

# **BP and the media: What you and your company can learn**

A Guest Article by Michael Dodd  
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### **World's Worst Interviews: the contenders**

A little while ago a professional speaking colleague and I came up with the concept of performing what we're calling "The World's Worst Interviews" in front of our audiences.

The idea was that my colleague would use his phenomenal improvisation talents to highlight the kind of errors that interviewees frequently make when confronted with media enquiries. I knew that he would be able to make a diabolical hash of any topic our audience could throw at us from the floor.

My role would be to fire the tough and tricky questions at him to help push him into various traps – and then critique the results to underline what he'd done wrong and how he could have avoided it.

At the time when we hatched the idea I was confident that we really could convince the audience that these were the world's worst interviews. I have to admit I was amazed at just how impressively appalling my colleague's impromptu interview answers could be.

But we didn't fully count on the competition from Tony Hayward.

### **An outstanding talent**

The BP chief executive officer, who resigned on 27 July 2010 (effective October 2010), has proved to be in a class of his own. And the more closely I've studied his performances while preparing the keynote, the more gobsmacked I have become. Mr Hayward has demonstrated such a talent for putting both feet – and more – in his mouth that it will make it awfully hard to reclaim the "world's worst" crown.

You may have thought some of your least favourite politicians were pretty bad. But Tony Hayward and some of his BP colleagues have left such masters of the atrocious interview trailing in their wake.

To be fair, some of their interviews have been better than those cited below. But here are seven fine examples of BP media response gaffes from which all companies can learn.

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### The magnificent seven

- **Gaffe 1:** "There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back." *Tony Hayward talking to reporters on 30 May 2010 in Florida.*

**Lesson 1:** When your company has been responsible for something bad, never use an encounter with the media to express sympathy for yourself. All the more so if people have died in the disaster – not to mention a devastating impact on countless other living creatures. Keep your concern entirely fixed on the victims and their friends and family.

- **Gaffe 2:** "The drilling rig was a Transocean drilling rig. It was their rig and their equipment that failed, run by their people and their processes." *Tony Hayward in an interview with NBC on 20 April 2010.*

**Lesson 2:** Don't blame others when your company is at least partly responsible. The key thing when something bad has happened is to demonstrate a responsible attitude. You look responsible when you take ownership of the problem, regardless of whether it was 100% your fault or not.

- **Gaffe 3:** "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume." *Tony Hayward in an interview with The Guardian, published on 14 May 2010.*

**Lesson 3:** Put things in a wider context by all means, but don't be ridiculous. Trying to talk away a problem that is appearing day after day on our screens is never going to work.

- **Gaffe 4:** "I think the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to have been very, very modest." *Tony Hayward in interview on Sky News on 18 May 2010.*

**Lesson 4:** Don't deny the obvious. Your audience isn't stupid. Admit the size of the problem and speak about what you're doing to tackle it.

- **Gaffe 5:** On 17 May 2010, BP fitted a siphon to the wreckage. This managed to collect around a thousand barrels of oil a day. According to BP, this was roughly a fifth of the oil leaking out, though some scientists suggested there was much more oil escaping than the company was admitting. The siphoning effort, which was later abandoned, prompted Tony Hayward to declare: "I do feel that we have, for the first time, turned the corner in this challenge."

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**Lesson 5:** Don't declare light at the end of the tunnel when you aren't certain. If you're wrong, you just build public expectations higher for the subsequent big letdown. Be cautious. If things turn out better than predicted, so much the better.

- **Gaffe 6:** As billions were wiped off its share price, BP issued a statement on 10 June 2010 saying: "The company is not aware of any reason which justifies this share price movement."

**Lesson 6:** When you have a problem, don't pretend it isn't there. You come across so much better in the media if you're talking about how you're seeking to solve the problem, rather than denying it exists.

- **Gaffe 7:** On 17 June 2010, Tony Hayward watched his boat take part in the JP Morgan Asset Management yacht race around the Isle of Wight – a decision defended by a BP spokesman, who said Mr Hayward had not had a break since the spill began and was merely "spending a few hours with his family at the weekend".

**Lesson 7:** It's not good to be seen leaving the scene – and certainly the country – where your problem is located without very good reason. But if you want to spend a little time with your family during a media storm there are ways of doing it that don't involve flaunting yourself before the world – especially in an activity seen as one for the rich, when victims less well off than you are suffering.

### A fundamental principle

Underlying these and many other lessons is a fundamental: Whatever you've done and whatever you're doing, you really have to care about the impact of what you do. Then in media interviews you can seek to demonstrate how you care.

Trying to tell us you care first, before totally convincing yourself that you really do care, doesn't work. If this is what you choose to do, battalions of problems will arise.

Media consultants don't usually have expertise in fixing leaks on oil rigs – and we typically don't know how to set them up so that they won't leak in the first place. But despite these weaknesses, it's fair to say that if Tony Hayward had spent a couple of days working with a consultant on how to deal with the media – providing, of course, that he proved receptive – he could have saved billions on BP's share value and reputational damage.

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Meanwhile my colleague and I are still pressing on ambitiously with our “World’s Worst Interviews” series. But Tony Hayward has raised the bar, and we’re going to have to try a whole lot harder to get back in front.

*Michael Dodd*  
*Communications Consultant*

If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.