

When I asked colleagues what they knew about the Government Information Service I got the following answers:-

"They are a cover for M.I.5" - They are the "Thought Police".

Maybe..... But I know better, I got the low down through "The System".

You are involved this weekend in a session of "Self Examination" sometimes dangerous, always enlightening - this must lead to change.

Change not for changes sake but because the world we are living in is changing faster than ever before. You are in the Business of Communicating and Communication Technology or "I.T." Information Transfer Technology as the cliché runs is in the forefront of the "Change" business. Have you thought of the technical changes that have taken place in the past five years. Languages are changing, new words appear in our vocabularies almost daily when Euros, Yanks, Africans and Asians attempt to communicate with each other across a rapidly reducing world - Computers and Technocrats have their own rapidly increasing "Gobble de gook". A far cry from the day in 1914 when C.O. sent his message "Send reinforcements"

Any organisation, large or small, if it is to perform satisfactorily must recognise - as you have done - the need for strategic change. Once accepting the need it is vital to know a number of things but most important of all is where you are starting from and where you are going, reassess the objectives. Having done that you can decide on the route, how you are going to travel and what skills you require to ensure your safe arrival.

AIM PARA I

The strategic aim of the Information Service is to ensure that the public relations implications of the political, security and socio-economic policies of the Government are thought through and presented in an efficient and effective way in the whole of the UK, in Europe, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, in the USA and elsewhere overseas, using all appropriate legitimate techniques, and to co-ordinate and contribute to work aimed at countering terrorist propaganda from whatever quarter to enable the people of NI to lead normal lives.

I am sure that you all have that framed in front of you!

Perhaps I can example some of this through the Tall Ships experience.

The Tall Ships Project was the brain child of a Civil Servant or group of Civil Servants in response to Richard Needham's intense desire to change the "Image" of Belfast. This later spread to "Belfast 1991", The Inter Conference '91", the "International Rose Show" etc.

However the objective was clear, "I want to change the Image of Belfast", why not NI? - more of that later but the strategy and plan evolved.

As it evolved stage by stage, a series of communications exercises were undertaken each with their own objective and preselected audiences. First we had to sell the idea and the feasibility of it to the International Tall Ships Council, in order to persuade them to come to Belfast - who, how, timing? That achieved we had to sell it to commerce and industry in order to raise the necessary sponsorship - we also had to make officialdom - ie the Civil Service, the Police, the City Council Services etc believe and understand the scale of the event they were involved in - finally we had to sell it to the people to make all our predictions come true and lastly manage the PR at the event.

In order to achieve this we used three different sets of consultants with different skills and we used video and brochures, poster campaigns, press advertising, PR stories on Radio, TV and Newspapers etc in the whole armoury but all controlled and planned. We also had a defense plan and a management structure which allowed for discussion and quick decision making. We knew where we were starting from and precisely what we had to achieve. Different styles and skills were needed for each of these and now that we are into Positively Belfast I believe that it is vital to have people in the management team who understand thoroughly the technology of marketing and the tools of the trade, and who in the Province is the best exponent of these various skills. We need to understand thoroughly the working of the Press and electronic media, journalists, how they think, what their pressures and deadlines are, how they are likely to react etc. This requires team work and training and the ability to recognise the various needs as they show.

There is no obvious government strategy in NI or anywhere else for that matter for its Image Communication - this government has no Transport Strategy and no Communication Strategy and I sometimes wonder if it has any idea in what direction it is trying to go on any front - however, be that as it may - let me turn to my real "hobby horse":-

NI is about the size of Yorkshire with a smaller population but it is the area within the UK with the greatest need for a good Public Relations image and I say again there is no apparent co-ordinated strategy. This is not for lack of effort - it is because government, or lack of it, allows this effort to be frittered and more importantly the finance required too little and frittered.

For example take Belfast alone:-

We have the B.D.O. - Positively Belfast - Laganside - The City Council - The Belfast Chamber of Trade - The Belfast City Forum - The Tourist Board, in part - I.D.B. - LEDU etc. If all these groupings formed part of a National Strategy with their own clear objectives and funding within a co-ordinated strategy I suggest more recognisable positive good would come from their efforts; but none of those organisations on their own, including Positively Belfast, is large enough or has sufficient funds to make a significant International Impact.

Your aim concludes:- "To co-ordinate and contribute to work aimed at countering Terrorist propaganda, from whatever quarter, to enable people of NI to lead normal lives.

In Positively Belfast we believe that the BEST people to sell Belfast are the Belfast Citizens themselves, and in order for them to do that, they have to believe in themselves and their city. Hence one of our aims is to promote Belfast to its own people - I believe that this could be done on a large scale throughout the Province. We have a huge offshore and immigrant population, these people potentially are NI's best ambassadors - if they are getting the right messages from home.

Our other Ambassadors are our visitors, in particular those of international standing in sport - music - the arts or whatever. By bringing them to Belfast/NI allowing them to experience our hospitality, our lifestyle, and to see and enjoy our beautiful countryside, we convert them to our cause.

Furthermore I believe that if this sort of promotional campaign could be stepped up to encompass the whole Province we could regain the initiative in the propaganda war with the terrorists and local politicians.

Surely the Government Information Office has a duty to the people to take the initiative in this war of words.

I do not believe that "The marketing of NI and the positive affect this could have on the propaganda war and the lives of ordinary people is given sufficient credence or priority". We are now talking about money - resources and overall political strategy - by and large neither Civil Servants nor Politicians understand the discipline of "Marketing" or its power when you have an excellent product. I believe that NI is an excellent product and that a well funded, well thought out medium term marketing plan, could benefit the community every bit as much as a new school, hospital or bypass road, and should have equal right when Permanent Secretaries and Ministers are discussing the apportionment of the NI budget.

This must be a co-ordinated plan, well understood by all allowing each facet its own parameters and sensitivities - in other words, don't take a successful PB event and crudely ram its success down the terrorists gullet with glee, because next time Joe Terrorist will ensure you fail.

I say to Government "Lets face up to the task of marketing NI to the outside world and to itself" Why??

Because I believe that is the best anecdote to the present malaise.

What do we do when faced with a project like this? Define the Product - Analyse and assess the strengths and weaknesses - plan to positively and strongly promote its strengths, anticipate attacks on its weaknesses and prepare to meet them. Analyse and investigate the resources at our disposal - organisations - people - money - technology. We have the resources - lets have the leadership, drive and masterplan.