipate.

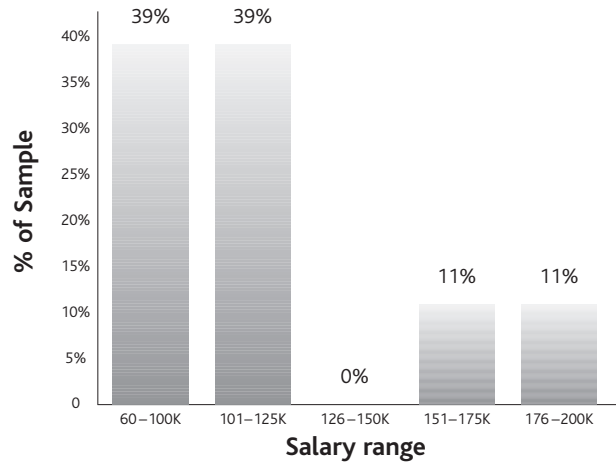
'Some forget that the moment they cross the fence their best mates will happily cut off their bollocks!'

13

Salary levels

The wide variety of elements that make up participants' remuneration packages makes a detailed analysis – as well as comparisons – difficult. We therefore focused on salary alone which is, after all, the most important reference point for most people. The findings have been represented graphically in the chart below. Most of the sample were earning in excess of £100,000 and over a fifth of the sample earn salaries in excess of £150,000. This is more than some Communications/Corporate Affairs Directors of FTSE100s are earning, an indication of both the status and perceived value of the role.

The wide variety of elements that make up participant's remuneration packages make a detailed analysis – as well as comparisons – difficult.



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Participants

Abbey	Head of Media Relations
AstraZeneca	Head of Public Relations
British Airways	Head of Corporate Communications
Barclays	Public Relations Director
BP	Senior VP Group Media & Publications
British Gas	Head of Communications
BT	Group Director of Media Relations
Diageo	Director of Corporate Communications
EMI	Media Director
GSK	VP, UK Corporate Media Relations

Rolls Royce	Head of Corporate and Financial Media Relations
Sainsbury Plc	Head of Press
Shell	ex Head of Group Media Relations
Tesco	Head of Media
The Big Food Group	Head of Group Corporate Affairs
Unilever	Head of Media Relations
United Utilities	Head of Corporate and Financial Communications
Vodafone	Head of Group Media Relations

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