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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world of Brisbane Grammar School - May 2000

Brisbane Grammar School (BGS) came under scrutiny by media due to allegations of inappropriate behaviour by a former staff member (passed away in 1995). The Media Link Communication Group (Media Link) had to act within a short timeframe to provide crisis management.

The Courier-Mail (C-M) investigation team contacted BGS on Thursday, 18 May 2000. The School began an internal investigation of archived records and met with the C-M to 'hand over' the file on the former staff member which highlighted no record of allegations.

On Friday, 26 May 2000 the C-M contacted BGS and said they were going to print a damaging story in Saturday's newspaper.

Media Link, the preferred supplier for Brisbane Grammar since January 1999, was contacted and had three hours to tactically devise a plan. The strategy was 'high risk' and required the confidence of the School Chairman of the Board, Headmaster and legal adviser.

Aims:

- Advise on appropriate communication flow between all stakeholders;
- Minimise negative publicity and encourage balanced reporting through transparency.

Results:

- Increased variety of perspectives of the story due to transparency approach;
- Reduced external public damage;
- Effective communication with stakeholders.



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KEY LISTING

The following five terms best describe this entry:

1. Crisis management and direction
2. Strategic communication;
3. Stakeholder management and communication;
4. Reputation management;
5. Crisis Containment.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Brisbane Grammar School first opened its doors in February 1869, and is well recognised for its proud tradition in the pursuit of academic excellence.

Australian educators and education institutions are subject to ongoing national public scrutiny in media reportage, particularly since the investigations of child sexual abuse in church run schools and institutions such as the Neerkol Orphanage case.

The response of the Catholic Church when the former deputy director of the catholic education office, Father Ron McKinnan, was jailed set the media tone for journalists when investigating this kind of story.

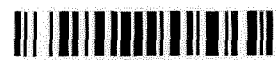
The media agenda had been set and built upon a historically 'closed door' approach when Schools were pressed by journalists. Any School that was not perceived by journalists as totally transparent and accountable, was likely to be subjected to a sustained media campaign.

It was anticipated that any further discoveries of sexual allegations within Queensland Schools would unearth historical comparisons. It was also expected that journalists would enforce rigid investigative methods to uncover the truth for the benefit of public interest.

In an attempt to supersede any historical comparisons and to encourage balanced reporting, Media Link suggested the School assume an open, transparent and pro-active stance with the media and stakeholders.

However, this approach presented both problems and opportunities that had to be managed effectively such as:

- Some of the alleged victims were already receiving legal advice therefore the public relations advice was competing with the legal advice given to BGS;
- Some media were sceptical of the 'open' approach and formed a media agenda similar to those in the past;
- Some media were appreciative of the 'open' approach and provided balanced coverage of the allegations; and
- All information possible was divulged to media therefore every step BGS made in its investigation was announced to keep communication flowing between stakeholders.



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GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal for the crisis management plan was to minimise negative publicity.

To meet this objective the strategy was to demonstrate that the school was an open and accountable institution for which the welfare of its students - past, present and future - are paramount.

In order to achieve this goal the following objectives were defined:

Internal

OBJECTIVE	MEASUREMENT TOOL
To reassure the School community through ongoing direct dialogue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hotline for parents/students; - staff meetings; - email notes; - letter to parents; - newsletter to students and parents.
To establish communication systems to handle media enquiries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff responsiveness; - Success of established process.
To create a climate that creates discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student assembly; - Staff meetings/forums; - Media briefings/statements.

External

OBJECTIVE	MEASUREMENT TOOL
To provide key stakeholders with timely and factual information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media 'off the record' comments regarding approach;
To encourage balanced reporting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media coverage
To proactively initiate media disclosure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media coverage - Headmaster's statements to media; - Number of press conferences held.



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TARGET PUBLICS

The situation required effective communication to numerous target markets to ensure the correct message was conveyed and rumours or false conclusions were not made. The following target audiences and stakeholder groups were identified:

Internal

Staff
Students

External

Media Institutions
Old Boys
The former Headmaster
Parents
Former Students
Government

RESEARCH

A variety of research was undertaken to assist with structuring the communication approach and to gauge the message being received by stakeholders.

Influential stakeholders' research -- This determined key decision-makers and influencers primarily in the media and government and their associations with the School. These stakeholders were targeted immediately to reduce assumptions or incorrect information distributed by opinion leaders.

Communication flow audits -- This research determined the most effective and efficient methods of communicating and reaching stakeholders such as letters, meetings, press conferences, and e-mails.

Internal perceptions research -- This research was undertaken in the form of staff meetings and forums. It aimed to gauge internal feelings and thoughts on the situation to encourage ownership and input.

Internal systems research -- This research was undertaken by tracking calls and assessing responsiveness to media enquires. This enabled BGS to monitor and amend incorrect procedures to ensure a systems approach that could be followed and relied upon by all staff members.

Policy audit -- This research aimed to determine current School policies and promotion methods. This enabled a gap analysis to be devised and a plan written to rectify and improve policies and promotion.



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Secondary research – studies into recent cases and theories in regard to sexual allegations in Schools was conducted to determine potential problems and opportunities that BGS may face. School records were also meticulously studied to investigate allegations and determine liability, evidence and insight into allegations.

Media monitoring - Four weeks of media clippings were collected to monitor positive and negative coverage of BGS. Revision to the crisis plan was made pending media outcomes.

STRATEGY

Ideally crisis management power lies in the ability to effectively identify and manage crisis before journalists are aware of the issues. As this was purely in a reactive mode, Media Link's strategy for the situation was to create order out of a crisis and this was dependent on the following factors:

- Immediate and open lines of communication;
- Authority to act and close relationship with legal advisers;
- Physical and procedural guidelines;
- Trained and ready staff;
- Creating a climate that creates discussion;
- Development of key supporters and affiliates.

Immediate and open lines of communication

Open communication was created with the decision to publicly announce a full investigation the day prior to a potentially damaging exclusive story in the C-M. This aimed to limit the 'shock' impact of the story by diversifying the media coverage across media outlets and increase the variety of differing perspectives of the story. This continued throughout the crisis which enabled BGS to endeavour to balance the C-M coverage, in a monopoly newspaper town. (Refer to 26 May television coverage on Channel 10 and 9.)

Authority to act & close relationship with legal advisers

Role definitions were important to establish to clearly highlight lines of responsibility. As this was the first crisis the School had been involved in it was a new experience. At times during the campaign the public relations advice was competing with the legal advice, although this created a quality based environment centred on transparency and openness.

Physical and procedural guidelines

Media Link provided a receptionist brief, media register, telephone interview checklist, councillor call brief, and a parent call brief. This allowed for clear guidelines when receiving calls and ensured all calls were addressed immediately which encourage open lines of communication.

Trained and ready staff

Brisbane Grammar School's Headmaster had already completed a Media Link media training course. The task of Media-Link throughout the crisis was to encourage the school spokesperson to present as open and accountable and to avoid being distracted by the attitude of the C-M, which in a one newspaper town was inclined to run the issue as a crusade.



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Creating a climate that creates discussion

Deciding on an open communication approach, defining roles and providing physical and procedural guidelines automatically created the basis for communication and a climate for discussion. Input was received from staff and discussions with authoritative parties took place in a controlled environment to determine the most agreeable approach. Media Link participated in discussions to ensure media response was taken into consideration.

Development of key supporters and affiliates

Media Link was concerned that the coverage of the story was taking on the character of a crusade. This was reinforced by the fact that the C-M editorialised the story.

Media Link addressed this by approaching a journalist (Martin Thomas) with a high reputation of fairness and integrity. Mr Thomas was separate to the three investigative journalists that were in the original group. (Refer to article x) If this approach had not been used, the coverage in the C-M would have remained unbalanced and more damaging. Instead the article by Mr Thomas provided a balance report and in fact provided contradictory facts to the other article written on the same day by Debra Cassrells. (Refer to article X)

Media Link built relationships with other journalists reporting the story, notably John Barton, 612 4QR (Refer to tape number x) and Channel 10 reporter Lisa Goddard-Roles and Channel 9 reporter Jane Hodgkins (Refer to video number x). This also provided a number of perspectives on the story.

It was important that the issue of the allegations of sexual abuse remained the primary issue under discussion in the media rather than the school's response to the allegations. At several points throughout the crisis this did threaten to become the case, as the C-M editorialised about and ran feature stories which put a focus on the School's response as much as on the allegations.

The C-M attempted to encourage a 'herd mentality' (ongoing media comment and focus) concerning the School's response rather than the issue at hand. In creating relationships with other media outlets the 'herd mentality' was counteracted and did not come into play.

