



Pulling no punches with the press gang

WHEN I crawled out of bed in the dark at 5.30am with a pounding head and eyes stinging, my decision to spend a day in the BT press office suddenly didn't seem such a smart idea.

But it was the day BT began issuing details on the demerger of mmO2 — and I wanted to find out how the press office influences coverage of BT matters in the media.

So I set off for the group newsroom in BT Centre, near St Paul's Cathedral in London.

Mike Bartlett was on his own when I arrived at 6.15am, working on the 14th draft of a press release that explained why, how and when mmO2 would be demerging from the rest of BT.

Several teams in BT had commented on the press release, as well as the company's banking and legal advisers, and Mike had to ensure that everything was incorporated and all approvals complete, including sign-off from the chairman Sir Christopher Bland.

At 7am, we e-mailed the press release to the London Stock Exchange for publication on its regulatory news service, and then on to hundreds of journalists on newspapers, magazines, websites and TV programmes worldwide.

We tried to stop for a coffee but, within minutes, the phones in the press office were ringing — mainly calls from journalists on the business pages of national newspapers keen to find out more.

I was intrigued to hear senior press and broadcast officer Robert Dunnett laughing with a journalist and telling her something I didn't think BT would want to see in the national press, but he soon put me straight: "We have a group of sharp journalists who know that trust works both ways," he said.

"We know we can give them background or sensitive information to help them make sense of the issues, secure in the knowledge that they won't print it directly.

"It helps them look well informed in their reports, gives us the opportunity for some subtle steering, and can pre-empt them picking up and running negatives from anti-BT sources.

"They know that if they let us down even once we'd never help them that way again. You use your skill and judgment to decide how far to go with each individual."

The newsroom also arranges press interviews on major news days, with senior BT people — such as the chairman or chief executive — speaking to camera crews direct, or linking up live from the BT recording studio in BT Centre.

While I was there, Robert arranged for Chris Earnshaw, group engineering director and chief technology officer, to speak on BBC2's Newsnight about the future of broadband Britain.

Robert spent almost two days gathering information from broadband experts across the company and briefing Chris for the 25-minute interview.

Initially I was surprised to hear the interview had been edited down to just one minute, but when it was broadcast a few days later, I realised how much you can

BT's press office works flat out to get the best coverage for the company in the media — helping to shape opinions, making sure journalists have all the information they need for stories, assisting senior BT people in dealing with the press, arranging TV, radio and newspaper interviews and stamping out damaging untruths before they make the news. **HEATHER BERESFORD**, from BT Today, spent a day in the press office to find out what goes on.



Heather Beresford checks the day's newspapers to find out what has been said about BT in the national media — and, left, all in a day's work: attending meetings, reading, writing or interviewing

say to millions of viewers in that time.

At 8.30am, Michael Wadley and Gerrard Bithell arrived at the office. "We were out with a bunch of journalists from the Daily Telegraph last night," said Michael, nursing a coffee.

"It's all part of the relationship-building process and we regularly get together with writers on all the national papers."

Trusting, enduring relationships with influential journalists are critical to good coverage and the press officers often entertain journalists from national newspapers, building genuine friendships that help when everyone is back at their desks.

"We're also making a concerted effort to form better relationships with the tabloids and influence their opinion of us," said Michael.

"For example, earlier this year there were one or two fairly hostile editorials in The Sun about BT, attacking us over our debt and other matters.

"We've spent time getting to know them and their readers' needs and interests better and now we're talking more often, and perhaps giving them the odd exclusive where appropriate.

"In turn, they seem to understand better where we're coming from and are tending to write more balanced pieces."

The press officers also take turns to be on call in the evenings and over weekends so any

journalist ringing the press office out of hours will be directed to their home phone or mobile.

"Whatever you say could appear in the paper or be used in a TV report the next day," said Andrea Paradine, a press officer.

"And the number of calls can be high, especially on a Sunday when journalists are following up pieces in the Sunday papers. You always have to be on the alert, ready to explain BT's side of the story."

The business press is said to be more hostile in the UK than anywhere else in the world and the level of positive coverage varies every month — from 34 per cent in May to 58 per cent in June, 54 per cent in July and then down to 36 per cent in August.

It is also fascinated by BT, with between 12,000 and 13,000 stories appearing in the national press every year — more than 1,000 a month.

At 10am, I was whisked off to help Robert prepare a "special newsroom briefing" — an information pack for media-facing people in BT on sensitive issues the press could pick up.

Recent subjects included BT's re-jig of its advertising agency roster and changes to the pension scheme.

"We don't necessarily want to encourage discussion in the press on issues like this," said Robert, "but if journalists are going to ask questions, we want our people to have the answers."

The phones never stop ringing in the press office and when I plucked up courage to take a call, I found myself speaking to a producer on the lunchtime TV programme, Working Lunch.

He had read the press release and wanted more information and a BT logo — all in time for the programme that day. Robert and I pulled together a press pack and biked it to the Working Lunch studios.

My next slot was the "rebuttals" team — the people who hit back when BT is attacked in the press. Nicola Rossi is busy writing responses to reports criticising BT's demerger plans.

"We carefully peruse the press cuttings at 8am every day, looking for negative coverage and preparing the BT line in response," she said.

"This involves digging out the relevant facts and figures and presenting the truth. These rebuttals — usually about two or three paragraphs for each subject — are then sent to senior management, media-facing people and the team producing Setting the Record Straight, BT's intranet site featuring responses to media coverage in the UK.

"All this activity ensures that BT people are speaking with one voice — even to the extent that employees can defend BT if they want to when BT comes up in conversation with friends."

I was just about to pop out for a sandwich when Robert called me over to see Working Lunch. I hadn't expected to see the programme so soon for some reason, and it was quite a buzz to see the presenter explaining BT's reasons for the demerger, using the very information we had wanted to be publicised and whizzed over in such a hurry that morning.

It made me realise that journalists are often keen to get the story right, rather than just attacking the companies they cover.

BT's press office sends out more than 400 press releases a year, composing roughly 100 itself and approving the hundreds sent out by PR agencies on behalf of BT.

Subjects include anything from restructuring the company, senior appointments and financial results, to new products and the results of surveys commissioned by BT.

There is also an online Media Centre to make life easier for journalists, providing anything from press releases and biographies on BT people to illustrations for stories and answers to questions sent in by e-mail. Launched in August 2000, the site gets around 40,000 hits a month.

The press officers spend most of their working life on the phone to journalists, but other calls creep in.

When I was there, they took calls from Mo Mowlam asking about BT pensions, a customer complaining about the new name for a BT brand, and a TV company asking if they could film in the BT Tower.

And as they handled each call without breaking step, I realised you need a few important qualities to be a press officer: composure, charisma and the gift of the gab.