Managing Perceptions: The Care and Feeding of The Media

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In a recent edition of one of our local community papers, *CXpress*, we were told about two young boys who were playing on a field in Durban when a vicious rotweiler suddenly came out of nowhere and attacked one of them. The other boy managed to get his cricket bat under the dog's collar and twist it, breaking the animal's neck and so ending the attack.

A reporter happened to be walking his own dog in the same park and witnessed what had happened. So, of course, he rushed over to interview the boy.

"*Heroic young Sharks fans saves friend from vicious animal...*" he writes in his notebook.

"But I'm not a Sharks fan," protests our little hero.

"Sorry," says the reporter, "but since we're in Durban, I just assumed you'd be a Sharks fan." He starts again: "*brave young Cheetahs fan rescues companion from horrific attack....*"

"But I'm not a Cheetah's fan, either," says the boy.

"I thought everyone in Durban was either for the Sharks or the Cheetahs," says the reporter. So who *do* you root for?"

"I'm a Western Province fan!" beams the child.

"*Little brat from Cape Town kills beloved family pet...*"

Unfortunately, it seems to me that this little story - which, by the way, appeared on the paper's "*Go on, Have a Laugh...*" page - sums up the way the public sees the role of the media.

So today I'd like to try and define the media's role, and then to look at how the tourism industry can influence the working relationship between itself and the media through planned campaigns and through planning for critical incidents.

In preparing this paper, I was fortunate enough stumble across the transcripts of *The Star's* Centennial Conference, which was held in Johannesburg in October 1987.

The theme of the conference was *Conflict and the Press* – which was particularly appropriate in those dark days when South Africa was struggling with yet another state of emergency, and journalism was often an extremely dangerous occupation.

Many of the speakers at the Conference looked at whether the media was instrumental in creating violence, and whether the draconian censorship laws that were in force at that time were at all effective in preventing further violence.

I believe that both questions were eloquently dealt with in the opening speech by Mrs. Catherine Graham, who was then the chairman and major shareholder of a media organisation called the *Washington Post Company*, and who had been the publisher of the *Washington Post* itself from 1969 to 1979.

And I believe that her words are relevant to us: firstly they're relevant to the tourism industry in South Africa, where there is a worrying amount of violent crime (along with an inevitable increase in calls for "responsible reporting") – and secondly they're relevant to us here today, because it's necessary to understand how the media sees its own role if we're to get to grips with the relationships between our two industries.

As an American, Catherine Graham drew on the American media's experiences of the civil rights movement in the deep South, from which, she said, "we have learned that press coverage can stimulate passions, spark the fires of change and even turn the tide of history. The unspeakable, unforgettable scenes of American policemen turning fires on black protestors did arouse the conscience and consciousness of the nation. It made change necessary and possible.

"However, press coverage alone was not responsible for the civil rights movement in the South, as some believed. A common assumption of the white supremacists was that if only the press didn't report the news, the civil rights struggle would simply go away.

"But the blacks didn't need press reports – or outside agitators – to inform them of their oppression; the indignities to which they were subjected; their lack of opportunity. They didn't need to rely on newspapers to stimulate their protests. Television didn't bring rioters into the streets."

Her opinion was underscored by Stephen Claypole, the BBC's Director of External News Services, who said that television has been blamed for much. It is "the evil eye, the medium which has dislocated the social order and set community against community... If only we would put away our cameras and microphones and lights, all would be well.

"As if the times before television were noted for peace and tranquility!

"There is a familiar pattern to the indictments brought against us. The press and the broadcasters arrive to cover some upheaval ... The phone lines and the satellites begin to buzz, and the world reads and sees reports of a harrowing kind. At this moment a sort of official bewilderment often sets in."

The result is that the media is the subject of accusations which, said Claypole, are "otherwise known as blaming the messenger."

And finally he put it into perspective: "he had," he said, "never forgotten the civic dignitary in Northern Ireland who accosted the BBC controller there and said: 'Why don't you show the good news? Why don't you tell the world that we kill twice as many people on the roads as we do by bombs and bullets?'"

It seems quite obvious, then, that the members of the media - the press, radio, television and the internet (at least those parts of the internet which concern themselves with current affairs) – see themselves as messengers and conveyors of the news - although they're careful to understand that the way in which the messenger carries the message can seriously influence the course of events.

But we must also remember that the media is a business, an industry, and we have to remember this and respect its practitioners as

professionals - just as we expect the media to respect our professionalism in the tourism industry.

I think this is very important in establishing the relationship between the two industries.

With this in the back of our minds, let’s look at how we can help the media to influence what we do in tourism.

And to do this, we must begin by trying to understand what it is that makes a story newsworthy.

I’m in the fortunate position of having sat on both sides of the fence – I’ve operated my own tourism business, but I’ve also edited a tourism business publication and I currently write a weekly commentary on tourism issues (and because this is my field of experience, I’m going to confine my discussion largely to dealing with the print media).

One of the problems in my work is that I spend an awful amount of my own money on downloading messages – usually containing enormous attachments - from people who believe that I have a duty to report on their products.

Very few of the people who send me these messages have stopped to think about whether or not their products are newsworthy: in other words whether or not my readers care about their price increases or their new toilet seats or the redecoration of their grannies’ bedchambers.

In 1991, the Australian Press Council issued a wonderfully concise piece on the selection of newsworthy stories.

It had received various complaints from groups and organisations – including political parties – who believed that their press releases were given less than adequate mention in particular papers. The complainants believed they should be given publicity for a number of reasons, including their perceived importance of the issues; the fact that the authors of the statements had previously been given support in the press; the limited media access available in given communities; and the Press Council’s own stated position that the freedom of the press is the people’s freedom to be informed.

The reply to these various complaints came as follows: “the Council is sympathetic to the frustrations of community groups who feel their views are not receiving the coverage they deserve. In a pluralistic society it is important that citizens know of the views and opinions of significant community groups.

“At the same time the Council notes that the daily press is not the only source of information in society. With technological developments, a proliferation of sources is available.

“In addition, the Council is a strong supporter of editorial discretion to determine what ...is in fact newsworthy. This discretion, provided it is *bona fide*, must remain that of the newspapers, and it would be improper for the Council to seek to substitute its views for that of the editor.”

So, what does the media want?

Because they receive so much information every day, journalists and editors are receptive to that which is novel and of interest to their readers, and some newspapers, like the *Sunday Times*, publish

‘accuracy tests’ which their journalists use to determine whether or not a story should be written and published.

These accuracy tests include questions like: what is the story? – why would the writer persue the story? - is it because the story interests him, or because it is of interest to his readers? - is it in the interests of the public to publish the story? - has all the background research on the story been done? - and, very importantly, what is the source’s motivation for supplying the story?

This last question is important because writers are suspicious of press releases which seek only to provide free publicity, but which don’t provide anything new or interesting.

So, for instance, the first question I was asked - and, by the way, two editors asked me the same thing – the first question I was asked when I submitted the press releases about today’s seminar was – “who is going to benefit?”

I made it clear that delegates would be paying for their seats, but I managed to convince both editors to publish:

- because of the obvious educational value of the seminar;
- because of the ground-breaking nature of Professor Vrancken’s work;
- because of the novelty of the laws governing e-commerce; and, I suppose,
- because we were going to be looking at the role of the media.

Of course, ‘newsworthiness’ is a very loose term, and your story needs to hit the right person first time if it’s going to have any chance of being printed.

And this brings us to the question of planning and managing a media campaign.

The Media Campaign

Before you can begin any effective media campaign, you need a media resource database so that, depending on your story, you know *which media to target* – newspapers, magazines, e-zines, radio and television stations - and, ideally, you should also know the names of the relevant people who work for the different titles or stations. A typical newspaper, for example, would have various sections devoted to specific types of writing - hard news, op-ed pieces, letters to the editor and so on - and your database should record who is responsible for each section so that you can also decide *whom* to target.

Op-ed pieces, by the way, are usually carried ‘opposite the editorial pages’ of daily papers, although the weekend papers sometimes devote entire sections to this type of writing. These pieces are given over to informed opinion and analysis of current issues and are usually written by people with specialist knowledge of their subjects. So, for example, the *Cape Times* has its “*The Debate*” column, and it invites you - the reader – *to* “*Join The Debate*.” Thus, if you feel strongly enough about, say, the way the tourism industry deals with a particular issue, and if you are sufficiently informed about it, you could write a piece and submit it – and, if the editor feels that you have valid argument, you could well be published.

But if, for the sake of argument, you were to submit this same story to the sports editor, you can be sure that you'd be ignored. I mean, with the Springboks losing everything in sight – games, face, credibility – does your average sports writer have any interest in bed occupancy or non-African visitor arrival figures?

Your media database is clearly one of the most powerful tools in preparing all your media campaigns, and should be the foundation upon which they are built.

It's easy working with a small country paper, where the editor-in-chief is also the chief bottle washer, but it gets a lot more complicated in larger papers, where key people to know include

- the *city editor*, who determines what news should be included in the paper and who assigns stories to the individual journalists;
- the *features editor*, who may personally direct the activities of the different sections (home and garden, tourism, environment, etc), but if the newspaper is large enough, there may also be various editors for specific sections;
- the *business* and *sports editors* - most newspapers have separate editors for both sections; and
- the *advertising manager* who is responsible for all the advertising in the paper.

Other people who are worth knowing include the reporters on certain beats (crime, tourism, the environment, etc), the editor of the op-ed page and the regular columnists.

Remember that the media needs you as much as you need them – because without leads, there are often no stories. And as long as you have something worthwhile and interesting to tell them, most journalists will stop and listen to what you have to say – because, as much as you need your story to get out, they need fresh ideas to create their stories.

With this knowledge, you can now set about

- designing your media plan;
- deciding what types of coverage you want;
- designating media specialists who will act as the interface between your company or organisation and the media people;
- setting the campaign into action; and,
- finally – and very important for your ongoing marketing and for the success of future campaigns - keeping records of what coverage you actually receive from the campaign.

Of course, certain guidelines exist of which you need to be aware – and many of these have to do with the way the media operates. This is why the larger organisations often employ media specialists: more because of their intimate knowledge of how the various media work then because of their knowledge of their employers or their ability to write about them.

As a final word on planning and managing media campaigns, you should know that the media works with certain 'unwritten rules' - and

here I must thank Gary Plummer of the *Global Development Research Centre* for actually writing them down:

"1. You aren't in control.

You may be the master or mistress of your fate in your business, but you have absolutely no control over the use or placement of any news item you submit to the media. A story idea or news release you think is important may be nothing more than junk mail to an editor or reporter. And recognise that you can do everything right and still end up with the media doing a lousy job on your story.

"2. Your advertising doesn't carry any weight.

Don't even think about demanding that a news item be used because your business is an advertiser. There is a long-standing, inherent hostility in the media between the news and advertising departments, especially at newspapers. Nothing turns off a reporter or editor more quickly than the suggestion that because you are an advertiser, your news should get special treatment.

"3. You need to explain, explain and explain some more.

Chances are the reporter covering your story won't know much about the subject. It's your job to help educate the reporter about the topic, especially if it's a technical one, in the interests of accuracy. You may only have 10 or 15 minutes to do it, but you need to do it because you're the expert. Don't hesitate to ask the reporter if he or she understands. If not, explain it again.

"4. This isn't the movies. There are no previews.

The media won't let you see, edit, correct or otherwise preview a story before it's printed or aired. Don't embarrass yourself by asking, or threaten not to cooperate or to withhold information unless you have the right to approve what is used. It won't do you any good to try, unless your goal is to antagonise the media.

"5. More isn't better.

Papering the newsroom with copies of your news release isn't going to assure that your news items is used. In fact, it's likely to get your organisation's news consigned to the garbage can. Don't send duplicate copies of your news release to different people at a media organisation. This can cause embarrassment to the media - two different reporters get the release and write stories, which show up in the paper the same day. Make every effort to deal with just one person at each media outlet.

"6. There's always another source.

Don't think you're the only source for a story about your business - especially a negative one. If you won't talk, you can bet the reporter will find somebody who will. And the chances are that it will be somebody who doesn't know the whole story or who has an axe to grind, like a politician, a government bureaucrat or a disgruntled employee or customer.

"7. 'Off the record?' Don't go there.

"Off the record" doesn't exist. There is no such thing. You should respond to media questions as if everything you say is on the record and will be reported, and that includes any informal conversation before and after the formal interview. If you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the air, don't say it!

"8. Truth or consequences!

Always tell the truth! You can skirt a sensitive question, but don't lie. A falsehood will inevitably come back to haunt you and your business. Don't risk the long-term consequences to your reputation by lying to the media.

"9. Give 'em sound bites.

In preparing for any encounter with the media, develop a list of the key points you want to make. Then construct short, 15- to 20-second sound bites explaining those points. This approach will help you focus your message on what's really important.

"10. 'They really screwed it up! I should sue them!'

Don't lose your cool if the media make an error in your story. If it's not really significant, forget it. If it is, politely point it out to the reporter and request a correction. If you aren't satisfied with the response, talk to the reporter's editor or news director. And if that doesn't work, be satisfied with pointing out the error in a letter to the editor or station manager. Don't forget that if you overreact, you could damage your relationship with the media outlet permanently - and that this probably isn't the last story they'll do on your business."

Here's an example of a brilliant media campaign which was cited by Richard Beamish of the *Grantsmanship Centre*, an American organisation which helps and trains people who work with public funds: the *Adirondack Museum* is a highly saleable institution that forms part of New York State's Adirondack Park and provides a reflection of the Park's cultural and geographical identity. It has superb displays and it's also set in an unusually beautiful area of the Park.

But for purposes of press coverage, what it does *not* have is easy access – it stands in the center of a sparsely populated area and is a two-hour drive from the nearest newspaper office.

The Museum recognised that the papers in the small cities surrounding the Park reach an important audience, and it believed that many of residents of theses cities would probably be inclined to visit it if they knew about the institution.

So it decided to hold a press preview for the coming season – a 'press event.'

The Museum's publicist began by calling a few editors and reporters to find out if there would be enough interest to justify all her preparations. There was, and the next step was the written invitation – a one-page memorandum that was sent to city editors, art editors, outdoor writers, feature writers and various columnists – and which presented the vital statistics of the event: the who, what, why, where, and when. And - and this is important - the memo stressed what was new and different about the Museum.

The memo was sent out about three weeks before the event. A week later, it was followed up with a phone call to ensure that the memos had been received. The caller mentioned the press preview by date and spoke about the Museum's unique selling point (it owns what is perhaps America's finest collection of small, non-motorized watercraft). Mention was also made of photographic possibilities and the fact that reprints of historic pictures would be made available - and this is also important, because good photo opportunities will often attract the greatest attention.

This call was probably scripted, and the callers were no doubt rehearsed, and this is also important when you're trying to grab this kind of attention.

A second call was made a few days before the event, and this time the focus was on the journalist's need to find a good story and the reader's need for interesting and useful information.

The result? Beamish tells us that "six of the eight daily newspapers invited by the Museum sent reporters and photographers. The two papers unable to attend did stories based on pictures and information provided by the Museum. Most of the coverage appeared in the Sunday editions on the weekend before the museum opened for the season. All were front-page spreads, either on page one of the newspaper or on the front page of inside sections. All displayed photographs in a way that attracted widespread attention."

Together, these stories reached millions of readers in New York State, and thousands of them visited the Adirondack Museum as a direct result of the coverage. So, from the Museum's point of view, this simple campaign was an enormous success.

But there's more, and Beamish makes this very significant point: he writes that "the advantages of publicity over advertising are clearly seen in this case. Consider how much this nonprofit institution would have to pay for newspaper advertising to produce similar results. And could any amount of paid advertising have the appeal and credibility of this kind of press coverage?"

In the end, every media campaign rests on one thing: the validity of what you have to say - and validity is a subjective thing. That's why it's so important to be aware of the *people* behind the media. So if your campaign focuses on the environmental benefits of what you're doing and you have already established a good working relationship with various environmental reporters, it stands to reason that you're going to have a better chance of success than if you've never spoken to any of them ever before.

Keeping good relations with the press is something one can't underestimate, and I'd like to leave the subject with one final - if somewhat extreme - illustration from the conference on *Conflict And The Press.*

There's a moral to this story, which came from Mr. Dana Bullen, the executive director of the *World Press Freedom Committee*: an American newspaper executive went to a conference in Nigeria, where he met a senior official of the Nigerian government who observed that "your newspaper used to carry a lot of news about us, but we haven't seen anything in it about our country for the last six months."

"Quite so," said the American. "It was six months ago that you expelled our correspondent."

One could go on forever about media campaigns, but I hope I have given you enough material to help you in planning your next one.

Critical Incident Planning

Tourism, ladies and gentlemen, is all about perceptions, and perceptions are so easily damaged. When a tragedy occurs - like when a bus goes over a mountainside or when some selfish idiot detonates a bomb or rapes a visitor - the perception can be created that this country - or this town, or this province, or this hotel, or this attraction – is 'unsafe.' Or worse.

But, correctly handled, another perception could also be created: that of "it could happen to anyone - pity that it should happen while we were there. It's actually such a nice place."

If you want to promote positive perceptions of your country, your organisation or your business, you have to be ready for critical incidents. One of the journalists whose knowledge of the industry I most respect - the *Daily Dispatch's* Lew Elias - recently put this into perspective when he said that "bad news doesn't undo itself as quickly as good news gets forgotten."

Which is precisely why it's important to know that there are good and bad ways of dealing with bad news - and that if you want to deal with bad news - well, you have to have a plan in place for doing so.

Critical incidents can happen to anyone at anytime. They are almost always traumatic, are very often tragic, and invariably include damage to people, animals or the environment.

They key issues in handling them - and here I'm referring to the complete handling of the incident, and not just the way in which you deal with the press - the key issues in handling critical incidents are the provision of protection services and the provision of effective communication to the outside world. In more monied societies, the provision of trauma counseling and legal and insurance back-up will also be important.

For our purposes today, we must confine our discussion to providing communication with the outside world - in other words, with anyone who is not directly involved with the incident.

And, of course, the only effective way of doing this is through the media.

I am indebted to Ed Richardson, of *Siyathetha Communications* in Port Elizabeth, who kindly wrote me a long e-mail in which he defines this kind of work as 'crisis communication.' And it's done, he says, "by planning for the worst, preparing press releases in advance, designating spokespeople, establishing lines of communication to those spokespeople and ensuring that members of the media have their telephone numbers.

"A good example is the way the mines handle rock falls - or 'seismic events' - these days.

"They have a spokesperson - who is not the mine manager because that individual has to save lives, clean up the mess and resume production. The spokesperson keeps the media fully informed about what

is happening and invites them to the site to photograph and film proceedings from predetermined positions (which results in images of rescue teams risking their lives underground rather than the more distressing pictures of grieving families and co-workers)."

In a cynical sense, it's all stage-managed. But it does serve to protect the mine from what you might call 'collateral damage.'

Richardson also cites the example of the recent shooting of a British tourist in Mpumalanga. He says that Cheryl Carolus "reacted quickly by giving condolences to the family, the police posted a reward and there were photos of the family visiting dad at the bed-side.

"It was important that they (the family) came to South Africa rather than us casavacking the surviving victim to Britain. Their coming here gives the subliminal message that this country is not really a war zone."

He also mentions that it seems that the man tried to play hero by resisting a robber with a gun.

"That is stupid anywhere, any time," he says. But he adds that "with wonderful hindsight, I would have ensured that the media releases announcing the attack emphasised the fact that he was shot while bravely trying to apprehend the interloper."

Ed concludes by saying that "yes, I would definitely have sent out a release before any journalist had time to get wind of the incident. You have to take the high road, stay ahead and keep the journalists so busy that they are not tempted to go ferreting around for their own bits of news."

Why is it that some people go 'off their heads' when tragedy occurs, whilst others remain calm and are able to assess the situation before they do anything one way or another? I'm tempted to think of the philosopher and Nazi concentration camp survivor, Viktor Frankel, whose thesis was that there is a moment between action and reaction in which we are free to chose how we're going to react.

I believe that people who react positively to tragedy, do so not *only* because they have made the conscious choice to do so - but because, by dint of their training (and by training I mean a combination of upbringing and education) – by dint of their training they are *also mentally equipped* to do so.

By the same token, organisations and businesses can only react positively to negative situations if they have equipped themselves to do so. And in this sense, equipping oneself requires planning and training.

Many companies have disaster management plans in place, and recent events in tourism – and media reactions to them - should alert us all to the need to include media planning in our critical incident planning.

At the risk of repeating myself, media planning is vital. Disaster can destroy a hard-won reputation in seconds - and effective communication via the media is the only real weapon in any damage control arsenal.

But you have to be ready for it, and trying to think about how you should handle the media is almost impossible when you find yourself in the middle of a difficult situation.

By the time a crisis arises, your senior management should, preferably, have taken part in training and simulation exercises to ensure that everyone knows exactly how to behave and what to do. And these exercises would be based on the following plan:

1. A strategy for dealing with the media has been agreed to. This strategy must be based on the certain knowledge that it's much better to take control of a negative situation with honesty than to let your organisation become the subject of public rumour and conjecture;
2. A designated person - one who has media training but who is not actively involved in setting the business back on its wheels - has been appointed to act as the organisation's spokesperson;
3. An up-to-date media database is available and its members can be contacted quickly and efficiently.

When a tragedy occurs, the media wants information right away - and in the case of radio and television, it's in a position to transfer that information to the public almost immediately. Reporters and editors are never willing to accept information from senior people who don't wish to comment or who say they'll "only comment after the proper investigations have been made." The media wants facts (it needs them in order to make a good story and also in order to protect itself against litigation) and any kind of guarded response will only stir them on to investigating further. So you could find yourself in a lot more trouble with your buying public by holding back information than you would if you were frank and up-front from the start.

This is not to say that you should give away anything that could incriminate you or your organisation, or could hurt the victims or their loved ones. But you should immediately make decisions on what you are prepared to say, need to say and can (legally and morally) say to the media in order that your message goes out as soon as possible after the incident - or, in the case of an on-going incident such as a hostage drama, flood or fire - during the incident.

Being pro-active in this way doesn't mean that no negative stories will appear – but it does ensure that media coverage is balanced and that the people who matter – the opinion-makers, tourists, other operators and so on – are informed as to how you have reacted to the situation and what steps you are taking to prevent it from ever happening again.

Any statements and comments you make should be brief and factual. You could, for instance, mention:

- what you know about the incident;
- your organisation's sympathy for the victims and their loved ones; and
- what your organisation plans to do in support of the victims.

If the protection services are involved (and they invariably are), you should check with them whether they're going to make any statements to the press, and your spokesperson should co-ordinate with theirs so that the two of them aren't putting out contradictory statements.

Remember in your planing that the media will usually want opinion and a 'human interest' angle to the story. You should therefore try to make provision for reporters to interview people both within and outside of your organisation - the victims themselves, relatives of the victims, 'experts' such as union representatives, academics, health and safety officers, and so on.

In any critical incident, you should aim above all – but within the bounds of caution - to be open and available and as accurate as possible in your dealings with the media.

Many companies choose to outsource their media work to public relations and media specialists. If you do go this route, you need to spend time ensuring that your contractor knows you, your organisation and our industry well enough to be able to handle critical incidents. At the time of a disaster, you don't want to find that your PR company thinks that you are a tour wholesaler when in fact you're a travel agent. Or – worse still – that they don't know the difference.

It could mean the difference between sinking with the tragedy or surviving with your reputation – and your bottom line – in tact.

To end off our discussion on critical incident planning, allow me to quote from a paper written by Judith Hoffman, who is the principle of an American media relations consultancy and who teaches workshops in dealing with the media and handling upset people.

The paper is called *"The Four Fatal Fiascoes Of Dealing With The Media,"* and in it Hoffman says that there are "a lot of things that you *should* do and say in times of crisis.. [but there are] four things you should *avoid doing at all costs*."

If you succumb to just one of these 'fatal fiascoes,' she says, "you can practically count on having an interview that will haunt you in the days and weeks to come."

"Fatal Fiasco #1: Saying 'No Comment'

> Hoffman says that "the initial impulse of many people, when faced with a TV camera or newspaper reporter, is to blurt out these two words. They think that, by doing so - usually accompanied by a glare and a gruff tone of voice - the reporter will simply give up and go away. In fact, several reporters have confirmed that they translate 'no comment' into 'guilty as charged.' Far from deterring them, it piques their curiosity and convinces them there is something that needs to be investigated more thoroughly." And this, by the way, has been substantiated by surveys in which no less than 65% of reporters said they read '*no comment*' as '*guilty as charged*.'
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> So, must you answer every question as reporter asks? No, and there may be many reasons not to. But Hoffman says that what you *should* do, is to say, "'I'm sorry, but I simply cannot answer that question because of this reason." But she also reminds us to follow up by telling the reporter something that you *can* share and which he or she could use for a story. Preferably this will be a 'must air' or key message that you've prepared beforehand in order to tell your story as positively as possible.

"Fatal Fiasco #2: Lying

Hoffman says, and I heartily agree with her: "If you are ever tempted to lie to a reporter - whether a little white one or a big whopper - stop and consider the consequences. The temporary avoidance of immediate pain is not worth losing your most important asset in dealing with the media - your credibility. All decent media relationships are based on mutual trust and respect. If you lie to a reporter even one time, he will never consider you trustworthy again. That reputation will negatively affect not only the current story, but all future encounters - and not only with that one reporter! They do talk among themselves.

"Fatal Fiasco #3: Losing Your Temper

"... Sometimes a reporter is unusually rude or intentionally tries to [push your] buttons. He may be trying to see if he can make you lose your cool and go beyond the agreed upon company statement to say something more interesting. Media people thrive on drama. If they make you lose your temper, you've given it to them. They'll be happy, but you - and the organisation you represent - will lose.

"You must exercise every bit of self-control you can muster. Stay cool. Be professional at all times. The reporters - and your ultimate audience of readers or viewers - will respect you. This is much more valuable in the long run than allowing yourself the short-lived satisfaction of venting your anger, even if you feel justified in doing so.

"Fatal Fiasco #4: Losing Eye Contact

This is particularly important in television interviews, but it applies throughout the media. Hoffman says that we've all – that is all westerners – been taught that a person who cannot look you in the eye is 'acting shifty.' She says that "reporters will be looking at you closely to judge whether or not you can be believed. How they gauge your trustworthiness may make all the difference in how they write up the story. When you are answering questions, look the reporter in the eye with a steady, but not unfriendly, gaze."

Clearly, the message is that planning and training will go a long way to avoiding total disaster for you and your business when tragedy strikes.

Complaining: The Press Ombudsman

No matter how well you've planned, how well you've trained yourselves and how good your PR practitioner might be, there could be times when you feel that you've been punched below the belt, and in tourism this can be very damaging. As I've said before – this industry thrives on perceptions, and it's usually in the media where perceptions – negative or positive are created.

We're lucky in South Africa, because there seems to be a higher degree of professionalism in the press now than ever before. Where the

party-line was once the only line, even pro-government papers now seem quite at ease with criticising our rulers. And – and this is the biggest joy – we have no real gutter press like those cheap, whining, holier-than-thou tabloids they put out (and, forgive me, the readers actually *buy*) in the UK.

Consequently, one reads of very few cases of slander against the press.

In the case of the *Sunday Times*, the paper has a published policy of avoiding "stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status; [of supporting] the open exchange of views, even views it may find repugnant; [of refusing] gifts, favours, fees, free travel and special treatment, if they compromise journalistic integrity; and [of admitting] mistakes and correcting them promptly."

And it's my belief that most other papers in the country operate to much the same standards.

But accidents do happen, and there are ways of putting them to rights.

You may be surprised to know that one of the most powerful of these is through the humble letter to the editor.

Now I know that the argument is that the damage is done once the story is printed, but my experience has been that the letters column is one of the best-read sections of any newspaper. So a polite letter will often do the trick. Use it to state your case simply and without too much emotion - and remember that, based on the philosophy of less-is-more, it's never a good idea to make more than one point in any letter that's intended for publication.

And, to be truthful, a letter to the editor might even give you a little more publicity than the paper had originally intended.

But if the dispute cannot be resolved through this means, there are two more avenues to explore before you begin to make your lawyers rich – the first is by direct contact with the reporter concerned and his or her editor, and the second is by lodging a complaint with the South African Press Ombudsman. You'll find his address on almost every newspaper's web site.

But the truth is that if you have a good working relationship with the media: if, when you supply them with a story, they know that they can count on you for honest and interesting material; and if you make an effort to understand what they need, you should never have reason to complain.

And finally...

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that, of all industries, the media can be – ought to be – the biggest ally of the tourism industry. But if this is to happen, we - the tourism industry - are going to have to make the running, and it's going to take a lot more effort on our part than we've made in the past. So I hope that my presentation today has gone some way towards ensuring that the tourism industry benefits from the care and feeding of the media.

Thank you.