

MANAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Lessons extracted from the PIP crisis

The PIP implant saga has given independent practitioners some important lessons about how things should be dealt with when bad publicity hits the headlines and the streets. Scores of hero surgeons went the extra mile in response, flying the flag for the caring face of a profession under fire. Here, **Tingy Simoes** (right) shares some lessons from the press office of the **British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS)**

IT WAS 9pm on New Year's Eve. I had one foot inside the bath and the phone glued to my ear as I continued organising interviews on the unfolding PIP implants scandal.

For the last few weeks, including weekends, Christmas and Boxing Day, I had been bombarding plastic surgeons with dozens of texts on a daily basis.

- 'Can someone get to BBC Bristol by 4pm?'
- 'Need a spokesperson for The Times.'
- 'Does anyone have any images of explanted PIPs?'
- 'Is anyone available for ITV This Morning?'

Despite what I suspect must have been growing resentment from spouses and families eager to enjoy festivities without a publicist's intrusive demands, BAAPS surgeons rallied to cope with the requirements of an increasingly fearful – if not outright hysterical – public and media.

I've been known to joke, when reviewing the list of spokespeople at our disposal, that we have unofficial categories such as 'think PR

is beneath them', 'won't get out of bed for less than *Tatler*', 'only science journals' and so on.

And while it's true that to ensure our presence during this turbulent period I may have threatened some with bodily harm and did not consider it beneath me to use tears, I only had to resort to these ignoble tactics once or twice: nearly all surgeons willingly put down the Quality Street and volunteered to help out.

Brave volunteers

One surgeon who had never done a TV interview sat bravely on the BBC *Breakfast* couch, another offered to drive from Birmingham to London through the night for a morning chat show when I couldn't find anyone local.

No one pushed their own practice or website, or sulked because this person or that got more exposure. When it mattered, they stood up to be counted.

To truly comprehend how we became the epicentre of information dispersal for all things PIP, we have to look back to when the rumblings of the scandal first started making their way across the Channel in early 2010.

With every development – from the company's liquidation to the revelation that the gel within the implants was meant for mattresses – we faced the dilemma: do we notify the media?

Damaging information

There is not always consensus in being the first to break certain news. Many times I'm asked by clients question such as: 'Does everyone need to find out about this?', 'Do we really need to be the ones bringing attention to it?' In this instance, there could only be one answer.

Anytime there is damaging information, publicists have to weigh up the options. Is it better to select a specific newspaper and trust they will write something sensible which will include our advice? Or wait until someone else gets hold of the information – which they undoubtedly will – and we lose all control over what is being said?

And so we issued press releases when the first tests were delayed because the samples had been impounded; when it was discovered the protective shell had been dispensed with; when the first

genotoxicity tests were 'inconclusive' and, as early as February last year, announced that cosmetic surgery tourists may unwittingly have received PIP implants under a different name.

Journalists, and the public via social media, came to rely on the BAAPS to stay informed.

Once France announced it would remove all PIP implants, the media onslaught became relentless.

Sea of rumours

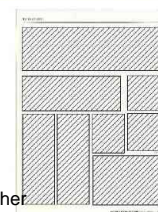
At the time, the UK's official stance remained broadly along the lines of 'nothing to see here, folks', but the women sobbing on the phone and writing panicked emails clearly felt otherwise.

In the midst of a sea of rumours, much confusion and slow reactions, the BAAPS directive was unequivocal and consistent throughout.

There was no immediate danger but it was the surgeons' expert opinion that the implants should come out, and preferably before rupture. It was important to reassure and educate as many as possible.

In December and January, the BAAPS appeared in over 1,500 articles and news bulletins from outlets such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, *Daily Mail*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* to France 24, *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.

Although it is true that, after nearly a decade of working



together – going onto the sixth presidential term now – with the result that BAAPS and its press office function like a well-oiled machine, there are a few basic principles that have ensured its message nearly always goes stratospheric, whether it be PIP implants, moobs or a proposal for regulations.

The lessons our members have learned are:

1 They understand that having a PR agency is like paying for a gym membership. Many organisations fail to understand that, just by virtue of paying a retainer, publicists cannot ‘magic’ coverage out of thin air. They have to invest the time and effort – and be ready to receive many (probably annoying) texts and emails demanding immediate response.

2 As a publicist, I’m only as good as what I’m given. A succession of BAAPS presidents and their councils have understood the importance of clearly articulated messages, and never fail to provide a solid direction and ‘party line’.

3 The decision to break a story is always a difficult one: in PR there are no guarantees. Even the journalist writing the story doesn’t know – and has no input on – what the headline will ultimately be. If you want to control exactly what will be said and who will be quoted, book an advert.

If used well, the media can be a healthcare organisation’s most valuable mouthpiece. In this instance, the willingness of scores of surgeons provided a direct line of help and information to the victims of this ongoing scandal – because even the best PR machine cannot create something out of nothing.

The saga continues... ■

Tingy Simoes is owner and MD of Marketing and PR agency Wavelength Marketing Communications and has been commissioned to write the first-ever Public Relations Handbook for Doctors, due for publication in the autumn



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A PIP implant removed by a BAAPS member. Another surgeon had put it in

News and features in our February edition were dominated by the PIP saga

