

## **The Role of Controversy in PR and Public Affairs**

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On January 22 this year the Daily Telegraph's front page screamed RACE HATE FLAG BAN. A sub-heading added "Music Fans Warned it's a 'Gang Colour'."

And there was a picture, young Aussie faces with big smiles and rosy cheeks proudly displaying the Australian flag.

The story, an exclusive, was that Big Day Out producer Ken West had decided to ban the Australian flag from the rock concert at Sydney's Showgrounds in three days time, the eve of Australia Day.

This was no small decision.

It was the first time ever in the Australian flag's 106-year history that our national symbol had been banned from an event.

In his first reported comments, Mr West said the flag was being used as "gang colours" following the Cronulla riots a year earlier and a recent ugly clash between Serbian and Croatian fans at the Australian tennis Open.

He said: "It's racism disguised as patriotism and I'm not going to tolerate it."

"I am telling people not to bring flags. They are free to get them out at midnight on their way home when it is Australia Day."

Mr West touched a national nerve and there was a howl of protest, as hostile and impassioned as it was swift.

Then Prime Minister John Howard roared that the ban was offensive to Australians and an insult to the freedom it represents. He told the organisers to cancel the concert rather than censor the flag.

Mr Howard said: "The event organisers should not ram their peculiar political views down the throats of young Australians who are only interested in a good day out."

"Such an event with such a condition is not welcome anywhere in Australia."

NSW Premier Morris Iemma was equally furious, telling organisers to reverse the ban immediately.

"It's just ridiculous. They should see the error of their ways and reverse this decision straight away, or take their event somewhere else."

It didn't stop there. National organisations, public figures, community leaders, celebrities and Joe Public all sprang to their feet to publicly express their outrage and opposition.

The Australian National Flag Association spokesman Bert Lane said the ban was "bloody disgusting".

"The only people who say this sort of thing are the tree huggers who are out of touch with the majority."

"Our association has many members who only recently became citizens and they love the flag dearly."

The head of the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia and confidant of the Mufti Sheik Taj Elhilaly. Keysar Trad, said the ban was “ludicrous”.

“The flag is just as much a symbol for Muslim Australians as it is for any other citizen.”

“Personally I would like to educate people that the flag belongs to us all.”

NSW RSL president Don Rowe slammed the ban a “politically correct stunt”, saying that “using the Cronulla riots as an excuse to outlaw it is an absolute bloody outrage.”

“The flag doesn’t belong to a gang, it belongs to all Australians.”

21-year-old Sydneysider Bindi Alaban, one of the many vox-popped ordinary Australians, made her feelings clear when she said: “Take us off the atlas if you take the flag.”

Was Mr West worried sick and in a panic, or smiling calmly?

I’ll come back to that in a minute. What is clear is that he had created a red-hot, first-class national controversy. And controversy is pure gold to the media, all media. Three days out from curtain up, Sydney’s Big Day Out rock concert was the top story of every mass media outlet from one end of the country to the other. Talkback radio, Today Tonight, A Current Affair, the evening TV news bulletins all lapped it up with relish.

The Daily Telegraph certainly knew it had struck media gold and splashed it again on its front page the next day.

It called the nation to defiantly “Fly Your Flag” and said Aussies had united in their “national disgust at the slur on banner”. The newspaper was now declaring the decision an “attack on patriotism and our national symbol”. Strong words.

The editorial, opinion page and Letters page overflowed with more expressions of outrage.

“My father and thousands of proud Australians fought and died for our great country under its flag. What an insult it is to them for the flag to be described as “gang colours” and a form of racism,” wrote Kerry Redwood of Kincumber.

Make no mistake, the Telegraph was rallying the troops and leading the charge against Mr West, the ban and all it represented. It was, in effect, taking on Mr West and his policy, challenging him to a very public duel.

But, at the same time, it also gave him a little encouragement to keep up his end of the dispute and keep the controversy – and newspaper sales – humming along.

It published a few pro ban letters, including this from a Con Tricolos of Kaleen in the ACT: “The organisers of the Big Day Out are right in banning the flag. At the event last year, the flag was used as a tool of racism masquerading as patriotism. Patrons were intimidated and harassed by flag-waving youths who demanded pledges of allegiance under threat of violence.”

And this letter from Con Vaitsas of Ashbury: “It is obvious that all the people criticising the flag ban have never been intimidated by drunken, flag-wearing blokes on Australia Day, as I was. I suspect that many people will not venture outside their homes or ethnic communities in case they get threatened with a verbal or physical bashing from people claiming to be Aussie patriots just because we look different.”

*The Australian* newspaper, on the same day, reported that at last year’s event at least one group of men marched around demanding people kiss the flag or be punched. It said callers to the youth radio network Triple J were divided on the issue.

Mr West, it seems, was sufficiently buoyed and of strong nerve to stick to his guns and push back, keeping the controversy and media frenzy alive.

He released a “clarifying statement” saying there was no ban but that he was “encouraging” people not to bring a flag to the concert.

His statement said: “In recent times there has been an increased incidence of flags brandished inconsiderately and this has led to increased tension. Our only goal in discouraging this activity at the Big Day Out is to ensure that our patrons are not subjected to or inconvenienced by this behaviour.”

No back down. Instead, a defiant digging in.

Both sides stood their ground and the controversy raged on.

Its cut through and influence on people’s thinking and behaviour was enormous. Young people flocked to stores to buy a record number of Australian flags in record time.

“It’s certainly had an impact,” said James Warrand, the proprietor of Flags With Flair.

“Young people have been coming in in droves. They just want to express the fact that they are Australian. Sales are up nearly 100% on last year.”

The day before the event a confident Mr West upped the ante, saying on radio: “I am fighting to stop hooliganism. I think it’s about time people started defining what is proper and improper use of the Australian flag.”

Mr West’s stand and emotional language spurred young people into action. A record 55,000 people voted with their feet for the event, cramming into Sydney’s Homebush stadium and proudly displaying the Aussie flag in any and every way possible. They demonstrated their patriotic ingenuity, using the flag as cape, boob-tube, picnic blanket, even a sling for a broken arm. It appeared on shirts, T-shirts, faces, hats, bikinis, limbs, boxer shorts and sunglasses.

The peaceful crowd was overall very well behaved.

The event, there is no doubt, was a huge success – and was thus hailed on every TV news bulletin across the country that evening.

In just three days an iconic annual national event was born.

The icing on the cake for Mr West was a glowing tribute in the Daily Telegraph from the reporter who broke the story three days earlier, Kathy McCabe.

“While promoter Ken West’s language may have been incendiary, his intention was honourable – to create a safe environment for the 55,000 people who attend the annual music festival,” Ms McCabe wrote.

“What all the politicians and usual suspects who have jumped on this bandwagon have failed to acknowledge is that young people go to music festivals to have fun.

“And the Big Day Out organisers are doing their very best to make sure they do so in a safe and secure environment.”

There you have it – from villain to hero in just three days! It seems everyone was happy at last.

There is no doubt that the policy to ban the flag was the catalyst for the cut through media and national controversy that led to the event’s success. Was it an ingenious strategy brilliantly executed or simply an accident, a fluke?

One of the letters published in the Daily Telegraph at the height of the controversy, from a Dennis Weatherall of Engadine, said, and I quote: "I believe this was a stunt to gain publicity for a money-making event. The best retaliation is to boycott the event, then Ken West may have second thoughts."

Another letter, from a K. Wallace of Picton, said: "By saying that they don't want people to bring Australian flags to the show, Big Day Out organisers almost certainly have ensured that fans will now go and buy one."

What do you think? Let's take a vote.

Please raise your hand if you think:

- Mr West's ban and actions were part of a deliberate strategy to create a national controversy and generate publicity for the event
- The ban was decided upon in good faith; that Mr West was concerned about violence and was doing everything he could to prevent it
- The story was a beat up; that the Daily Telegraph was making a mountain out of a mole hill
- Don't know, not sure.

I myself am not sure. It's an intriguing case study. If the ban was said in good faith surely Mr West would have known that it was virtually unenforceable and that young people were bound to rebel against it.

The fact is it doesn't really matter whether the controversy and publicity was intended or not.

What is known is that causing a controversy - creating a dispute, or indeed picking a fight - is one of THE most effective ways of influencing a target audience.

Why is that important? Because influence is the key to public affairs and government relations.

Now I'm not suggesting you all go out and start World War III tomorrow to get your way, but what I am saying is to be very aware of the power of controversy and conflict to influence a significant number of people. It's not the only way to influence, but when the opportunity arises, and carefully and expertly employed, it's one of the most powerful and effective ways to change the thinking and behaviour of a target audience, big or small, in a relatively short time frame.

And the larger your target audience, the more influence and power you have.

But before you can even begin to hope to influence you must gain the attention of your audience. And to gain the attention of your audience you must cut through (an increasingly difficult challenge). And one of the best ways to cut through is to use conflict.

This process – in reverse – was brilliantly used by Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party to neutralise the impact of John Howard's announcements and messaging in the lead up to and during the election campaign. It's now famously dubbed the "Me, too!" strategy.

It's true Mr Rudd took a few hits, particularly from the media, but this was nothing compared to the benefit it delivered in neutralising the impact of Howard's messages, policies and influence.

Howard and Costello desperately used each policy announcement to try and wedge Labor and gain the upper hand. But each time, Rudd matched the pledge, completely eliminating any contrast and conflict, thus robbing the Coalition of any cut through and platform from which to project its messages. Announcement after announcement vanished from the media and the debate in barely a day, sometimes within hours, as Rudd said "Me, too" and killed the story.

There were three important exceptions to Rudd's rule – IR and WorkChoices, Kyoto and climate change, and the campaign launch spending announcements.

In these cases, Rudd took an opposite view, created conflict - and thus controversy – and caused these three issues to dominate the campaign and the debate. It was a brilliant strategy because Howard was vulnerable on WorkChoices and climate change, lacking a convincing argument. In relation to the campaign launch spending announcements, Howard walked headfirst into this trap, announcing \$10 billion in initiatives after an interest rate rise and growing concern over rising inflation. Rudd, with the benefit of going second, immediately manoeuvred to take an opposing view on spending, dramatically undercutting Howard and creating a contrast and conflict, and thus a controversy, to cut through on the key issue of responsible economic management at a crucial stage of the campaign. Howard, the master of wedge politics and picking a fight and winning, was being trumped at his own game.

The Labor campaign is an excellent example of managed controversy to influence the thinking and behaviour of a target audience, in this case voters. It won them the election.

Before I finish I'd like to talk briefly about controversy and influence, specifically why controversy provides cut through and why influence is the key to public affairs and government relations.

First controversy. Controversy is in essence a dispute, an argument between opposing sides. As explained earlier it's the stock and trade of newspapers and all media, and thus controversies are almost guaranteed prominent media coverage and a decent-sized audience. Unlike one-sided stories or what I like to call passive media, controversies and their opposing sides challenge us to assess our own values and thoughts and, in many cases, decide where we stand on the issue. They are interactive and engage us. Depending on the subject matter, language used and intensity of opposing forces, a controversy, as we saw with the flag ban, can engage an entire population and mobilise our thinking and feelings towards a particular position, decision or action.

The key to “managed controversy”, creating a dispute or indeed picking a fight, is to ensure your argument, your position is sustainable, that it stands up even under the most intense pressure. If so, then there's a strong chance you'll do well and influence.

And finally influence, the key to public affairs and government relations.

Governments need support from all sorts of quarters to function properly and effectively and stay in office. They simply cannot survive without it. If you have influence over any part of that support you'll have access to and the ear of government. I guarantee it.

Use your influence wisely and responsibly and where possible expand it. But never ever let it wane.

Thank you.

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