

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2003. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: Unravelling the spin doctors

People are more likely to believe the stories they read in newspapers than the advertisements next to those stories. That's the argument that public relations companies have long used to woo money away from advertising agencies.

“Free media”, to use the industry jargon, is a better buy than “paid media” because people are more likely to trust a story than an ad, particularly if it is a third party - and not the obvious vested interest - which is providing the desired spin.

Times may be changing, however. The public has become so cynical about what they read and hear from the media that the pendulum may be swinging back in favour of advertising, which at least has a “curious transparency”.

That was the thrust of one address to PR types attending the Fourth National Public Affairs Convention, held in Canberra recently under the title, “Good Clean Spin”.

Of course the speaker in question worked in advertising, and so was pushing her own particular barrow.

But she had a valid point.

Those in the know have long read the media differently to a general reader. As one public affairs officer puts it, they can decipher the “code”.

They can tell when a story is the result of an off-the-record briefing by the PM's office, even though the PM is nowhere mentioned. They know when a story raising alarm about a disease signifies a pharmaceutical marketing campaign is underway.

Maybe the general public is also wising up.

Maybe the PR industry has been so effective at promoting its clients' interests that it has, in a sense, shot itself in the foot by undermining media credibility.

Certainly there is a widespread view around that politicians' reliance on media management and media training has contributed to public cynicism about them.

The recent conference heard plenty of examples of successful media management. The Australian Medical Association had been very successful in "spinning" coverage of the medical indemnity crisis, noted its director of public affairs, Mr John Flannery.

One former Keating Government staffer told of wondering how to generate media interest about some uneventful trade talks. "We decided to highlight a potential difficulty with Canada," he said. "This gave the journos a story and then we got a triumph at the end of the day because we got Canada on board. This was my first experience of spin."

Meanwhile, Financial and Corporate Relations, the company which acted for the Scandinavian shipping line involved in the Tampa crisis outlined its strategy for managing Australian media coverage.

A central goal was to avoid becoming involved in political controversy in Australia, recognising that the Tampa was "John Howard's Falklands War", said the company's managing director, Mr Anthony Tregoning.

All public communications referred to "survivors" rather than refugees or asylum seekers. In Australia at least.

Mr Tregoning revealed that the messages disseminated here differed from some of those in Norway, which has a long history of supporting refugees.

The media doesn't always realise when it is being spun a line or when a story is part of a PR campaign.

But when it does, it should make this explicit. Helping its audiences to better assess the validity of stories, might also help its own credibility.

