

cover story

High tidings

For some professionals, it is all in a day's work to break happy news – or sad, writes **Lissa Christopher**.

When Bianca Green is on the end of the line, the news is either good, very good or fantastic. The PR executive has the enviable job of letting players of Powerball and a range of other lottery games know they have won the jackpot.

She can still remember her first, tongue-twisting call. "The amount I had to tell them they'd won was \$666,666.67," she says. "It's just such a hard amount to [pronounce]. He said to me at the end of the conversation, 'What was that amount again?' and I was like, 'Oh no, don't make me say it again.'"

Some people have already checked their numbers and know they've won when Green calls but many have no idea. "The biggest winner I've had was a great-grandfather who won \$15 million in Powerball and he didn't know, so I was breaking the news to him. I was nervous but also very excited. It was wonderful to share the experience with him."

Green works in Queensland and her role is to contact winners in that state of Powerball, Gold Lotto and other lotteries run by the Golden Casket Corporation. She has counterparts doing a similar job in each state. Some of them, she says, have had winners hang up on them in the mistaken belief the call is a tele-sales exercise or a hoax but it has never happened to her. However, she has heard a lot of shrieking, "Oh my Gods" and "Praise the Lords".

"The responses you get are so varied," she says. "Sometimes people go really quiet. Often people tell you stories about hardships they've been through and how this will make such a difference." The news obstetrician-

gynaecologist Dr Philippa Ramsay has to break to people is not always so cheerful.

In the busy ultrasound practice she leads, the sonographers get to break most of the good news, such as confirming a normal pregnancy. Breaking bad news is reserved for Ramsay – who specialises in ultrasound and prenatal diagnosis – and the other specialists in the practice.

As often as once a day she is called on to tell a patient her unborn child has died.

"Sometimes it's very early, at only six weeks' gestation, and sometimes it's a week before the woman is due to deliver," she says. "It's always very sad but in the third trimester it's worse."

The distressing revelation demands careful, step-by-step communication.

"We try to break it as gently as we can, which involves sort of talking around the fact, circling in towards it," Ramsay says.

"Sometimes the partner is in the room too so we try to make sure everyone is on the same page, that everyone is concerned about the

pregnancy and everyone is aware that a few things are wrong.

"Even when the men, and it's usually the men, say directly, 'It's dead, isn't it?' you can never just say yes because they tend to get very offended when you're direct in return.

"That's because what they really want in their heart of hearts is for you to say no, everything is fine. So, even when my first instinct is to say yes, I don't."

Not all the news Ramsay has to pass on is bad, however. Her favourite scenario is "when a woman has four boys who are all bouncing off the walls in the scanning room and the dad plus two secretaries and the grandma can't control them – one of the boys has his hand jammed in the video recorder, another one is poking the sterilising equipment, another is drowning in the toilet and you get to tell [their mother] that her next baby is a girl. That's what I like."

Philip Goldstein, managing director of recruitment firm Future Prospects, says he can't wait to get on the phone when it means telling someone they've



Jackpot ... Bianca Green, who tells lottery winners the good news. Photo: Paul Harris

it's not about you

Breaking news well requires a high degree of emotional intelligence and compassion, says organisational psychologist Christopher Shen.

It might be tempting to become caught up in the emotion of an event but people who are expert at delivering extraordinary news maintain a healthy degree of detachment while still expressing compassion where appropriate.

Shen says if called on to convey a shocking message you should sort through your own feelings first. Unresolved emotion will come through in your voice and could make the experience more intense for the recipient of your news.

Consider how the person you are informing is likely to feel and what questions they are likely to need answered.

Daniel Dasey

'I was nervous, but also very excited.'
Bianca Green

won a job. "But ringing the list of 10 who didn't make it and giving them a valid reason why? That's tough. You do tend to put it off."

When he makes the calls to those who didn't get the job, Goldstein says his priorities are to be "empathic and to turn the negatives into positives".

"Candidates shouldn't be down on themselves because usually they have come through a process and having made it to the final five or three is an accomplishment in itself. I try to highlight that."

In common with Green, Goldstein has heard shrieking down the phone from successful

candidates but it seems to happen less often these days, he says.

"It's the state of the employment market. At many levels there is an abundance of work available and there is an expectation that people will get work and that there will always be another opportunity. There is more of a reaction to not getting the job. 'What do you mean I didn't get the job? Why? Who did they hire?'"

Answering that question can be challenging because the employers make the ultimate call and he has to rely on them for candidate feedback.



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