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NSW Electoral Commission Final Project Report

Details: Final report for provision of consultancy services to NSWEC
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Introduction

In August 2006 the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC), then the State Electoral Office, appointed Hill & Knowlton to provide issues management and media relations advice in the periods preceding, and during, the 24 March 2007 NSW State Election.

Of key concern to the NSWEC was the impact of several legacy issues, in particular past media commentary around the management of the Legislative Council ballot paper and IT issues that gained significant media attention after the March 2003 election.

Through the course of the project Hill & Knowlton:

- facilitated a Compass 2.0 planning workshop to identify potential issues, stakeholders and the objectives for success as proposed by the NSWEC
- critically reviewed and made recommendations relating to strategy and execution for the NSWEC Media Communications Strategy, Head Office Media Protocol and Returning Officers' (RO) Media Protocol
- made recommendations on, and provided solutions for, media protocol training for ROs
- in conjunction with NSWEC designed, developed and delivered RO media protocol training programs
- ran a key messaging workshop based on Hill & Knowlton's proprietary media training methodologies to serve as the basis for responses to identified issues
- reviewed and made recommendations on NSWEC-written media materials including media releases, media alerts and media statements
- made recommendations on the appropriate distribution of the NSWEC's media kit
- advised on appropriate logistics for distribution of media materials
- conducted media refresher training for the Electoral Commissioner, Director Corporate Communications and a representative of the Election Funding Authority
- provided on-call issues management advice and strategic recommendations to the NSWEC as required
- provided media intelligence to the NSWEC on a range of issues
- provided crisis support and advice relating to possible issues of privacy and some NSWEC materials, as raised in the media
- attended the election night Tally Room to provide media liaison support
- provided support and advice during post election media analysis

Compass 2.0 planning workshop

Hill & Knowlton facilitated a Compass 2.0 proprietary planning workshop to help the NSWEC identify the issues most likely to arise in the build-up to and administration of the election.

The workshop identified a range of potential issues for the NSWEC, to which Hill & Knowlton provided preliminary recommendations for implementing effective media relations and issues management strategies.

Throughout the workshop, a continuing theme was the issue of balancing the NSWEC's good news outputs, with managing any issues of negative perceptions. Identified issues were expected to arise around new initiatives or legacy issues from previous elections.

Identified Negative News Issues

- Delaying processing postal vote applications
- Closure of polling booths
- Changes to boundaries
- Technical glitches (counting continues)
- Qualification of candidates
- "Getting called in to comment"
- Calls for adjudication
- Postal votes holistic issues
- Legacy issues
- Announcing results
- Errors by ROs

Positive News with Potential Issues

- Mailouts
 - Privacy
 - Cost
- Vision Australia partnership
 - (no Braille ballots)
- Postal vote monitoring/ diligence
- iRoll
 - security
- Election advertising
 - Cost vs. cost saving of this year's campaign
- New approach, new EC - focus on process not person
- Media Kit/ New website (perception of cost)
- When appropriate to "step in"

Media Protocols

Following critical review of the NSWEC's media strategies and protocols, Hill & Knowlton found that the existing documentation provided an excellent framework for achieving the NSWEC's objectives.

As identified in *The State Electoral Office Media Protocol*, the media protocol is in place to:

- ensure that all media enquiries are handled in a professional manner;

- ensure that information provided is authoritative and accurate;
- ensure that media calls are responded to in a timely manner having regard to journalists' deadlines;
- assist the media to understand that the SEO (NSWEC) has a media protocol so that they know who to contact; and
- ensure that the public is provided with accurate, helpful and timely information.

The existing media protocols provided the tools to achieve these objectives; however Hill & Knowlton provided recommendations for further developing the potential benefits of these protocols by:

- Introducing a more comprehensive structure to the existing protocols;
- Updating the policy of discriminating between print and broadcast media to take into account the rise of online media;
- Providing pro-forma documents to users to help them more fully behave in line with the media protocols; and
- Adding an additional requirement for staff to report contact with media to aid in issues monitoring and overall service to journalists.

Key recommendations made by Hill & Knowlton included:

1. More structured organisation of the existing protocols – a complete, over-arching protocol with appropriate limitations for user groups (e.g. Head Office staff, Returning Officers, Electoral Staff).
2. Review of discrimination between print and broadcast media, taking into account the growth of online media.
3. Providing more detail to users, in particular in the form of standard reporting materials, and therefore further limiting the capacity for individual users to “interpret” the protocol as guidelines rather than rules.
4. Enhanced checks and balances to help the NSWEC use media contact for:
 - Monitoring issues arising in regional areas
 - RO accountability

These recommendations included Hill & Knowlton designing and developing a Media Calls Log Form for all NSWEC staff to use in the event of contact with media, and a Returning Officer's Media Information Checklist to keep key RO information easily to hand at all times, without having to rely on memory.

Key Messaging

Hill & Knowlton was requested to help develop key messages for the NSW Electoral Commission in the lead up to the election.

The main function of the key messages was to support the NSWEC's communication objectives and provide a tool with which to communicate with all audiences. The NSWEC identified three key areas of success:

- To reduce the number of “disenfranchised voters”
- To administer the electoral process without attracting criticism
- To secure positive media coverage of the SEO's good news stories

The NSWEC key message report included details for developing and using key messages for all identified issues, including:

- **AIM** – Audience, Incentive, Message: audience-centric message development tool
- **PREP** – Point, Reason, Example, Point: message structure
- **CAP** – Concern, Action, Perspective: issues management technique for use in interviews
- **Control Phrases**: issues management technique for use in interviews

Training

Hill & Knowlton provided two media training programs to the NSWEC.

Returning Officer Media Protocol Training

The NSWEC identified a potential risk in allowing Returning Officers to engage with media in the course of their duties for the Commission. As such, following the review of the NSWEC media protocols, Hill & Knowlton developed a unique Media Protocol Training program to be included in the scheduled Returning Officer training curriculum.

In conjunction with NSWEC, Hill & Knowlton:

- summarised key information from the appropriate media protocols
- developed a half-hour presentation based on Hill & Knowlton's First Degree media training principles and the NSWEC's media protocols
- delivered the training presentation to 93 Returning Officers and their Senior Executives, in five training workshops

Spokesperson Media Training

In preparation for the large volume of interviews expected of the Electoral Commissioner, Hill & Knowlton media-trained:

- Electoral Commissioner, Colin Barry
- Director Corporate Communications, Nicholle Nobel
- Election Funding Authority, Trevor Follett

Training included:

- preparation of media presentation and interviews
- preparation of course materials
- briefing prior to course
- research and development of hypothetical scenarios
- preparation of course overviews and workbooks

Issues Management Counsel & Editorial Advice

Over the course of the campaign Hill & Knowlton provided strategic issues management and media relations counsel to the NSWEC, on a range of topics including:

- managing public understanding of the postal vote application process
- handling hostile media enquiries
- communicating the benefits of the elector mail-out to electors and media
- distribution of media information kit in hard copies to key media
- reviewing NSWEC media releases and providing recommendations on content, structure, tone and style

- timing and distribution of media releases via AAP and The Media Game, including coordinating recording of audio news release grabs and distributing in line with mainstream media releases
- updating NSWEC media contacts and distributing information to contact list
- reviewing recorded interviews by Colin Barry and providing feedback and advice to the NSWEC regarding content on interviews, perceived influence/bias of stories and ongoing relationship management for those media
- media liaison and issues management counsel following stories relating to electors being “deleted” from the electoral roll
- remaining on-call to the NSWEC throughout the duration of the campaign

Media Intelligence

To provide pre-emptive intelligence on any simmering issues within NSW media, Hill & Knowlton maintained informal dialogue with key political journalists, providing regular updates to the NSWEC.

Tally Room

At the request of the NSWEC, Hill & Knowlton attended the NSW Election Tally Room, on election night 24 March 2007, to provide on-site counsel and media liaison support as required.

Hill & Knowlton provided a point of contact for media on the floor of the Tally Room throughout the Legislative Assembly count while the NSWEC managed the event logistics and communication.

Media De-brief

In supporting the NSWEC throughout the 2007 election period, Hill & Knowlton conducted a media audit of key journalists following the completion of the election. This feedback from this audit will provide additional guidance to the NSWEC on delivering improved information to media in future elections.

Hill & Knowlton developed a three-question interview for use with key journalists, focusing on the NSWEC’s performance in providing relevant and timely information, its media liaison skills relative to other NSW government departments (especially compared to previous NSW State Elections), access to information and the performance of the Commission’s spokesperson.

These questions were as follows:

- How do you rate NSWEC’s communication with you compared with other government departments or past elections?
- How do you rate NSWEC’s communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
- How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

In analysing journalists' responses Hill & Knowlton identified seven strong, recurring themes. These were:

- Access to information
- Media kit
- Website
- Relevance of information
- Personal communication with media
- Access to Electoral Commissioner
- Spokesperson performance

Overall the interviewed journalists recognised an improved commitment to open communication by NSWEC. This was most evident in the NSWEC's commitment to issuing information voluntarily in the forms of a media information kit, media releases and an online media facility. Additionally, media commended the performance of the Electoral Commissioner in media interviews.

Interviewed journalists identified several areas for the NSWEC to improve its communication with media. There remains residual criticism of what is considered a high level of bureaucratic impediment to some journalists receiving information in a timely fashion. There is also a perception amongst some senior journalists that while the function of the NSWEC has improved under the new administration, there is still confusion among some staff about their roles and relationship with the media.

Following is Hill & Knowlton's analysis of media feedback. Raw interview results are included as an Appendix to this report.

Access to information

Journalists reported mixed experiences in accessing information via the Commission. Some journalists said the effort to provide information had improved since previous elections, with information issued by the Commission rated from "quite good" to "very good".

Of most concern for journalists were the Commission's responses to enquiries. Several journalists who had contacted the Commission directly reported finding the Commission "bureaucratic and unhelpful".

Specific criticisms included Commission staff being "defensive" and "suspicious", and the lack of an after-hours contact number for media enquiries.

"The NSWEC is an organisation you would hope is more open and accountable than any other department. I think they have a culture of not being honest or just plain disruptive. I also think they hide their incompetence by being so bureaucratic and unhelpful." – *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

"...there is no after hours number for the media person which is very frustrating."
The Daily Telegraph.

*"The releases were satisfactory however could have been issued earlier in the day." -
- Coffs Harbour Advocate.*

*"We were also aghast that when we had made two enquiries to their media spokesperson about the problems with people not being on the role, we were not sent the media release they finally issued on the matter. We thought that was pretty incompetent that they wouldn't respond to our queries and then decided that we should be left off the media release which dealt with the matter we wanted answers to." -
, The Sydney Morning Herald.*

Recommendations:

- initiate an internal training program for NSWEC staff dealing with media
- work on building relationships with key journalists – particularly those from major metropolitan media as these made the greatest criticisms

Media kit

Journalists who used the media kit were unanimous in finding it to be of value, with talkback radio producers and regional journalists commenting that it was more useful for their needs than the media releases.

Areas that journalists identified for improvement were as follows:

- having graphics and maps that are suitable for reproduction in a newspaper
- ensuring accuracy of information in the media kit (esp. Independent numbers and state of the House)
- information on the previous election for comparison, such as results by party

*"Of most value to us was the media kit. This was great tool as it provided background information on the electorates." -
, Newcastle Herald*

*"Media kit was extremely good. However it wasn't strictly up to date, (it had) a couple of dodgy figures like Independent numbers." -
Sun Herald.*

Recommendations:

- implement a greater proofing/corrections process for future iterations of the media kit
- engage a graphic designer to develop artwork to meet the needs of newspapers for reproduction (many large newspapers have designers on staff who may be available to consult to the Commission on appropriate improvements)

Website

The main comment journalists made regarding the website was that it did not provide easy access to information. Before use it was seen as a good source of information however several journalists commented that getting the information they needed from the website was difficult. This led them to call the Commission more often than they would have if they'd been able to access information more easily online.

*"I would not have had to call them as often as I did if the website did as it should do, which is to provide clear up to date information... There is no way any punter can go to the website and see who won the election." -
The Daily Telegraph.*

"The website was not easy to get information from. That made us very frustrated because we then had to call the office, and found them very suspicious that we weren't using the website!" – Radio Producer.

"The website is not an instinctive website and much too complicated. I would have attended an hour's seminar on how to work the website and the workings of the Commission. It would have been useful to familiarise myself with the system and the people. It would have been a good way to acclimatise journalists." – The Australian

"Their website and all points bulletins were fine. I liked the seat profiles on the website, and also their information about the tally room, that was all okay." – The Sydney Morning Herald.

Recommendations:

- include a site map on the home page to help all visitors find the information they're looking for
- provide media with a "trial run" of the website, for example an introductory session or training module such as those produced by Qantas for its Frequent Flyers promotions
- provide an online feedback form for access/information problems
- use the website consistently as a source of useful information for journalists between now and the next election to familiarise media with its operation
- include more basic information online, such as winner announcements for elections

Relevance of information

Most journalists surveyed reported that they didn't use the Electoral Commission's media releases, preferring to rely on information from the media kit and interviews with the Commissioner.

Regional journalists reported that the media releases were useful background information but of limited use due to the lack of regional information.

One journalist suggested the Commission should have issued a "final press release" summarising the election.

"We were not interested in any of the media releases. We only approached the Commission after receiving a large amount of calls." – 2UE.

"We didn't use the media releases as they didn't contain regional information however they were still good for background information." – Newcastle Herald.

Recommendations:

- include links to relevant sections of website with each media release
- reconsider schedule of media releases to ensure only relevant releases are written/sent – this will also reduce workload for Commission staff

Personal communication with media

Metropolitan journalists tended to report negative experiences when dealing with Electoral Commission staff, with some exceptions. Comments tended to focus on the Commission coming across as defensive and not up to the standards journalists expected of the Electoral

Commission. Where journalists had positive experiences these were acknowledged, however the general trend was quite negative. Regional journalists spoke of the Commission in terms of their information-providing role and made no personal comments about their experiences.

"Best I can recall for access to info... They seemed to be terrified about saying what was going on, what sort of complaints they received - like the Cherie Burton incident. It was all too politicised. The Commissioner is independent and should be acting that way and not too afraid of being seen to be political." – Sun Herald.

"We didn't have any problems getting results or things like that, but I do know that my chief of staff (who is on maternity leave) had a few problems getting information. She felt her request for information had been rudely sidetracked and so she was surprised at how well we got the results information." – Sunday Telegraph.

"They certainly were not the easiest bunch of people to deal with and didn't seem to get where we were coming from." – 2GB.

"The main problem is that it appears to be a bit of a 'sleepy hollow' there and they have difficulty understanding that a journalist needs the information today, not whenever. That was a bit of a problem." The Australian.

Recommendations:

- initiate an internal training program for NSWEC staff dealing with media
- work on building relationships with key journalists – particularly those from major metropolitan media as these made the greatest criticisms

Access to Electoral Commissioner

Media had mixed responses on the issue of their access to the Electoral Commissioner. Some journalists felt that their access to the Commissioner was improved on from past elections. However the majority said they found it difficult to secure interviews, or that the Commission was inconsistent in which interviews it agreed to – in particular refusing to take calls on talkback radio, while granting one-on-one interviews with other hosts on the same network. Their disappointment at what they thought was over protection or management of the Commissioner's media appearances was compounded by the Media Releases promoting his availability. There was a perception that some staff were preventing access to the Commissioner, or strongly attempting to vet any questions that would be put to the Commissioner in any interviews. Others were concerned that the parameters of any interviews were being controlled by staff, such as whether or not the Commissioner would take questions from the public. On the other hand, those who did get access to the Commissioner were usually impressed with his willingness to answer their questions as well as the way he dealt with complicated issues. The overall message is that the Commissioner is viewed as an asset who was not used enough in the media.

"Excellent. We didn't get much of the Commissioner in the past. The staff were more accessible than usual." – Sun Herald.

"We wanted to get Colin on the Chris Smith show to take calls from listeners in the days leading up to the election and they flatly refused without providing us with a good reason. The only excuse they had was that they he didn't have time. That's not a good enough excuse. He had time to do one-on-one interviews with Ray Hadley but not to take calls for 10 minutes from listeners who were still really confused." – 2GB.

Recommendations:

- prepare for a compact schedule for talkback radio particularly in the last week of the campaign
- build relationships with journalists between now and next election so that there's a greater level of mutual trust and respect by the time the next batch of tough interviews come around

Spokesperson performance

Media consistently commented on Colin's performance as spokesperson for the Electoral Commission. In particular, journalists described the Commissioner as "a good spokesperson" who was good at explaining complex issues simply.

"The Commissioner was a good spokesperson. We had him on once and (he) was good at explaining issues our listeners may be confused with. He knew his stuff and spoke in plain English." – 2GB.

Recommendations:

- retain Electoral Commissioner, Colin Barry, as single spokesperson
- refresher training sessions after a hiatus period

Conclusion

The 2007 NSW State Election ran smoothly and with minimal criticism from media. Those issues that did arise publicly generally fell outside the remit of the NSWEC (for example, candidate qualification and management of the electoral roll).

Where issues arose that were within the management of the NSWEC, such as the elector mail-out, the NSWEC was well-prepared to address the issues in a calm, authoritative manner, neutralising the issue as it arose.

Overall the NSWEC's commitment to open communication was applauded by members of the media, though there remains residual criticism of what is considered a high level of bureaucratic impediment to some journalists receiving information in a timely fashion. There is also a perception amongst some senior journalists that while the function of the NSWEC has improved under the new administration, there is still confusion among some staff about their roles and relationship with the media. Hill & Knowlton believes that the Electoral Commissioner's policy of openness and his desire to continue strengthening relationships with media will alleviate many of those concerns.

While the 2007 election is now complete, Hill & Knowlton would welcome the opportunity to work with the NSW Electoral Commission again in the future.

Appendix

Following are the raw responses from journalists interviewed as part of the post-election media audit. Please note these responses are all direct quotes from the cited journalists. Where journalists requested anonymity as a condition of participating in the audit, this is noted for reference.

Hill & Knowlton recommends reviewing the following responses in conjunction with a summary of media coverage by each journalist – this will provide the NSWEC's Communications Team with a greater understanding of how each journalists' perceptions of their interaction with the Commission have affected the resultant coverage.

The Daily Telegraph

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?

Overall they were all pretty friendly, but the real problem is access to information. The website is a joke. They only do one election every four years, you'd think they could get it right. There is no way any punter can go to the website and see who won the election. All the media want is clearly accessible results, and they simply haven't done that. It is a joke.

We were also frustrated with the length of time it took for the count.

2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?

I would not have had to call them as often as I did if the website did as it should do, which is to provide clear up to date information.

Also, there is no after hours number for the media person which is very frustrating.

3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

Richard is a nice bloke. I think he was fairly shocked at how we put the blow torch to them in the aftermath of the election, but he tried to be helpful and got me an interview with the Commissioner which surprised me as I was not expecting that at all.

The Sunday Telegraph (requested anonymity)

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
We didn't have any problems getting results or things like that, but I do know that my chief of staff (who is on maternity leave) had a few problems getting information. She felt her request for information had been rudely sidetracked and so she was surprised at how well we got the results information.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
*We didn't have a problem with media releases or the content. However I think they should redo their graphics and maps as they are too hard to reproduce in a newspaper.
Of course I remember the dim dark days of the tally rooms and not much else, so what they have now is always an improvement.*
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
Seemed quite good, thought my Chief of Staff has other views.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?

Best I can recall for access to info. I don't understand why they didn't have a final press release about the election and how it was run. They seemed to be terrified about saying what was going on, what sort of complaints they received - like the Cherie Burton incident. It was all too politicised. The Commissioner is independent and should be acting that way and not too afraid of being seen to be political. He should release a statement that talks about the complaints and the issues that arose during the election campaign.

2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?

Media kit was extremely good. However it wasn't strictly up to date, a couple of dodgy figures like Independent numbers.

State of the house was wrong, figures didn't add up correctly. Also their information about the speaker was wrong. That confused a lot of us. Couldn't understand why it didn't contain information on the last election, makeup, numbers and things like that. There were no results by party. Every journo needs that, it is the most important information we need.

Media releases were very good. I am technically inept and should have gone to one of your sessions on how to handle things on the night.

3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

Excellent. We didn't get much of the Commissioner in the past. The staff were more accessible than usual. We got good access to Mr Barry. The staff came back to me very quickly and seemed to be on the ball with the information I needed.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
They did a reasonable sort of job and they were quite happy to supply with information or clarify particular issues.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
My only criticism was on the day before the election we had arranged to conduct an interview with the electoral commissioner. When we called up the media staff were missing in action and we were only able to get hold of the commissioner by luck. That caused us quite a lot of anxiety. On the night of the election they explained why they hadn't been able to be contacted. Apart from that one hiccup it was fine.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
The Commissioner was a good spokesperson. We had him on once and (he) was good at explaining issues our listeners may be confused with. He knew his stuff and spoke in plain English.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
Overall they were pretty bad.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
The election kit was helpful and promptly sent out, but that was it. We got the releases but were of no use to us.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
We wanted to get Colin on the Chris Smith show to take calls from listeners in the days leading up to the election and they flatly refused without providing us with a good reason. The only excuse they had was that they he didn't have time. That's not a good enough excuse. He had time to do one-on-on interviews with Ray Hadley but not to take calls for 10 minutes from listeners who were still really confused. They certainly were not the easier bunch of people to deal with and didn't seem to get where we were coming from. If Colin couldn't answer questions from voters then he shouldn't be the commissioner. But we knew that he was a good spokesperson from his previews interviews. Our listeners thought this was quite a contentious election and wanted to hear from him.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
After receiving a huge volume of calls on Monday 26 from people who had been left off the roll, we requested an interview with the Commissioner. Electoral staff were fairly helpful and we finally managed to get hold of the Commissioner. There seemed to be a bit of confusion however among the staff.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
We were not interested in any of the media releases. We only approached the Commission after receiving a large amount of calls.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
The Commissioner seemed fairly good at explaining complex issues. I understand that there were some complex reasons for some people being left off the electoral roll however many of our listeners were still really confused after the interview.

Radio Producer (requested anonymity)

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?

I think they tried, but they were really out of their depth. The so called media person was incredibly defensive all the time, when there was no need to be. Compared with other departments I deal with, they were very amateur.

2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?

The website was not easy to get information from. That made us very frustrated because we then had to call the office, and found them very suspicious that we weren't using the website! I think they had the information at their finger tips, but were too interested in controlling their messages, that they got a bit tied up in trying to find our so called hidden agenda. It was a huge pain with our deadlines.

3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

We wanted to give them a free kick in the final week of the campaign and just get someone on to talk about the mechanics of the election and what people should be mindful of. But the media people were just so suspicious and wanted to see all our questions and even veto the idea of callers. I mean that is what we actually do, take calls! They were so unrealistic.

In the end it didn't happen. They said something stupid like he was too busy. Too busy to talk to the electors! It is his job, isn't it? It was just so stupid because the Commissioner is a good person to interview; he comes across as a good bloke. But he has these people around him who don't know a good media opportunity when it is presented to them on a plate. He should get some people who actually know how to talk to the media, because at the moment I think he is being let down by the current lot.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
I found them rather good and quite proactive with the information they released.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
I had no problem with accessing information. Their communication tools including their website, media releases and media kit were quite useful.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
We were not interested in an interview with the Commissioner. At no time during the campaign did we make contact with the commission.

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?

I was one of two main journo's covering the election (the other is on leave). All up they were pretty good. Of most value to us was the media kit. This was great tool as it provided background information on the electorates.

2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?

We didn't use the media releases as they didn't contain regional information however they were still good for background information. We relied on the media kits a lot more than the releases.

3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

We ran an opinion piece by the Commissioner. We were pretty happy with his responses.

The Advocate (Coffs Harbour)

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
Overall we found the information provided was quite good.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
The releases were satisfactory however could have been issued earlier in the day. They didn't provide any local/ regional information so even though we got them quite frequently we still needed to do our own searching for local releases. The media kit was more useful to us than the releases.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
We did not approach the Commission for an interview.

The Sydney Morning Herald (requested anonymity)

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
Pretty Useless. The NSWEC is an organisation you would hope is more open and accountable than any other department. I think they have a culture of not being honest or just plain disruptive. I also think they hide their incompetence by being so bureaucratic and unhelpful.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
Pretty bad. When we did have a legitimate issue, they fobbed us off by saying something stupid about boundary changes when it was later revealed to be moving to the new computer system. There was simply no need for them to be so unhelpful.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
Useless. When you ring for information the person seemed to go out of their way to make sure we didn't get any answers. I am not sure if that is a reflection of the culture of the place to be generally unhelpful or just a style problem. The spokesperson was very difficult and not at all forthcoming.

The Australian

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?

I had no problems with them; I think they did a good job. I did wish that the count proceeded faster than it did.

2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?

The website is not an instinctive website and much too complicated. I would have attended an hour's seminar on how to work the website and the workings of the Commission. It would have been useful to familiarise myself with the system and the people. It would have been a good way to acclimatise journalists.

3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?

I did not have to interview the Commissioner, but I found Richard and Nicholle helpful. The main problem is that it appears to be a bit of a 'sleepy hollow' there and they have difficulty understanding that a journalist needs the information today, not whenever. That was a bit of a problem.

The Sydney Morning Herald

1. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you compared to other government departments or past elections?
They were okay, but very by-the-book. They just didn't have anyone there who seemed capable or willing to answer left of field questions. There was no-one who could or would take the responsibility and find the information for us.
2. How do you rate NSWEC's communication with you in terms of media releases (content and timeliness) and access to information?
Their website and all points bulletins were fine. I liked the seat profiles on the website, and also their information about the tally room, that was all okay.
3. How do you rate NSWEC media spokespersons in terms of giving interviews, providing information, responding to your inquiry?
They were very bureaucratic about getting information to us, even if we had asked questions that no-one else had. It seemed they just couldn't grasp that we needed that information, and so they didn't go out of their way to help.

We were also aghast that when we had made two enquiries to their media spokesperson about the problems with people not being on the role, we were not sent the media release they finally issued on the matter. We thought that was pretty incompetent that they wouldn't respond to our queries and then decided that we should be left off the media release which dealt with the matter we wanted answers to.