

NOISE MANAGEMENT MAGAZINE'S VIEW OF ACOUSTICS AND ACOUSTICIANS

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1 INTRODUCTION/ABSTRACT

Noise Management magazine is a business-to-business newsletter issued ten times a year serving the 'noise' industry. The magazine was launched towards the end of 1999 following requests from readers of an air quality newsletter that they would like a similar news briefing covering noise.

Until the launch of Noise Management, noise professionals relied on learned journals and similar publications. Some of these are peer reviewed and have editorial boards, and by their very nature tend not to focus on news. By contrast *Noise Management* is written by non-technical journalists who's aim is to deliver news more quickly and in a more digestible format. A key philosophy behind the magazine is independence and impartiality, reporting on the industry rather than necessarily speaking for it.

The IoA organising committee felt that there was value in recounting observations on the profession gleaned from that reporting. Is the industry 'normal'? How does it present itself? Does the industry make use of the press? How can the industry use the press to its advantage? What are the pitfalls of dealing with journalists?

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The magazine

Noise Management is a monthly newsletter carrying short news articles and news based features. This is very important, and a key distinction from other professional magazines such as *Acoustics Bulletin*, or *Acta Acoustica*. The latter magazines may be peer reviewed and overseen by committees, and it may take several months for articles to be published. By contrast a *Noise Management* article may be written at 5pm on a Thursday night, sent to the printers an hour later, popped in the post the following day and in the reader's hands less than 36 hours after the last words were written. Where learned journals may pride themselves on getting every detail correct and approved, newsletters such as *Noise Management* prides themselves on getting news – the ultimate of perishable products – to its readers as quickly as possible.

Clearly such a publishing ethos leads to compromises – distilling late-breaking news stories into a few sentences at the last minute will mean detail is lost in the interests of telling readers that something has happened. For a moving story (such as the recent Alton Towers noise nuisance ruling), our philosophy is most definitely *not* to wait a month for the full story – rather we will rush out what news there is and follow it up the next month with a more considered feature.

And then there is the 'house style' of the *Noise Management* – very different from learned journals. Every attempt is made to simplify the language, an issue that will grate on many professionals, we will make every attempt to find a simple phrase to replace a complicated sentence, or a one syllable word to replace a long technical word - even if such short cuts are not exhaustively correct. Here the goal is readability (lowering the reading age if one is brutal), and reader questionnaires overwhelmingly agree that it is a key role of *Noise Management* to explain things simply (so that even councilors can understand the issues), leaving the complicated, exhaustive explanations to the learned journals, which

they are best at. If such short cuts mean that politicians and lay people can understand and be enthused, then those short cuts are worthwhile.

It is also the nature of the beast that news magazines must be 'newsy'. Some journalist trainers might argue that there is no such thing as good 'news', and only bad news is really news. That's taking it to extreme – but there's no doubt that people are more interested in things that go wrong than things that go well (provided it is not themselves in the news for getting it wrong!). Tabloid national newspapers of course thrive on this stuff, and don't especially care if they alienate a lot of people. *Noise Management* cannot afford to alienate the industry it writes for, but equally at times there will be interesting stories that must be told that some would prefer not to be aired. As an example Defra would probably prefer *Noise Management* not to keep banging on about the mess its made of the England noise mapping – but then consultants and local authorities need to know that they are not the only ones finding the whole process rather tortuous.

2.2 The Journalist

So how is all this stuff written? I edit the magazine and there are two part time feature writers, none of whom are technical noise specialists. But we are all experienced journalists.

Journalists are typically versatile in what they write about. In my case, I became a journalist having worked as an engineer, and have reported on topics such as construction, oil and gas, the economy, transport, trucking and most recently environmental issues such as noise and air quality. I become knowledgeable about each sector while reporting on it, but never imagine for one minute that I become an expert – you are the experts, its my job to report as best I can on the issues you face. Indeed, becoming too much of an expert can make it increasingly difficult to take an objective view of the industry you are reporting. So a trade organisation may promote, for instance, noise mapping of England as a 'good' thing as it involves a lot of work for consultants, *Noise Management* not be afraid of suggesting that the £13m noise mapping project is flawed and the money better spent. And in any case, any such opinions are just that – opinions – and must remain in the opinion section and out of the news. Our job is to report on what the industry is saying, not what journalists are thinking, something broadcast journalists would do well to remember.

2.2 The Industry

Having hopefully emphasized that *Noise Management's* news and features pages will never carry journalists' opinion, I was invited to give this talk on the basis of giving an opinion on acousticians and the acoustics industry.

Acousticians are specialists in their own field, and have their own jargon and impenetrable habits. But whether or not the nitty gritty of decibels and A-weighting scales are any more complicated than financial, engineering, computing or any other industry is an interesting point. The general public are not particularly interested in hearing about any of those sorts of jobs, so it's not as though acoustics and acousticians are inherently dull, but being a small sector, it doesn't carry a high profile. The low profile also is not helped by acousticians being fragmented – most appear to work alone or in small groups, where there are a few thousand acousticians, there are tens if not hundreds of thousands of engineers. And engineers complain about low status and their low profile – so what hope is there for acousticians! And while there are so many engineers, the public is no more interested in bending moments and finite analysis than they are in decibels, the public is notoriously disinterested in complicated detail.

As a journalist, I would make the comment that very few acousticians ever shout about what they are doing. In other sectors I have worked in, a new tint on a widget would prompt a breathless press release in a bid to get publicity in the trade press – in the acoustics world it appears that tremendous achievements go unpublicised and unrecognised both within and outside the profession.

2.3 Insider tips

So enough of the background, here are some random tips for dealing with 'the press' and getting more out of journalists than they get out of you!

1/ Make a hard choice as to whether you trust the journalist. If they work for a local or national paper, their job is to get a 'bad' story (remember the maxim there is no such thing as good news for newspapers!) and are unlikely ever to have to need your cooperation again, in which case bear in mind that there's no such thing as 'off the record'.

2/ If you decide that you can trust the journalist, for instance if they work for a trade magazine where they are highly likely to need your future cooperation/subscriptions/advertising, learn the difference between being on the record or 'unattributably' (roughly translated means 'you didn't hear it from me'). Talking 'off the record' when taken literally, is pointless as the journalist can't use it anyway! Remember that journalists may have information that may be useful to you and that horsetrading of such information can be mutually beneficial.

3/ Don't get riled by headlines. Headlines by their very definition give you half a dozen words (if their short) to tell the story. So while the story might be that Bloggs decides to take early retirement from Acoustics Unlimited after years of loyal service, don't be dismayed if the headline says "Bloggs quits".

4/ Do send in press releases or a simple email about anything that's happening. Very few people do this – and believe it or not journalists do use them. But don't be dismayed if 'top of the range' 'well known' 'best selling' superlatives in the press release are ruthlessly cut.

5/ Don't be upset if press releases aren't used, it may be because its boring, or it may be because there simply isn't space this month. Keep trying – but of course make sure that there's something genuinely new to say.

6/ Don't be afraid of contacting the journalist if you don't like the story – and conversely, if you do like a story, contact the journalist anyway to encourage 'follow ups' and extra coverage. Many journalists' slip up has ended up with articles or letters that have more than put the record straight and provided good publicity.

7/ If something goes wrong and a journalist phones up – bear in mind that a 'no comment' will never prevent a bad news story being run. But a considered comment – or unattributable guidance – is highly likely to make the story less awful. And journalists are human, it is very difficult to be unremittingly negative about someone who is trying to be helpful (and the converse is true – its all too easy for a journalist to become angry and more determined when faced with unhelpfulness

8/ From a journalists point of view, PR companies are a complete waste of time and money. Rather than deal with PR firms, forge a relationship with a journalist you know.

9/ Never assume a journalist knows about something everyone else in the profession takes for granted!

Following these tips, and common sense, should yield more positive stories, more mentions, a higher profile, and fewer bad stories as you and your firm are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt by a journalist who you take the trouble to get to know.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Journalists struggle to keep to the facts and most of the time get things right. The acoustics profession is small, but there is an increasingly large amount going on as people make more and more noise but demand peace and quiet.

Quality of life is at the heart of the Government's social agenda, and noise (or lack of) is a big part of that quality of life. *Noise Management* hopes to be able to provide the profession with an honest snapshot of news on noise. We think it complements, rather than competes, with journals such as *Acoustics Bulletin*, and we hope to continue to develop the magazine as the industry grows.

4 REFERENCES

Noise Management magazine is available on subscription, and is published by Thomson Corporation. Its editor, Jack Pease, can be contacted on 01737 642215 email jack.pease@thomson.com, website www.noise-management.co.uk