

## Drop the jargon and lose the pink elephants

BILL MCFARLAN

"I DON'T know you and I don't trust you!" Shirley McKie's blunt, but honest, words to me were hardly the most encouraging I'd ever heard, but I persevered nonetheless.

"Then trust my judgment on how the media works," I suggested, "because the only way you can win justice in your case is by engaging the media."

It was May 1999 and McKie's reticence was understandable. She had been cleared by a jury of perjury charges and commended by the trial judge - yet stories continued to appear, branding her a "rogue" cop.

I insisted that these stories would keep on coming - placed by those who needed a smokescreen to cover their mistakes - until she began to tell her own story. Her concern was that the media would misrepresent her if she spoke up. "You're in far greater danger of misrepresenting yourself," I suggested.

I then set about explaining the two major obstacles that get in the way when we speak to the media: jargon and pink elephants. Understandably, she looked perplexed.

First, her case was extremely complicated, involving a fingerprinting world full of jargon. "You have to paint a picture of your involvement in the investigation of the murder of Marion Ross," I suggested, "but do it by telling a story of where you went and what you did in plain English."

To make the next point, I teased her: "So are you a rogue cop?"

"I'm not a rogue cop!" she snapped.

"Hook, line and sinker," I started. "Why tamely repeat my allegation when the truth is that you're an honest cop who's only ever told the truth?"

That example allowed me to explain pink elephants to her.

"Right - don't think of a pink elephant," I started. "Now what are you thinking about?"

"A pink elephant," she obliged.

"I didn't go into the murder scene without permission," I started. "Now what do you see?"

"Me at the murder scene - without permission," she replied.

"So what you must do is only ever say what you did do, what you are doing and what you will do," I said. "Stop telling people what you're not doing. In other words - drop the pink elephant!"

She found the first practice interviews hard, being so emotionally scarred by her experience. But, week by week, as she put these principles to the test with the media, she saw her personal confidence recover to a level where she could cope with any question thrown at her.

She has now told that story in five major TV documentaries and over 200 media interviews. It's my firm belief that her confident handling of the media has been the biggest factor in winning some form of justice.

I'm proud to have helped her achieve that. I can also now call her one of my closest friends. And now she does know me - and she does trust me.

- Bill McFarlan is managing director of the Broadcasting Business, a Glasgow-based media training agency, and the author of Drop the Pink Elephant, Capstone, £7.99.

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