

My name is Matthew Bell, co-owner and director of Ferrari Press Agency Limited, a freelance news agency based in Dartford, Kent.

I began my career as a trainee general news reporter on the Kentish Times local newspaper group in 1987, which included two block release training stints at Harlow College, Essex, under the National Council for the Training of Journalists. This covered training in general newspaper practice, law (libel and Contempt of Court), public administration and short-hand.

Following successful completion of this training I progressed through the ranks of the company to become a senior reporter and a news editor, before leaving in 1991.

I then worked as a reporter at Ferrari Press Agency, which was then owned and run by a former Crime Correspondent of the London Evening Standard.

I stayed at the agency until 1993 when I joined the Sunday Mirror newspaper, working there as a reporter, Investigations Editor and latterly News Editor, before resigning in 1999 to take up a new challenge.

This challenge came in 1999 when myself and Adam Gillham, a friend and former colleague at the Kentish Times and Ferrari's, paid a nominal fee to or the agency name and took over the ownership and running of Ferrari Press Agency, establishing it for the first time as a limited company.

In addition to my role at Ferrari's, I am also the unpaid Chairman of the National Association of Press Agencies (NAPA), which is an umbrella body representing the interests of a large number of other agencies in the UK and abroad.

Ferrari Press Agency was originally established in 1945 by the late Lino 'Dan' Ferrari. His son Nick Ferrari is the highly-respected presenter of the breakfast show on LBC Radio. Numerous talented and highly-regarded journalists have worked at the agency over the years.

It has a very good reputation within the newspaper industry, hence the reason why Adam and I decided to keep the name of the company when we took it over in 1999.

We file news and features articles, and pictures, to national newspapers and magazines via a computer system called Newslink which is known within the industry as a 'news wire'.

We currently employ four full-time staff, which includes Adam and I, and two part-time staff. These are both trained and experienced journalists.

Adam and I take a fixed PAYE salary and regular dividends which vary, in total, annually from between each to each.

Our full-time reporters are paid £18,000-£20,000 pa and our part-time reporters are paid a similar rate but pro-rata depending on number of days worked.

When trying to recruit a reporter our preference is for someone who is trained and has had at least one year's experience on a regional newspaper.

We do not employ any photographers. We use freelance photographers as and when we need them.

We occasionally engage freelance reporters and photographers on a casual basis but always on a strictly per-job basis, as and when a need arises - i.e. none are engaged on fixed contracts or any other long-term basis. I could not be exact about how many of these would be used by us in any period of time but it would be an estimated 50 times a year approximately.

A typical working day for one of our reporters would run from 9am-6pm. They are given assignments, by Adam or I, to work on in our office, or possibly to go to a specific location to work on. The normal task involves gathering information and writing an article.

The research process normally involves talking to people, either by phone or in person, and/or sourcing information publicly available on the internet.

Sometimes we gather information via Freedom of Information requests from organisations.

The reporter may be asked to work on a particular story, which we will brief them on, or a story may 'break' and we ask them to go out of the office, to a particular location, to work on it. Occasionally the reporters may be asked to work on an assignment in an evening or at a weekend. Their normal working hours each week are about 45 hours.

Our reporters are all paid a set PAYE salary. Freelances are paid an agreed rate before they take on a job, normally approx £10 an hour. The amount both are paid is NOT influenced by how many stories they write or have published, or how well they perform on a job.

The only incentive we offer is a 'Hit of the Month' bonus of £100 which is paid to only one staff reporter once a month in recognition of what we judge to be the best journalistic story each calendar month.

Their biggest incentive is to perform well enough in their job to be recognised and possibly offered a staff position on a national newspaper.

We would consider increasing a staff reporter's salary if we asked them to take on a more senior role within the company, or were keen to keep them if they were offered another job away from the company.

We do NOT have any written policies in place but it is made extremely clear to our staff and freelances, through a variety of means, how highly we regard the need for them to engage in legal and ethical practices.

They know, from their staff contract, that any misconduct could result in disciplinary action including dismissal.

When we first employ a reporter, or hire a freelance for the first time, we brief them on how we expect them to work - i.e. explaining to them what they can and cannot do while working for us.

We also frequently have discussions with our staff reporters about the methods which we find acceptable for them to use while working on a particular story.

We also adhere to, and openly display in our offices, the Society of Editors' Code of Practice and the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice.

Adam and I are both experienced journalists with many years of experience so we appreciate and understand the need for legality and ethics, if nothing else to protect the standards and reputation of our company.

Our practices and our advice to our staff and freelances have not changed as a result of the phone hacking affair because such conduct has NEVER had a place within our company, and indeed was not something we were ever aware of within the media industry.

However, in the light of the hacking scandal, we intend to hold ongoing regular reviews and updates with our staff of conduct and practice expected from us while working for Ferrari's. We realise the importance of being aware of any new laws or changes to law, such as the Bribery Act, which may have an impact on our working lives.

When a reporter writes a story it is ALWAYS checked by either Adam or I before it is filed on the wires, or emailed to someone on a newspaper and/or magazine. Our staff and freelances know this is standard practice within our company.

It is possible the story may be rewritten or edited for various reasons, such as protecting the company from any legal issues or simply because we feel the story does not read correctly.

Obviously Adam and I have the experience and ability to know what makes a story attractive to newspapers and/or magazines but we would not change it to an extent that it completely altered the key facts of the story.

We would NOT file a story if we found it to be inaccurate and particularly if it contained legal issues.

Newspapers pay their own rates to agencies like ours for what we call 'on spec' stories. These are stories which we file that they have NOT asked us to file to them.

The newspapers have a self-billing payment arrangement which means they pay us without us invoicing them.

However, if we place a particular story exclusively with one particular newspaper then we will seek to negotiate an agreed payment with them prior to publication.

The standard newspaper 'on spec' payment for a story which makes a page lead - the main story on a page - is from £100-£150. This payment reduces depending on the length or placement of a story to as little as £10 for a one-paragraph 'nib' story.

An exclusively-placed story can vary from anything between £200-£5,000 (or possibly more), again depending on the length and placement of a story. E.G an exclusive front page story in the Sunday Mirror might attract a payment of up to £5,000 whereas an exclusive page lead in the Sunday Mirror would normally attract a payment of around £500-£800.

These payments are similar among all the national newspapers.

We also place feature articles which are what we call 'real-life stories' about real people who sign us their rights for us to sell their story. These are placed with magazines for agreed pre-publication rates varying from £200 to £3,000 (or possibly more), depending on the level of interest in a story and where it appears in a magazine.

Newspaper and magazine payments form at least 95 per cent of our total annual income.

Our other income is from doing the occasional PR job for a company.

The onus for checking sources of information is on the individual reporter but Adam and I will NOT let a story be filed if we spot anything in it which does not seem to have been properly sourced.

These are some examples.

We wrote a story about a man caught on CCTV swinging a cat by its tail. We named the suspect in our story after he went into a police station. We were given his name by talking to his neighbours but we did not file his name in our story until we made efforts to confirm that name with the RSPCA press officer, in an off-the-record briefing.

Another example is that we had a tip that [redacted] chief [redacted] had retired from his position but then immediately been kept in his post as a freelance. We checked and substantiated this with the [redacted] Union rep and the press officer of the [redacted]

Adam and I make sure we know the sources of any information BEFORE a story is filed. This is essential to protect the reputation of our agency and stop us being hit with legal problems.

To the best of our knowledge, our agency has never used, paid or had any connection with private investigators in order to source stories or sources of information, and neither have we paid the police, public officials, mobile phone companies or others with access to the same.

All the information for our stories either come from the principal person or subject matter themselves, or those close to them, and is verified with others where possible, such as a police press office on a crime story.

We also cover court cases, inquests, tribunals, etc, where information is covered by privilege.

Even then, Adam and I may spot something in our editing/facts checking stage where we are not happy with what has been written and will ask the reporter to verify those facts with, for example, a court clerk or a coroner's officer.

For example, we have a very good working relationship with the Crown Prosecution Service in Kent when we need to check facts on a court case.

I should add that Ferrari's use legitimate sources, such as electoral rolls, telephone directories and Companies House records, when we need to find people to talk to them about a story.

We believe it is the professionalism, experience and high standards of us, Adam and I, and our staff that has made Ferrari's such a well-established and well-regarded agency in the newspaper industry.

This is our livelihood so clearly it is in our interests to ensure that remains the case, and Adam and I will continue to have the completely hands-on approach to protect the integrity and reputation of our business.

Yours sincerely,

MATTHEW BELL