

# Politician catches coward punch - how to manage a media firestorm

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IN the early hours of a Sunday morning, on a well-known nightclub drag, a State Government Minister was reportedly hit by a 'coward punch' by an unknown male, for no known reason. The Minister says that he was seeking an "elusive taxi" before the incident.

We asked PR professionals to provide their best advice as to how the Minister should handle his communication with the press regarding this painful and no doubt embarrassing event. Here's what they said:

"The first step is to find out the real story. Was the Minister involved in any behaviour that could be construed as embarrassing? Might he have been assaulted by a jealous boyfriend or husband? Was he under the influence of legal or illegal recreational drugs? These are the questions that media will ask and they have to be answered."

For the purpose of this exercise, let's say the answer to all those questions was "no".

"Let's assume the Minister was simply looking for an elusive taxi at an ungodly hour. The first thing I'd do is check with all the taxi companies and find out what the wait was for a taxi at that time as well as the number of taxis on the road at the time.

"The check would, of course, be made anonymously and if the numbers support the Minister's claim, the information would be made public and if they didn't then I'd let it slide. I'd also establish whether or not the Minister used his mobile telephone to call for a taxi. What time? What was he told? Is there a recording of the conversation?"

"The answers to those questions would determine the nature of the advice."

One PR advisor suggested an important question for the Minister: "Did he know his attacker or did the attacker say anything to identify himself?"

Again, let's say no.

"In the final bit of detective work, I'd find out how bad the assault was. Was an ambulance called?"

"Did the Minister seek medical help? What was the medical assessment?"

Again, let's assume "no", "yes" and "mild".

Given the scenario described above our strategic communication professionals would advise the Minister to respond along these lines:

"My first priority is to let the police do their job. This State deserves to be proud of the men and women in uniform and I'm confident the systems we have in place will work.

"On a personal note I'd like to say that what hurt me more than the cowardly king hit was any damage this might have done to the reputation of this State. In an ideal world anyone should be able to walk down any street at any hour without fear of being assaulted. I would now like to step back and take the necessary time to recover and let the police do their work.

"Like any other citizen, I have made a report to the police and the matter is now in their hands. I ask you to let them do their job. Thank you for your concern."

# Media Training Q&A

I would further advise the Minister to answer any questions in the most cursory manner. For example:

Q: "Minister, what were you doing out at that hour?"

A: "I was looking for a taxi to take me home."

Q: "Was it appropriate for a senior politician such as you to be out at such a late hour?"

A: "That's a ridiculous question. It is perfectly appropriate for anyone to be anywhere at any time. I was not looking for trouble, I was looking for a taxi."

Q: "Were you on a date?"

A: "I was out. I was trying to get home."

Q: "What have you learned from the incident?"

A: "Sometimes bad things happen to innocent people."

Q: "Has this incident ruined your chances of becoming Premier of this State?"

A: "I can only measure the past, I can't predict the future. Ask me that question again in five years and I'll be able to give you a complete answer."

Lord knows we need errant politicians and eccentric celebrities or our papers would be empty - just ask Barry O'Farrell. But was this good advice? What would your advice be?

