

IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE: FOR MEDIA TRAINING PURPOSES ONLY

Post Office media training scenario: Horizon

Background

The BBC has requested an interview regarding the alleged issues with Horizon system. They are aware of the Group Litigation Order and that various trials that are underway.

They have pre-recorded an interview with an ex-postmaster who claims that faults in Horizon resulted in cash shortages at their branch for which he wrongly served a prison sentence.

You have been invited to take part in a live studio interview to respond to these allegations.

The BBC understands that you cannot discuss individual cases, but will no doubt make suggestions that hundreds of postmasters have been wrongly accused of theft and may attempt to draw you into commenting on individual cases.

Key messages/points to stress

- Our employees and postmasters are important to us and we take our relationships with them very seriously. We have confidence in our network of 11,500 post office branches and the systems underpinning it. The Horizon computer system is operated successfully by thousands of employees, postmasters and their staff to process 47 million transactions every week.
- We're robustly defending against allegations being made in a long-running dispute by a very small proportion of mainly former postmasters. It's now for the courts to examine these claims and we believe this process provides the best opportunity to resolve the dispute.
- We have worked strenuously and honestly in our determination to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and to do the right thing by the people involved. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation. We have met with all parties concerned on numerous occasions and we've continued to improve support and training for our branches.
- We have never said we always get everything right, but what we are clear about is that as an important national organisation, we have always sought to act honestly and appropriately.
- To be fair to all parties involved we are not commenting on the detail of individual cases outside of public court hearings, or on selective documents. This is complex litigation and we believe its right to focus on resolving the issues through the legal process.

The interview

Carefully consider your key messages and prepare for the interview which will take place in a few minutes' time. Anticipate the questions likely to arise and try to take some control to ensure your messages are heard and understood by the end audience.

The following guidance on potential questions and suggested key points to stress has been provided by Post Office Newsdesk.

Q. How can you justify holding postmasters responsible for losses when your computer system is unreliable?

- Like any IT system, Horizon is not perfect but it is robust and reliable. It's operated successfully by thousands of employees, postmasters and their staff to process 47 million transactions every week.
- It is a very small proportion of mostly former postmasters who are making claims. We're robustly defending against the allegations being made and it's now for the Court to examine the claims. We believe that the Court process provides the best opportunity to resolve this long-running dispute.
- We take the cases very seriously. We have worked strenuously and honestly in our determination to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and to do the right thing by the people involved. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation. We have met with all parties concerned on numerous occasions and we've continued to improve support and training for our branches.

Q. It's now been revealed in Court that there have been software problems with Horizon which you did not tell postmasters about – how can you justify this?

- To be fair to all parties involved we are not commenting on selective documents outside of Court hearings. This is complex litigation and we believe it's right to focus on resolving the issues through the legal process.
- It is for the Court to examine the claims, but I can underline the seriousness with which we take these cases. We have been determined to get to the bottom of them. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation, providing many thousands of documents for analysis as part of this.

Q. One of the emails that has now been disclosed to the Court explicitly mentioned errors in Horizon that, if known about, might have an impact on prosecutions. These errors were never disclosed to a postmistress who was being prosecuted at the time and was subsequently jailed. How can you possibly say that the Post Office has sought to do the right thing by people?

- To be fair to all parties involved we are not commenting on selective documents or individual cases outside of Court hearings. This is complex litigation and we believe its right to focus on resolving the issues through the legal process.
- It is for the Court to examine the claims, but I can underline the seriousness with which we take these cases. We have been determined to get to the bottom of them. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation, providing many thousands of documents for analysis as part of this.

Q. Do you believe that hundreds of postmasters who say they have had or are experiencing discrepancies caused by Horizon are all lying?

- It's for the Court to examine these claims. It's a very small proportion of mainly former postmasters making allegations. The cases span nearly two decades and differ in facts and circumstances – it wouldn't be fair or appropriate to comment on them outside of the Court process.
- What we can say is we have worked strenuously and honestly in our determination to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and to do the right thing by the people involved. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation. We have met with all parties concerned on numerous occasions.

Q. What does Post Office actually do to investigate complaints about discrepancies which postmasters say have no explanation apart from computer fault?

- Our employees and postmasters are important to us and we take our relationships with them very seriously. It is in our interests for our postmasters run successful branches and we provide them with comprehensive training and support to help them do so.
- It's postmasters and their staff, not Post Office, who have first-hand knowledge of activities in their branches so there is an extensive range of reports and information available to help them investigate what might have happened if there is an anomaly they do not understand.
- For additional help we provide support that includes helplines, extensive operational information, branch visits and accounting reconciliations with third parties.
- It's a very small proportion of mainly former postmasters making claims and these are now for the Court to examine.

Q. How much taxpayer's money have you now spent defending the claims – is it true that the litigation has so far cost around £10 million?

- We're not going to comment on speculation – we report on financial matters through our annual Report and Accounts. As a public national organisation we are very mindful of our responsibilities.
- Post Office has a right to robustly defend the allegations being made against it and we believe the Court's process now provides the best opportunity of resolving this long running dispute.
- We have been determined to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and have worked strenuously over a number of years to do the right thing by the people involved. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation. We have met with all parties concerned on numerous occasions.

Q. Isn't it true that you have been trying these postmasters up in legal knots for years in the hope that they will not be able to find the money to continue legal challenges? Are you prepared to mediate at some point?

- We have been determined to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and have worked strenuously over a number of years to do the right thing by the people involved. There have been thorough investigations, an independent inquiry and we sought to resolve some of the claims through mediation. We have met with all parties concerned on numerous occasions.
- We believe the Court process provides the best opportunity to resolve the dispute and we are focusing on that process.

Q. Given that in some cases postmasters have been driven to bankruptcy, potentially wrongly imprisoned, have suffered mental breakdowns and even tragically committed suicide, do you think your CEO should have refused to accept her New Year honour?

- Our CEO has been determined to get to the bottom of the serious allegations that have been made and initiated investigations, an independent inquiry and a mediation scheme.
- Some of the people involved have undoubtedly faced some significant challenges with some very sad outcomes and we have worked strenuously and honestly, over a number of years, to respond to the claims.
- We believe the Court process now provides the best opportunity for resolution. We are robustly defending our position but with empathy – and to be fair to all parties involved we are not commenting on the detail of individual cases outside of public court hearings. This is complex litigation and we believe its right to focus on resolving the issues through the legal process. It's now for the Court to examine the claims.

