

# Crisis control

When a company has a crisis, monitoring the actual coverage becomes critical. **Hannah Marriott** looks at the options

From avian flu to absent luggage, the country's issues and crises teams have had plenty to keep them busy in 2007.

In today's fast-paced news environment – with 24-hour rolling TV news, newspaper websites and increasingly powerful blogs – the challenges are greater than ever.

However, monitoring companies are becoming increasingly adept at providing tools to help PROs evaluate fast-moving stories.

One of these tools is Media Report's Newswire Alerts, which flag up the day's newspaper coverage in emails sent out before 6am, helping press

teams 'tweak their strategy', says Media Report head of media evaluation Mark Carrier.

Other companies – such as TNS Media Intelligence – also offer a range of products tailored to crisis situations.

TNS recently launched News Alerts, a service that sends out notification and summaries of the details of broadcast programmes five minutes after they have finished.

Deputy MD Dean Wading says: 'If an issue affects your industry, you can see how your coverage compares to other companies without having to purchase media monitoring on your competitors.'

Crisis communications experts recommend using such products along with in-house resources. 'Your own staff will be the best placed to really understand the coverage,' says Tim Johnson, director at crisis specialist Register Larkin.

Johnson always puts Sky News on the moment the story breaks ('Sky is always first with breaking news – even if it is not always accurate,' he notes) and uses an external supplier for broadcast updates. He also has one of his staff on-line all day to monitor the blogosphere.

But it is worth remembering that media monitoring alone is not enough, warns Kissman Langford MD Martin Langford: 'If you are guided purely by what the media say you will be deeply depressed. It can be difficult to react rationally if you are judging the public mood by a raft of screaming headlines.'

PRWeek teamed up with Media Report to analyse the media during three summer stories, involving British Airways, Bernard Matthews and Mattel, and to see whether on-the-spot media monitoring could have made them any easier to deal with.

## Case study: British Airways

### The issue:

Lost luggage, 7-25 July 2007.

### PR team:

In-house, led by senior media relations manager Paul Marston.

**Spokespeople:** Willie Walsh, CEO; Mike Henwood, ground services manager; Martin Broughton, chairman.

### What happened:

Heightened security and staff shortages left British Airways struggling to reunite 20,000 bags with their owners. A spokesman for The Transport and General Workers' Union berated the airline in the press.

### The coverage:

- The story was relatively low-key, mentioned in 24 articles in the national press.
- Four per cent of the coverage was positive, 50 per cent was balanced, four per cent was neutral and 42 per cent was negative.
- CEO Willie Walsh was the most featured spokesperson. Of his coverage, 80 per cent was balanced and 20 per cent was negative. When an unnamed

**Lost luggage: BA lost 20,000 bags in July but achieved fairly balanced media coverage**

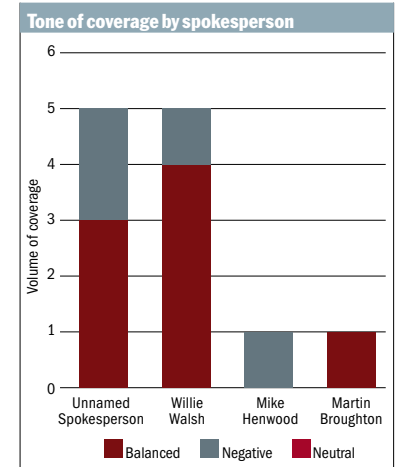
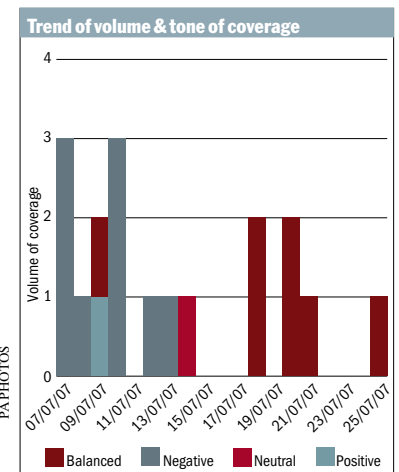
spokesperson was quoted, 60 per cent was balanced and 40 per cent was negative.

### What BA did:

British Airways has a high-profile issue almost every day of the year, and frequently faces bigger crises than this, so no additional media monitoring arrangements were made, explains British Airways' senior media relations manager Paul Marston.

'We handled it in-house and didn't do anything differently. It was routine – monitoring news channels, news websites, using our usual cuttings agency,' he says.

As for news alerts, he says: 'We don't usually become alerted to a problem by our cuttings agency – it is the other way around.'



Source: Media Report

## Case study: Bernard Matthews

**The issue:** Bird 'flu, 3 Feb-18 March

**PR team:** Hill & Knowlton, led by issues and crisis MD Tim Lockett; Giles Read, senior account director, H&K.

**Spokespeople:** Bart Dalla Mura, CEO; Bernard Matthews, founder.

### What happened:

An outbreak of avian 'flu at Bernard Matthews' farm in Holton, Suffolk was followed by a turkey cull and an outraged media calling for Matthews himself to comment. The resulting drop in sales led to more than 100 redundancies.

### The coverage:

■ We analysed 278 national press articles. Overall, 49 per cent of the coverage was negative, 42 per cent was balanced, five per cent was neutral and four per cent was positive.

■ Coverage peaked on 5-6 February, as the media reacted to news of the outbreak. The second highest peak was on 10 February, as media speculated on the origins of the virus and whether it had entered the food chain.

■ Most of the response coverage was attributed to an unnamed spokesperson (68 per cent). Half of that was balanced, while half was negative.

### What they did:

Hill & Knowlton was monitoring the media, checking the news wires and the local and national press itself, with Sky News and BBC News 24 continuously on in the office. For local and regional broadcast media – vital for internal communications – it used a media monitoring agency. The team knew that the media were calling for Bernard Matthews as a spokesman but felt unable to alter their position at first, given Matthews' old age and lack of involvement with the company.

Instead, they focused on key messages – that poultry was safe to eat, that the crisis had been handled swiftly, and that Bernard Matthews had liaised with Defra and the Food Standards Agency.

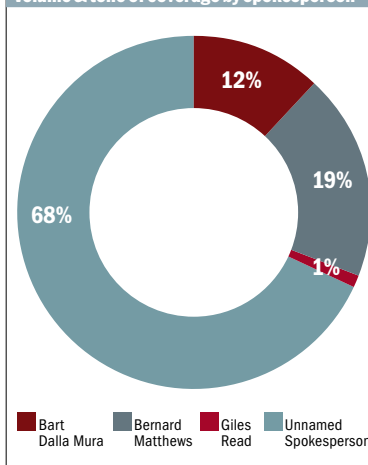
When the media continued to call for Matthews, a piece – ostensibly by the company's founder – was scripted and given exclusively to the *Daily Mirror*.

That piece was partially a response to



### Outbreak: workers in protective clothing at the Bernard Matthews turkey farm at Holton

Volume & tone of coverage by spokesperson



Source: Media Report

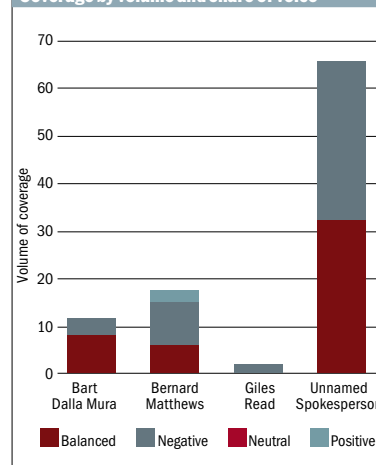
media pressure, and partially a response to the company's ongoing customer research, which demonstrated that the customers wanted reassurance from Bernard Matthews himself.

### The expert's view:

Carrier says: 'Bernard Matthews seemed unprepared for this crisis, and there was very little contact with the founder, with an unnamed spokesperson leading the communications himself.'

'There was no public response from Matthews until 15 February, so the media filled that vacuum with all manner of negative stories, from Jamie Oliver's campaign against the Turkey Twizzler to

Coverage by volume and share of voice



video footage of two workers playing football with turkeys. This certainly didn't add to the company's credibility. The press also seemed to feel aggrieved because they were calling out for Bernard Matthews, but they weren't getting their man.

'No matter what the press called for, the company's messages seemed to stay the same. Thorough media monitoring would have shown that a prompt change of strategy was needed.'

'Bernard Matthews needed to focus on presenting itself as an organisation that was keen to communicate and meet the needs of the modern consumer. The company came across as being old-fashioned and not up to speed.'



## Case study: Mattel

### The issue:

Product recall, 2-23 August 2007.

### PR team:

In-house, led by Mattel PR manager Sarah Allen.

**Spokespeople:** Robert Eckert, CEO; Jim Walter, senior VP worldwide quality assurance; Brian Stockton, VP Mattel International; David Allmark, general manager Fisher Price; Jules Andres, director of corporate comms, Mattel.

### What happened:

Mattel was forced to recall millions of products during two separate toys recalls, owing to concerns that the Chinese-made toys contained unsafe levels of lead, as well as loose magnets.

### The coverage:

- Coverage peaked around 14 August, the time of the second, larger, recall.
- The global nature of the story led to a raft of coverage internationally, in print, broadcast and online.
- Eight per cent of coverage was positive, 28 per cent was negative, 35 per cent was balanced and 29 per cent neutral.
- Chairman and CEO Robert Eckert was

the most highly featured spokesperson. Thirty-one per cent of his coverage was positive – almost four times the overall level of positive coverage.

### What they did:

Allen says: 'We did not feel that additional media monitoring was necessary at the time. When you're in the firing line you are constantly reading newspapers, watching the news, constantly on the phone to journalists. You always have the television news on in the background and you are usually too busy to do more than that.'

'As for using media monitoring to know which journalists to target, as a PRO you should know that. Shame on you if you need media monitoring to tell you what line the *Daily Mail* or *The Times* is likely to take.'

'Also, as this was such a big, global story, we didn't feel we needed to monitor all of the blogs. We were the ones breaking the news of the product recall, and we already knew that the story would be all over the internet. We had to be pragmatic and concentrate on the most influential sites, newspapers and programmes.'

'By doing this we could tell the story had quickly evolved from being a Mattel-centred story to one focused on the wider



Recall: toys containing excessive lead levels were recalled in August by Mattel, but much of the coverage focused on whether products should even be made in China



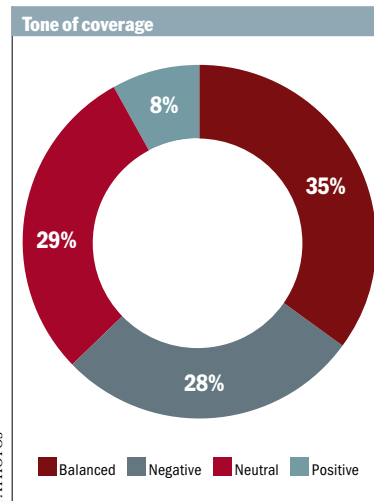
Unsafe: Mattel had to take millions of products off the shelves

issue of doing business with China.

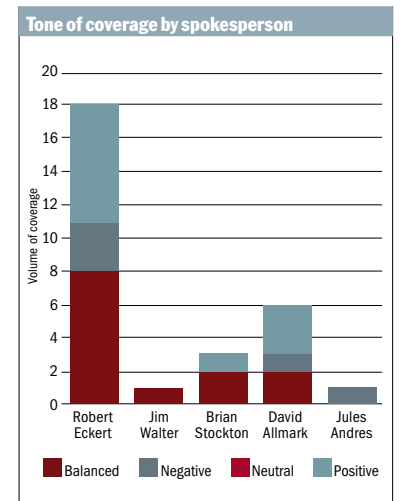
'Media monitoring will be something we do retrospectively, to review the long-term effect on the brand's reputation.'

### The expert's view:

Mark Carrier says: 'This story was the one with the most evidence of an underlying culture of proactive communications. The fact that the CEO was so involved really helped key messages about commitment



Source: Media Report



to quality control come across.

'The angle most journalists seemed to be focusing on was not to do with Mattel, but was instead whether China is a good place to have toys made. This was particularly so after an owner of one toy factory committed suicide on 13 August.'

'This was a very confident communications strategy, and one that worked well, but there was perhaps an element of luck. Things may not have

turned out so well if there had been any other unexpected developments.

'Given that it was a global story, we would advise working with a media monitoring company to monitor the online coverage, to give an immediate heads up if an overseas story developed that could have been picked up by the mainstream UK media.'

'We would recommend analysing the coverage in the run up to Christmas, to see if the same issues resurface.'