

The Gordon Brown Makeover

CorpComms magazine cover story | by Editor, Helen Dunne on 01/09/2008 in [Issue 30](#)



With his popularity sinking fast in the opinion polls, is there anything Gordon Brown can do to make himself electable? Helen Dunne asks the experts

It was Richard and Judy's final show on terrestrial television that summed up the problem. Joined by celebrity guests, the husband and wife team were reminiscing over their career and re-playing favourite interviews when up popped an old one involving Tony Blair. The then prime minister was defending himself against a complaint aired by wife Cherie (who had personally rung into the show) that he had never sent her flowers. Ever.

Wriggling sheepishly on the famous couch, Blair desperately appealed to Richard to 'back me up here'. 'You're on your own mate,' retorted the host.

The celebrity guests squealed with laughter at the sight. Richard and Judy chuckled at their audacity in quizzing the country's leading politician on his romantic persona, when she muttered (almost as an aside) 'can't imagine that happening today'.

The resolute, no-nonsense image of Gordon Brown, which served him so well while he performed his duties as Chancellor of the Exchequer, is playing out badly with the British electorate.

On television sofa duty, Brown appears uncomfortable and taciturn while a recent attempt to portray a more relaxed image with a holiday photo shoot backfired badly. Brown looked stiff in a three-button sports jacket, open neck shirt, black trousers and work shoes as he walked along the beachfront at Suffolk. It was one of the few hot days of the summer and Brown chose to wear a jacket although he abandoned a tie.

His image contrasted poorly against the pictures of Conservative leader David Cameron, dressed in a shabby blue polo shirt and black shorts strolling bare-foot along the sands holding hands with wife Samantha.

Both photographs were stage-managed but experts believe that Cameron won the day. 'People might say But it's only a picture but it all matters,' says one. 'Brown's clothes were seen as too stuffy and conservative, while Cameron seemed relaxed and at ease on his holiday. It is getting these details right that makes the difference. The problem is that I don't think Brown sees these things as being important. He sees them as shallow and irrelevant to the job at hand.'

Phil Hall, founder and chairman of PHA Media, believes that getting image right is essential not frivolous. 'If you are leader, you have to look the part,' he advises. 'If you look like a fish out of water, people cannot see leadership. Look at football managers as an example. José Mourinho [formerly manager at Chelsea, and now at Italian club Inter Milan] presents a confident air of authority. He is charismatic. Alan Curbishley, the former manager of West Ham, is always making excuses. He constantly looks red faced and worried. He doesn't look like a leader.'

Matthew West, director of Mantra Public Relations, believes that the personal qualities and skill sets required for a number two, who often worked behind the scenes, are very different from that needed by the person in charge.

But he adds: 'From the outset, it was always going to be a difficult job for Gordon Brown to follow Tony Blair because his predecessor's key skill was his ability to communicate. He had charisma.'

'It is very difficult to teach somebody to be that comfortable [in front of the television cameras] and it would take a long time, particularly for Gordon Brown because you are trying to change behaviours that he has had for more than 40 years. He should have been working on these skills 20 years ago rather than worrying about them today.'

LISTEN TO ADVICE

Indeed, West believes that Brown should have first tackled his 'stage presence' and ability to communicate with the electorate back in 1997 when he first discussed taking over from Tony Blair as his successor.

Hall agrees. 'In 1997, I think Gordon Brown was too arrogant to listen to advice. But the world has moved on. This is a world of 24/7 news coverage, and television is an essential medium to communicate with the electorate. He has to be able to sit on the sofa and chat on the hoof, communicating and relating to the viewers.'

Appearance is important. Some experts believe that 55 per cent of the meaning of any message is in body language, 38 per cent is in the tone of voice while a mere seven per cent rests in the words expressed.

CLEAN DELIVERY

Many politicians, including Gordon Brown, fail to deliver their messages well, according to Peter Coë, managing director at Media Speak, which specialises in training in communications skills. He explains: 'Politicians tend not to engage with an interviewer, so the encounter invariably ends up as a series of dull, prepared statements. Gordon Brown is particularly at fault here. He arrives at an interview armed with answers and is determined to deliver them, regardless of the question and often regardless of the point behind the question too. For him, it's not about engaging or connecting with the interviewer, so he tends to come across as the stereotypical dour Scot and evasive politician at one and the same time. It is not what we want in a prime minister. We want someone who can talk to us as if they had met us for a drink in a bar.'

Warwick Partington, managing director of Media Training Masterclasses, believes Brown compounds this problem by mixing messages and overburdening statements with too many messages. 'The more thoughts he adds, the more diluted the clarity of his key messages,' says Partington. 'He tends to speak too quickly and with too little emphasis, so whilst he communicates factually, he is not able to communicate in a way that reflects his and our emotions and connects them to the message.'

It is a similar recommendation from Andrew Caesar-Gordon, managing director of Electric Airwaves. 'If Brown was sitting in our media training studios, personality transplant aside, we would tell him that in order to try to minimise the damage already done, he should understand and counter the fact that, as far as the public is concerned, He is in my living room but not talking to me. He needs to demonstrate through interviews, speeches and actions how you empathise with the public. He currently demonstrates only sympathy. Think back to Thatcher talking about housekeeping in 1979 to get the female vote, or 'fears of being swamped by an alien nature' that saw the National Front vote collapse and transfer to the Conservatives.'

LESSONS FROM THATCHER

Baroness Thatcher was also once criticised for her public image. Her voice was deemed too high pitched whilst her hairstyles and clothing were also under attack. She took vocal training to lower her voice in order to sound more authoritative, and altered her dress sense. Thatcher even mocked her makeover in a public speech, saying: 'I stand before you in my chiffon evening gown, my face softly made up and my fair hair gently waved.'

'Thatcher's voice was very harsh and grating, so she worked to soften it,' says Mantra's West. 'You have got to look at the willingness of the individual to change their image. Does Gordon Brown really see it as imperative?'

Media Speak's Coë certainly believes it is, pointing out that Gordon Brown is 'on borrowed time'. He would start with energising the prime minister's delivery. 'If I was working with Brown, I might ask him to choose a visionary speech from history, deliver the most florid part of it on camera - Martin Luther King's I have a dream is a popular choice - then review it together and get him to deliver his own speech or interview straight after. I invariably find the exercise makes a big difference to the impact and human connection the person makes when speaking for themselves,' Coë says. 'I might also recommend he try the kind of verbal exercises that actors do before going on stage, in private of course, before giving a speech or interview, simply to warm him up a bit.'

The experts also believe that Brown needs to change the tone and moderate his speech pattern. Media Training Masterclasses' Partington believes Brown's speeches 'often appear to have been written in written rather than spoken English'. He adds: 'The sentence structure and vocabulary is complex and far too long to allow a natural delivery. This does not allow him to deliver a sentence in one breath. He has to break up the sentence, and therefore the thought he is delivering within it, with short top-up breaths. That makes it harder for audiences to follow or take on board the thought, unless they are concentrating.'

BE HIMSELF

Caesar-Gordon adds: 'Gordon Brown should talk directly to the public in personal pronouns - I, we, you - rather than this cold 'government, public, politicians' which reinforces his perceived lack of charm, personality and empathy.'

'Brown needs to be more himself, particularly on radio and television. He certainly needs to smile more, acknowledge others more readily - even if he dislikes what they're saying - use more everyday language and appear both less boastful and less preachy,' says Coë.

A major part of Gordon Brown's problem is, according to the experts, also what made him so successful as a Chancellor of the Exchequer. That electorate does not want somebody who appears to lack substance or enjoys frivolous television interviews running the country's finances. They want a serious and resolute person. As one expert puts it rather rudely: 'He bored for England during that time and got away with it.' The electorate demands a different stance.

PHA Media's Phil Hall, a former editor of News of the World, believes that trying to repeat Tony Blair's media success will not work for Gordon Brown. He believes the prime minister's strategists should play on his strengths, such as his implacability, and harness them to better effect.

'The government should take five or six policies and use them to make Gordon Brown far more palatable,' he explains. 'Take crime, for example. They should talk about introducing more coppers on the beat and create a policy on knife crime, hammer home this policy and develop some sound bites on this message.'

'Gordon Brown then needs to be seen as anti-crime. He shows a zero tolerance attitude and promises to come down very hard on criminals. Tony Blair wanted to be all things to all people. He was a pleaser. The new prime minister needs to announce five or six policies and be seen as an enforcer. Brown needs to be seen as the man who will do something about these policies and really delivering them.'

Hall adds: 'Brown needs to be dressed up as a hard man, and his team needs to pull him back from informal interviews and chats. He is here to talk about his policies and not his personal life.'

It may work. But Hall also points out that, while the focus is on Brown and his poor media image, several of his Cabinet colleagues are similarly blighted. 'Several of his front bench colleagues have no experience and, in the eyes of the public, are not seen to have achieved anything,' says Hall, who believes their media interviews should be scaled back.

Caesar-Gordon concludes that, ultimately, 'Gordon Brown's media problem is that the media views him now through the filter of failure. A failure to articulate a compelling vision of Brown's Britain, a failure to tackle the challenges faced by the public and a failure to generate and project an image of government and party unity.'