

PUBLIC RELATIONS ADVICE

Headlines are harder to achieve

Independent practitioners these days are far more likely to court the press than they were a decade ago. But while hitting the headlines for the right reasons is good for your business, changing demands mean it is much harder to accomplish.

Tingy Simoes reports



IF YOU ask my six-year-old what mummy does for work, he will say something along the lines of 'she puts doctors on television'.

If further queried, he might explain, probably giggling, that a lot of these doctors 'make people's bums smaller'. Although undoubtedly true, their specialty is largely irrelevant in the grand scheme of medical celebrity.

Throughout a decade spent in medical and healthcare PR, my team and I have represented a wide range of hospitals, clinics, trade associations and products. From dentists, dermatologists and endocrinologists to some of the top exponents of that field most lauded – and criticised – for sensationalist media coverage: cosmetic surgery.

When I launched my marketing consultancy at the turn of the century and a sister PR agency a few years later, it sometimes seemed an uphill struggle to convince private clinics and doctors that they would indeed benefit from opening their doors – if ever so slightly – to the media.

The majority still avoided journalists like the plague and, when pressed, would pitifully ask whether comment could be given anonymously and mutter 'what will my colleagues think?'

Proliferation of cowboys

Fortunately, the more forward-thinking clinicians and organisations did realise that it was important to communicate with the public, if only for the purposes of education or to warn them of potential pitfalls and risks associated with choosing providers in the private healthcare sector.

The proliferation of cowboys, aggressive marketing and a rise in horror stories about people going to backstreet clinics for everything from Botox to fertility treatment created an urgent need for reputable spokespeople to provide expert guidance and advice.

According to market research company Mintel, 'public relations is by far the most effective form of advertising that a clinic or hospital can undertake. Effective PR can work wonders in terms of providing consumers with information on the latest developments in the industry'.

This dawning realisation among private practitioners has, for bet-

ter or worse, launched a thousand ships of rooky healthcare PR agencies willing to liaise with journalists on behalf of experts who feel they have something to say.

The reality is that, faced with a sea of private treatment prospects, patients still have to decide where to go and, in our media-led society, they will look to 'trusted' outlets such as newspapers and magazines to help them make that choice.

Rise of the media superstars

Thus, a very real need to educate and commune with the public from the rather exalted heights of medicine gave rise to the 'media superstars'.

We all know who they are. Of the scores of physicians I worked with, I knew exactly who would be willing to do an interview with an obscure radio station at 1am, or who would be willing to comment on whether Michael Jackson's nose was falling off.

I also knew who would not get out of bed for less than an in-depth profile with *Tatler*: the *Swindon Advertiser* was obviously beneath them.

Wading into the muddled waters of media relations separated the 'men from the boys'. A number of them fared wonderfully on television, while others were, let us say kindly, better suited to radio.

Although some private physicians continue to mourn the passing of the mystery and reverence surrounding Harley Street, others – perhaps not entirely selflessly but driven by financial pressures – were willing to launch and communicate cost-conscious services aimed at lower echelons of society, and market to those audiences accordingly. A true democratisation had begun.

For better or worse, 'resident expert' slots – where a preferred medic is regularly wheeled out to answer readers' questions or give their learned opinions from morning chat show couches – have become firmly established. They are now part of every self-respecting PR's Holy Grail.

I know that publicists out there will agree with me (probably while gnashing their teeth) when I say that nowadays many clinicians seem flummoxed, if not indignant, that they are not grac-

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Author Tingy Simoes runs both a marketing consultancy and a sister PR agency

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Surely all journalists would want to write about them, extolling their virtues? A new mindset has taken hold and, in fact, has made the PR expectations of many private practitioners well nigh impossible to meet.

In turn, the media's requirements have become more and more exacting. They do not just want an

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It's what we know

expert – they want an attractive one, preferably under 40.

They no longer want just a case study of a woman with adult acne, if we are promoting a new treatment. They want one who beat the condition only after being bullied at school and developing a drinking problem but who, later on, met a man 12 years her junior who proposed at Christmas.

Most patients, unsurprisingly, do not want their wrinkles or cellulite splashed across the pages of a tabloid. But, as rare as it remains to secure a cosmetic surgery case study, it is no longer enough that a man simply did not want to live with his father's nose.

The patient's story must include tremendous emotional pain, if possible a divorce and some kind of lurid 'New Year, New You' redemption. Oh, and the nose job should preferably have a new-fangled title named after a famous actor who has had it.

Clearly, sticking one's head above the parapet has its risks. For every opinion, there is one that counteracts it and this is actually a positive thing for the public.

It is effectively the difference between PR and advertising, where claims can go unchallenged. Certain experts became preferred by some types of media, as they could be relied on for a measured and honest response.

Other media, of the bombastic headline variety, learned to rely on those willing to comment on anything: whether Victoria Beckham may have gone abroad to somehow purchase the gender of their new baby or if a photo of Vladimir Putin looks like he has had a facelift. This does not establish these doctors as experts, but simply so-called 'rent-a-quotes'.

The bottom line is that journalists need expert opinion to produce their stories. As medical treatments launch and are mar-



keted, from miracle products to complementary therapies, reporters require someone's counter-view to properly inform the public.

Who could forget the media frenzy around a recent comment on a 'boob job' cream? For those who may have spent the last few months living under a rock, a plastic surgeon publicly doubted the effectiveness of a lotion which promised to increase breast size – inciting the threat of a lawsuit from the manufacturers.

Libel reform

While a harrowing experience for the surgeon, who was simply giving an expert view, the issue became a *cause célèbre* for free speech champions and was spoken about by everyone from Stephen Fry and Jonathan Ross to Andrew George MP, who called for libel reform.

Yet, it is not all doom and gloom. Doctors willing to descend from Olympian heights and walk or Twitter among the common man have wrought a democratisation of private care which, although assuredly not welcomed by all, can only be a good thing.

If patients are now keen to check their practitioners are properly qualified, to ask the right questions and be warned off going for a £200 facelift overseas, media coverage must be worth it.

It is true that the pendulum appears to have swung too far, but it will eventually swing the opposite way. Journalists' frenzied need for more and more lurid stories and 'new, new, new' developments in the medical field are, in fact, a product of growing scepticism.

Looking to the future, it is undeniable that both the public and the profession now recognise the importance of accurate media coverage that allows potential patients to make informed choices.

It is clear that healthcare organisations and individual practitioners can boost business and improve their standing in the industry through judicious media interaction with expert PR advice so they appear in the headlines for the right reasons. ■

Tingy Simoes is managing director of Wavelength Marketing Communications and founder of Cacique Public Relations



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