

# Apologies, but sorry used to be the hardest word

When exactly did public apologies become such big news?  
Dick Lumsden finds the whole thing baffling

**T**IME was when only two things in life were certain – death and taxes – but not any more.

How and when it happened I don't know, but somehow we have evolved into a world where something else has become as equally certain as death and taxes. And it is that, every day, on TV or in the press, someone, somewhere is apologising.

Whole countries are apparently apologising to other countries for things which might or might not have happened 100 years ago; broadcasters are apologising for wearing the wrong colour suit, or the wrong coloured tie; idiotic footballers and z-rated celebrities are apologising for opening their mouths and allowing a little drivel to drip out... it's madness.

Paedophiles are apologising to their victims, politicians are apologising to the electorate, the police are apologising to criminals – utter lunacy.

Years ago when I first trained as a journalist I went to college to learn useful things like shorthand, or the law of libel, or the long forgotten skill of checking facts.

Now, I imagine the most essential training is how to follow someone on Twitter and spin some inane chatter into a story – and then get the Tweeter to make a grovelling apology, withdraw the comment and go through the modern-day equivalent of being locked in the stocks and pelted with rotten vegetables.

And the apology itself is only part of the whole sorry routine.

First there is someone somewhere calling for the apology, then there is a day or so of “will he or won't he” apologise, then there is an apology, of sorts, and then two more days of stories debating whether it was a proper apology and whether or not the offended asylum seeker/benefit cheat/outraged minority (delete as appropriate) will actually accept the apology.

I challenge anyone reading this article to go through an entire day without hearing or reading a news item which isn't going through one ring of the apology circus.

This week I did a very simple Google search and typed in the dreaded three words “forced to apologise” – and guess what? In under 2.5 seconds I was delivered approximately 25,300,000 entries



**SORRY STATE:** Dick Lumsden observes that even presidents can find they are not immune to the apology bug.

Photograph: AP

speed read each one, at a minute or so each, that would take me 48 years, one month and 17 days. But of course, I would have been forced to apologise to the editor of the *East Anglian Daily Times* well before then for not finishing this article on deadline.

Mind you, I did get a bit distracted wading through just some of them. For example, 22-year-old Jean-Sun Ahn, having just been crowned Miss Seattle, should probably have thought twice before going on Twitter the next day and saying how much she hated Seattle, the weather and its people. Turns out she is also the reigning Miss Phoenix and prefers the sunshine there. Apology accepted.

Or how about the red-faced Coca Cola executive forced to apologise last year for putting up world maps all round the Olympic Park in London – which mistakenly missed off Greece – the home of the Olympics?

Or the creative team which thought up an advertising campaign to support the launch of a new Ford hatchback in India. Playing on the fact that the Ford Figo apparently has a very big boot, they created the slogan “Leave your worries behind” and used a cartoon of shamed Italian

curvy and provocative young ladies, bound and gagged in the boot. They were published at the same time as the country was in uproar about some high-profile rape cases. Cue grovelling apology.

Even Presidents aren't immune from the apology bug.

Poor old Barack Obama just said what many people were thinking when he said Kamala Harris was the “best looking attorney general in the country”. A joke, or a massively insensitive remark? I'll let you decide... but his apology was given so much coverage it was single-handedly responsible for half the Amazonian rain forest being cut down for newsprint.

The problem is, of course, that the apology has become such a fixture in the news now that it has little or no meaning any more. Indeed, some people more cynical than me might think that some things are said – or tweeted – with the express purpose of allowing the offender the oxygen of publicity through their apology.

As parents, we teach our children to say sorry when they have done something wrong. I'd like to think we also teach them that when you apologise, you must mean what you say.

apology. First, actually say you are sorry. Second, accept responsibility. And third, ask what you can do to make things right. Sadly, for most of the news-manufactured apologies we now see daily in the media, the so called celebrities do none of these.

Because it is all a sham, they do everything they can to “express regret” without actually saying sorry; they never accept responsibility and they couldn't give a toss about putting things right.

For those of you as fed up as me with the whole charade, try playing apology bingo.

Choose your treat of choice (chocolate, wine, beer, ice-cream) and, as you sit there watching the news of an evening, reward yourself with one or the other every time you hear the word “apology” – trust me, you'll be drunk or stuffed before the night is out.

■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some gentle consumer research, please contact him on dlumsden@