



How special advisers can work with departmental communications teams

Special advisers do a lot of comms and media work for their minister. But how can you work with communications teams to achieve results for your minister?



[The minister] made it very clear to me from the get-go; media coverage was very important to him. So that was very much the focus for me, was to try and drive positive media coverage for him and for the department.

– Former media special adviser



Ministers rely on communications experts – media special advisers and communications teams within their department – to communicate their vision, plans and achievements to a wider audience in ever more attention-grabbing ways

Special advisers – particularly those who represent their minister’s views directly to the media – need to build close, trusting relationships with departmental communications teams. This guide, designed for media special advisers as well as spads whose role has a communications element, lays out some key groups to work with, how you can work with the departmental comms team and your role in driving explicitly political communications.

1. Build close relationships with key groups inside and outside the department

As a media spad, you will want to promote the work of your minister and department in the media, including managing negative coverage. This means playing a major role in overseeing and shaping the department's communication activities, which requires relationships across government and beyond, including:

- **The departmental communications teams**, usually headed by a director, deal with day-to-day comms activities including proactive media monitoring, issuing press releases and briefings, managing social media engagement through modern channels such as Instagram, dealing with journalists' enquiries and broadly acting as the official public spokespeople for the department. They also play a key role in reacting to media stories and developing a long-term narrative for the department's priorities.
- **The No.10 press team** is headed by the director of communications. Spads need to work with No.10 to ensure that announcements, media appearances and other public-facing communications are properly coordinated as part of the grid and can feed this information back to the department. Special advisers also make the case for why their department should have space on the grid.
- **Journalists** provide routes for special advisers to publicise their minister's plans and achievements. Media spads will build extensive contacts with journalists to try to promote positive coverage of their minister and their policies. Strong working relationships with the media also help spads to manage negative media attention and ensure that the department and government's point of view is portrayed accurately.

2. Build a collaborative relationship with the communications team

You will only be directly involved in some of the comms team's activities and the aim should be to empower communications officials and shape their output rather than take over the department's comms apparatus. Building close, collaborative working relationships is key and special advisers, particularly media spads, should agree how they can work with established communications teams to avoid overlapping responsibilities or sending out mixed messages. This could involve:

- Bringing the press and communication teams into a weekly meeting with the minister and other spads at the start of the week to consider implications for short-term communications and the wider comms strategy.
- Setting up regular meetings between spads and relevant communications/press officials focused on media engagement and strategy.
- Maintaining a regular departmental grid managed by the communications team with upcoming announcements and media appearances.
- Making yourself aware of departmental processes for routine media monitoring and processes for dealing with negative coverage.
- Agreeing processes for crisis communications, ensuring that relevant officials are clear about guidance.

You can help communications officials understand the politics of a situation and set a clear sense of what success looks like. This can help shape departmental communications. Special advisers of all stripes need to think about the role that communications should play in policy discussions. You can bring communications experts into discussions with policy teams at an early stage so that a comms perspective can help shape the decision-making process.



"I think the media spad is very good in thinking through the politics and working through what the right messages would be and the language we might want to use."

Mark Hoban

Financial secretary to the Treasury (2010-12) and minister of state for work and pensions (2012-13)

3. You can rely on internal press teams to help manage media queries

Ministers can be particularly attuned to enquiries from journalists and the media, and the instinct can be to have special advisers manage this kind of external comms. Special advisers have a major role to play in overseeing the department's media strategy, but they cannot become the conduit for all media contact. The default approach should be for most media enquiries to go through the departmental press office in the first instance, and escalate to the media spad if necessary.

The press office will have experience in dealing with the media, and special advisers and ministers should listen to their advice and, where they want to take a different approach, be able to explain their rationale. If spads try to manage the entirety of a department's interactions with journalists and media organisations, they will soon find themselves overwhelmed and this can pose risks for their wider responsibilities. Rather, think about how you can empower the press office to convey key messages to the media, including instances where you direct journalists their way.

4. You are responsible for delivering overtly political communications

The civil service is impartial, so officials cannot lead on purely political communications such as party conference speeches or party press releases. These are the responsibility of spads. Officials may still provide factual input, such as statistics. Where political speeches announce government policy, the communications team may issue a press release stripped of political content. The risk of crossing the line of impartiality can be heightened when it comes to these kinds of communications, so you should be careful not to ask civil servants to do something they should not.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Have you had conversations with the minister and other spads about what the division of responsibilities are when it comes to communications and media engagement?
- Do you know who to contact at the No.10 press office and are you providing information about No.10's wider grid strategy to officials working on departmental communications?
- If you are working on policy issues, are you bringing communications experts into conversations with policy teams at an early stage?
- Have you thought about the boundaries between 'communication' and 'political communication'?
- Do you redirect journalists to the press team for routine enquiries and do the press team know when to escalate an issue to you?

Find out more:

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or to talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.

For more information about being a spad listen to '[SpAdCast: What is it really like to be a special adviser?](#)' which features interviews with former spads and ministers.