

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PRESS DURING A CRISIS

- by Merna Skinner

Your company's public image is particularly challenged when it is linked with a crisis which grabs the media's attention. They want to know what happened and why, so you need to have a communication strategy in place that puts you and your company in the best possible light.

"The disadvantage you have during a crisis situation is not always having complete answers to all of the reporters' questions," comments Merna Skinner of Exec-Comm, a New York communications and training firm. She adds, "Your role is to provide reporters with as much information as you do know on an ongoing basis so that they can get their jobs done".

You should always have a pre-existing crisis communication plan in place to address any possible crises that could occur. This plan should include a designation of appropriate people such as senior managers and technical experts who will handle various types of inquiries. Since many crises occur during off hours, your plan should include back-up spokespeople, as well as cell and pager telephone numbers.

Immediacy is crucial when responding publicly to a crisis. Many corporations mistakenly wait too long to gather all the facts before responding. You should immediately issue an initial statement summarizing what happened, its impact and steps that are being taken to correct the event. All company representatives should communicate a message which is consistent. This message should always be repeated at least three times in the exact same word order to ensure that all audiences, both internal and external, hear it and fully understand it.

An essential ingredient to this message is humanity. Often spokespeople only focus on data, facts and statistics. The discussion should also include how the event impacted people. Your audience wants to hear your concern and if your spokesperson is distant and insincere, readers and viewers will immediately know it and tune out.

So let's say you have been successful in issuing an initial message. How can you continue to work well with the press during this ever-changing situation?

★ **Remain accessible:** Don't stonewall the press by refusing to take calls. You should always be available for one-on-one interviews and give information updates as often as possible. When human life is at stake, hourly updates may be appropriate. For other crises, daily updates are sufficient—especially in the early stages of the event.

★ **Avoid speculation:** Recognize that the press needs to gather information, evaluate what happened

and speculate about causes. Your responsibility is to give a frank assessment of the situation to date and the facts as you know them. Do not fall into the trap of responding to reporters' speculations. If you do so, you will be responding to fiction rather than fact and this puts you in a defensive mode. Saying something like, "At this point, here's what we know..." is better than playing the "what if game". Remember that the ultimate goal is to stress that you are doing everything you can to bring certainty to the information known.

★ **Anticipate and clarify questions.** During a crisis you will not be able to have all the facts and all the answers, all of the time. However, knowing in advance the types of questions reporters tend to ask will put you at an advantage. During crisis events reporters typically want to know items such as:

- ★ a complete description of the event
- ★ number of people impacted
- ★ possible cause
- ★ parties responsible
- ★ dollar amount of damages
- ★ mistakes and who made them

In responding to these types of questions give consistent information. Don't be afraid to clarify ambiguous questions before responding. If for proprietary reasons you are unable to answer a question simply state this, rather than responding with the loaded phrase "no comment."

★ **Speak simply:** Use language that your audience will understand. A statement that is full of technical jargon will only distance you from the audience with whom you are attempting to connect. Using simple visuals or analogies is an effective way of clarifying key points.

★ **Deliver what you promise:** Get back to reporters with more information when you say you will. If you are unsure when that will be, do not commit to something you can't deliver. Remember that you will build rapport and credibility with reporters if you are honest and straightforward.



Merna Skinner is a Partner with Exec/Comm, an executive communications consulting firm, headquartered in New York City. During her years at Exec/Comm, Ms. Skinner has worked with such clients as Bristol Myers, Squibb, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Calvin Klien Cosmetics, Nickelodeon, Olin Corporation, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, Unilever HPS and many others.