

## Sainsbury's Spinning in Control

Written by John Eager

Thursday, 26 January 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 February 2012 12:32

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Evidence has come to light as to how Sainsbury's is spinning the local media to get its message across to councilors and the wider public and how it influences supporters for its proposed off-centre grocery hypermarket on the outskirts of Ledbury.

Sainsbury's is paying the public relations company [Gough Bailey Wright](#) to influence the local media and to coordinate local support for the grocer's.

In a document (attached below), a campaign the public relations company undertook on behalf of the grocer's is highlighted. It advises about the strategy used to push the Sainsbury's planning application through at Leek.

[Leek pdf](#)

The document reveals how Gough Bailey Wright targeted the senior reporter of a local newspaper by "developing a positive relationship" with that journalist. It would then supply the reporter with "advertorial features" - described as "vehicles for the latest 'rebuttal message'" which would "promote the general benefits of the development."

An 'advertorial' is an article written by the PR company that appears to be a news article, but is actually a paid for advertisement. The newspaper receives revenue, Sainsbury's benefits from a prominent promotional article in the newspaper, which some readers may believe is an objective, professional piece of journalism.

[Wikipedia](#) describes advertorials thus: "In printed publications, the advertisement is usually

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written in the form of an objective article and designed to look like a legitimate and independent news story. The tone of the advertorials is usually closer to that of a press release than of an objective news story.

"Advertorials differ from traditional advertisements in that they are designed to look like the articles that appear in the publication. Most publications will not accept advertisements that look exactly like stories from the newspaper or magazine they are appearing in. The differences may be subtle, and disclaimers—such as the word "advertisement"—may or may not appear."

Gough Bailey Wright informed the Ledbury Community Portal today that such an advertorial supporting Sainsbury's would be appearing in this week's Ledbury Reporter.

I asked Ledbury Reporter editor, Peter John, about the use of advertorials in his newspaper. If a company is paying the newspaper for advertising, can the newspaper remain objective in its reporting about that company? Mr John's response: "We are not on anyone's side. We offer balanced editorial coverage. Anyone can advertise with us."

The document also reveals how Gough Bailey Wright organises the supporters of Sainsbury's by encouraging them to write letters to the media and to attend the planning committee meeting. It recommends supporters to arrive early for the best seats and to wear orange to show their support of the multinational grocer.

The PR company describes the Sainsbury's supporters as the 'Silent Majority': "Ensure the *silent majority* found a voice to communicate its support to planning members."

These chosen words have been repeated in the [Ledbury Reporter](#) : "'The *silent majority*" of more than 1,100 residents who have put their name to a petition backing the scheme." But where did Ledbury Reporter writer Gary Bills-Geddes get his quote from - Sainsbury's supporters or Gough Bailey Wright propaganda? The Ledbury Reporter editor believes it is clear from the article that the quote came from Sainsbury's supporters.

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The use of 'silent majority' is clever. It creates an assumption that these supermarket supporters are both silent (nice and quiet, unvocal or perhaps even denied a voice) and in a majority.

It is unclear if they are a majority or not, but the one chance the town had to find out - a Parish Poll - was scuppered by LESS's own lack of enthusiasm for it. Did they not trust their own instinct despite their unsubstantiated claims? Or was there a PR company in the background advising that a parish poll was not the best foot forward?

Secondly, they are certainly not silent or quiet, but are just as noisy and outspoken, if not more so, than LOTS, the anti-out of town centre supermarket group. On this website two pro-Sainsbury's members/supporters have been banned for using abusive and offensive language against LOTS members.

Comments made today on the [Ledbury Reporter](#) have been removed that were discussing the behaviour of LESS members who, like LOTS members, took to the streets last Saturday to put their points of view across to the public.

What were these comments and why were they removed? The Ledbury Reporter's editor could not tell me.

Both sides have their own Facebook pages to publicise and organise and promote their causes. This is hardly a 'silent' group. One supporter has even replaced their house's obsolete 'Vote BNP' banner for a 'Ledbury Supports Sainsbury's' banner - surely a loud and antagonistic gesture.

The supporters of Sainsbury's should not be described as a silent majority. This out of county PR spinner is myth making for a corporate giant.

The PR company also supplied councilors' contact information to the hypermarket supporters to ensure that councilors were "being constantly reminded that the scheme had strong public backing by the residents themselves."

The document also reveals that the PR company had "regular meetings with councilors and stakeholder groups."

Gough Wright Bailey told the Ledbury Community Portal that it did not target councilors or committee members, but did have 'discussions' with them.

Councilors, both parish and county, may scoff, but should be aware that many of the letters they are receiving are being prompted and directed by both LOTS and LESS. However, there is an unobvious difference between them. LOTS is a group of local people, who fear that an out of town Sainsbury's might turn Ledbury into just another ghost town, boarded up and anti-social, because the life and vitality out of the town centre will be sucked dry by an oversized hypermarket at its edge. Doomsayers perhaps.

LESS is another group of local people who want more choice, cheaper food and more convenient shopping - all under one roof (and who can blame them?) This local group has the backing of a PR company and a multi-national corporate giant, neither of which is local, and cannot be said to have the best interests of the town at heart. Sainsbury's are coming here for profit, your dollars and mine - bottom line. Gough Bailey Wright are here to spin for Sainsbury's.

The PR company reveals that the Leek campaign cost £45,000, but refused to comment on how much the Ledbury campaign would cost.

The editor of the Ledbury Reporter told me he did not know how much an advertorial cost.

The question on councilors lips should be - what will Sainsbury's cost Ledbury?

But the cynic will tell you it's all a waste of time, as the decision was made months, even years ago. It's a deal already done. These manoeuvres are dances with process, mediated, democratic and civic, but little else.

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We will never know who made the decision, when it was made or even why it was made. It is concealed.

Perhaps the true cost is in the people of Ledbury. The friends and family, the neighbours and colleagues, who took sides against one another in defence of an historic imagined space against the threat an unknown, faceless, corporate giant.

Myth indeed.