

A 2015 accident at one of its theme parks made **MERLIN ENTERTAINMENTS** the subject of sensationalist media stories. Brunswick's **FIONA MICALLEF-EYNAUD** and **AUSTIN RATHE** talk with the company's leadership about their campaign to combat fiction with facts.

POOLE, A SLEEPY SEASIDE TOWN IN DORSET on the south coast of England, is the unlikely birthplace and headquarters of Merlin Entertainments, the second biggest attractions company in the world. The firm's popular brands, which include LEGOLAND and Madame Tussauds, attract 67 million guests annually, and the company has exclusive rights to the intellectual property of world-famous brands such as Peppa Pig, LEGO and celebrity adventurer Bear Grylls.

CEO and co-founder Nick Varney has led the company since its start in 1998, transforming it from a business that owned a handful of UK attractions to one that now operates more than 120 attractions in 25 countries across four continents. Whether as a private company or a public one (Merlin listed in late 2013), the company's narrative had been overwhelmingly positive—until 2015.

On June 2nd, a crash involving the Smiler rollercoaster at Alton Towers Resort—Merlin's largest UK theme park—left two young women with life-changing injuries. The ride was closed temporarily. Mr. Varney led the company's response with those injured and their families, as well as with the media. The company conducted its own investigation and

supported an official probe by the UK's Health & Safety Executive. In the subsequent court case, Merlin entered a guilty plea and was fined £5 million.

But media fascination with the company didn't end when the court case did. Merlin's theme parks remained targets of negative and often factually inaccurate reporting. Routine operational matters at any Merlin attraction—like safety protocols temporarily halting a ride—became targets for tabloids.

"Alton Towers' notorious Smiler rollercoaster breaks down," was one 2017 headline describing what the company called a "minor technical issue" involving a sensor. Similarly benign events drew headlines such as, "Terror at Alton Towers—AGAIN," as well as "Horror at Alton Towers as thrill seekers trapped 80ft in the air."

The company responded with a safety-first narrative. "Safety is absolutely critical to Merlin," Mr. Varney told Brunswick, which worked with Merlin on its communications response. "We invest a huge amount of time and money on engineering, equipment, technology and procedures to keep guests safe. It's not unusual for a ride to be stopped mid-cycle, perhaps due to passenger actions, and restarted again within minutes. It's a machine designed to stop if required."

ON TRACK

It was clear that responding to media requests with that message alone wasn't enough. "The coverage included our statement as a right to reply, but customers saw the articles as they scrolled through their social media feed, so all they saw was the damning and wildly inaccurate headlines," says Mr. Varney. "We had to find a way to speak to our visitors directly and quickly."

That meant developing a way for on-site teams to move quickly and respond in real-time—to keep up with the headlines, in other words.



Riders enjoy the Stealth rollercoaster at Merlin-owned Thorpe Park in Surrey, England. The rollercoaster boasts the fastest acceleration of any in the UK and reaches a maximum height of 205 feet (62.5 meters). Those with strong stomachs can watch first-person footage of the ride on YouTube.

"Our visitors are major consumers of content on social media," says James Crampton, Merlin's Corporate Affairs Director. "That's where they were seeing the sensationalist headlines and inaccurate reporting; we had to build the capability to fight it on the same turf. Long corporate statements don't work well on social media and would never engage our audience. We decided the most effective response was a clear, reassuring video from someone on the ground. That way, customers would hear directly that everything was OK, and could see for

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themselves the situation at the attraction."

The PR teams at Merlin's theme parks took ownership for publishing these responses themselves, in real time, with minimal central support. But before they could do so, Merlin worked with each attraction's team to develop a step-by-step response plan, including key messages for a variety of situations. Spokespeople were also trained. These plans were designed to be so simple that almost any team member could pick one up, grab their iPhone, and record an incident response.



The firm also made sure that once the response videos were produced, they would be seen by the right audience. They helped the attractions build Facebook audiences based on factors like newspaper readership, demographics and general interests. When responses were published, they could now be promoted to the people who were most likely to have seen the misleading coverage in the first place, or geotargeted to customers who were at the park.

Merlin also knew it needed to inform visitors about areas that wouldn't be promoted through traditional marketing communications and would have been ignored by traditional media: topics like accessibility, animal welfare (Merlin-owned attraction "SEA LIFE," for example, features marine life and penguins), health and safety, or engineering. Safety procedures working as they're supposed to isn't news or riveting marketing material. And even if they were, one-off pieces wouldn't be enough to educate customers about all the work Merlin was doing behind the scenes to keep their parks safe. That called for a sustained campaign through channels Merlin's customers were already using. The result was Merlin Backstage.

The ongoing campaign features two parts. The first is a website that acts as a repository for the content Merlin produces on key themes like safety, creativity and sustainability. The site acts as both a platform from which Merlin can promote content and also makes it easy to find that content through search engines.

Complementing the Backstage website is a Facebook page where the company publishes

One of Merlin Entertainments' best-known brands is Peppa Pig, a wildly popular animated children's show starring a family of pigs. Above, a child enjoys a slide at the recently opened Peppa Pig World of Play in Shanghai.



Merlin Entertainments CEO Nick Varney (above) and the firm's Corporate Affairs Director, James Crampton, played leading roles in helping Merlin counteract fiction with facts.



short-form content, especially videos. These posts range from behind-the-scenes insight into the work that goes into keeping its attractions safe, to showing how Merlin will transport two beluga whales from China to Iceland—a journey of 6,000 miles—where they'll be housed in the world's first ocean sanctuary. In addition to informing customers, this content can also be promoted on social media after any misleading coverage, providing additional context.

These new protocols were tested on July 2017, when the Oblivion rollercoaster at Alton Towers Resort stopped at the top of the lift hill. The ride couldn't be restarted quickly, and guests were evacuated from the ride exactly as safety procedures dictated. An onlooking guest tweeted a photo of the ride "stuck" on the track. Soon a national tabloid newspaper had published a story.

On the first media enquiry, Alton's Head of Operations, Francis Jackson, filmed a succinct, live response on-site explaining what had happened. That 30-second response was promoted on social media less than half an hour after the first coverage was published. Digital tracking tools showed that tens of thousands of people—specifically those who saw the media coverage—saw Alton Towers' video.

And their response was overwhelmingly positive; the most popular comment on Alton's post came from a customer who had been on the ride: "... staff were fantastic. Got us all off as soon as they could. Icy water also provided at the scene." Another comment near the top: "The media needs to get over the fact that stoppages are safety features."

Far from simply correcting the narrative, a more positive one emerged as outlets embedded Alton's videos in their coverage. "Alton Towers reassures customers after ride stoppage," read one headline.

"Building and maintaining the ability to speak to our visitors quickly, authentically and credibly—especially in the era of smartphones, short attention spans, and an increasingly fragmented society—has been hugely important to us," Mr. Varney says.

The ability to transform a setback into a new organizational capability is a response one of Merlin's best-known partners, celebrity adventurer and survivalist Bear Grylls, would likely endorse. "Struggle develops strength," Mr. Grylls once wrote, "and storms make you stronger." ♦

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