Category: Outstanding In-House Public Relations Team

Company: Lothian

**Business objectives and analysis of team performance against budget over the past three years:**
This kind of performance improvement can’t really be told in numbers. From being mired in controversy several years ago, Lothian is now a company that others are happy to endorse. It has:

- attracted visits from Nicola Sturgeon, Humza Yousaf and Ruth Davidson, celebrating successes in apprenticeships and green buses
- been highlighted by various political parties, campaign groups, commentators and communities as a model that others should follow

There has also been a complete turnaround in the relationship with the Edinburgh Evening News. The paper partnered Lothian on a competition to find the company’s ‘people champion’ as chosen by the public, and Lothian’s Director of Communications was invited to sit on the judging panel for the paper’s Pride of Edinburgh awards.

Detailed media monitoring was only introduced in 2016 so it’s not possible to provide prior statistics. In 2017, Lothian received around 1014 positive mentions in UK media, compared with 690 the year before, with negative mentions declining from 114 to 97.

It has nearly doubled its proactive story output, from c25 in 2015 to c50 in 2017, thanks to strengthened internal relations to generate the news itself and the willingness to promote it.

It has also openly engaged with other politicians and introduced a regular stakeholder newsletter to make sure that potential advocates (and critics) are aware of the company’s performance and achievements.

**A brief overview of business / team strategy:**
In 2014/2015, publicly-owned Lothian was embroiled in a bitter boardroom battle, leading to repeated front-page stories about its management culture. Despite being hugely successful and well-loved by its customers, Lothian was better known in the media for all the wrong reasons. It struggled with other negative stories about senior remuneration, fares and
services. The consequent acute internal sensitivity to any media interest made it challenging for it to deal with even basic enquiries. This lead to a fundamental breakdown in media relationships, stifling exposure for its industry-leading achievements.

In early 2016, a new Director of Communication and Managing Director, supported by the wider executive team and its retained agency Weber Shandwick, embarked on a simple mission: to get Lothian back behind the driving seat of its own PR narrative. With so much good news, and strong positions to defend, the challenge was much more about internal culture and external relationships than column inches or broadcast minutes.

The aims were to:

- Focus proactive publicity on core strengths of service, environment, innovation and community
- Drive improvements to tone, images and handling to facilitate better media coverage
- Take a more mature approach to reactive enquiries, mitigating negative coverage without undermining media trust
- Accept inevitable, occasional negative coverage and not allow this to derail any positive, proactive communications.

**A summary of commitment to CPD and professionalism:**
Over the last few years, the team has undertaken training in presentation skills, media interviews, public affairs and leadership training.

**A summary of recent outstanding achievements:**
In August 2016, Lothian took over services in East Lothian from First Bus, which had decided to withdraw from the area. As well as creating a new brand and paid-for campaign to promote the new service, the team:

- organised three roadshows in key towns
- entered a new liveried bus into a local parade
- had staff on-street ambassadors engaging with locals 1:1
- arranged promotional partnerships with local attractions
- engaged with local businesses and schools to further drive patronage
- secured national and local media coverage for the launch.

Less than a year after launch, the service website had c230,000 visits from a local population of c100,000! Against a national trend of declining bus use, ECB saw growth of c52% in the first 18 months, leading to extra capacity and enhanced routes being put on. Lothian produced its first ever Christmas advert, for use on social, in 2017. The video tells the story of a young bus customer being reunited with his precious Christmas star by a kind-hearted driver in a Santa costume. Produced in-house, with the help of Immagine Productions and on a budget of less than £1000, the video generated more than 140,000 views, receiving thousands of engagements, as well as rave reviews from customers and other well-wishers.
A summary of a campaign you are particularly proud of, including details of the brief, objectives, strategy, tactics, outputs, outcomes and budget:

The biggest highlight in recent years has been coverage around ‘hero’ driver Charmaine Laurie, whose exploits in avoiding a serious collision during Beast from the East in March 2018 were captured in a viral dashcam video that made headlines globally.

This was clearly not a planned campaign, but the incident illustrates perfectly the radical transformation that Lothian has undergone.

Three years ago, Lothian would have not engaged with any media interest. It would have been highly sceptical about media agendas and consequently risk averse. It would have cited the weather and other business priorities as being a reason not to engage, at best issuing a short, simple statement.

2018 was very different. While dealing with huge communications challenges around the weather, it handled dozens of bids for print and broadcast, with Charmaine appearing on BBC, STV, 5Live, Capital, Forth, Talksport and live on Good Morning Britain.

Although they faced some armchair critics incorrectly commenting on Charmaine’s driving speed (as a result of the misleading effects of the video) the company had full confidence in her actions and allowed her to shine nationally as an advocate for herself, the training at Lothian and the professionalism of bus drivers everywhere.

Later, Charmaine’s story – and the company’s efforts generally during the snow – were recognised in a Scottish parliamentary motion and a motion at the City of Edinburgh Council.

This seminal moment for Lothian was only possible thanks to the efforts of previous years to rebuild relationships with the media.