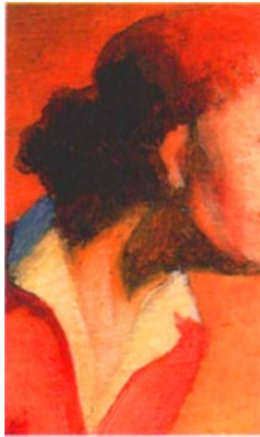


THE TALK

Crisis Communication

Sometimes, who tells and how they tell it is as important as the missive itself. How can you make sure that the message reaches the right audience in the way you had in mind? It's all part of a well-thought-out communications plan. BY DANA ASHER

It was November 18, 1999, at 2:30 a.m. when the bonfire Texas A&M students were building to herald their rivalry against the University of Texas collapsed. Cynthia Lawson was fast asleep. She was in such a sound sleep that when the call came, it took a minute to understand the gravity of what the university's critical incident response team told her.

Once she did understand, Lawson, A&M's executive director of university relations, was horrified. Students had been stacking six tiers of logs with a combined weight of two jumbo jets to make a six-story-high bonfire structure. When it collapsed, 12 students were dead, 27 injured. Lawson, who oversees crisis communication for the 43,000-student university, had been in her position for a mere four months.

She sped to the site, where the media was already assembling in search of answers. Racing to the impromptu command center to assess what had happened, she found that, for many of the questions, there were no answers. She pulled together reporters for her first statement, telling them what she knew and promising to keep them updated as information came to light.

True to her promise, Lawson held press briefings every hour on the half-hour for the first day after the tragedy, and continued with regular communication for months following the disaster. A Web site was created and continually updated as information poured in. Cell phones kept her connected to campus officials and her staff as well as media from around the world.

"On my way to the site, I remember thinking, 'Oh God, what am I going to do?' " Lawson recalls. "Then I thought, 'I've already done this.' "

Where she had done "this" was in her position as director of marketing and customer service at The Detroit Edison Company, an electric utility that generated some of its power via a nuclear power plant. As part of her job, she also served as manager of the Joint Public Information Group, which staged crisis drills. Periodically, Lawson would manage the communications function in semi-annual role-playing exercises that simulated an accident at the plant, a drill in which all parties—from the media to FEMA to county officials—took part. "We held press conferences and even sent out press releases... everything was as real as if it had actually happened," she explains. "This is what got me through the collapse of the bonfire. When a real crisis happened, I knew just what to do. I had been there many times before."

If ever there is a case where "practice makes perfect" are words to live by, crisis is it. The rise of 24-hour television and mobile news crews heralded a pivotal change in the handling of crisis communications. No longer could corporate headquarters issue a "No comment" when asked if its Chicago office was burning; all credibility was lost if the news report cut to footage of the building in flames.

"Because of the expanding media and different audience expectations, crisis occurrences happen much more often," says Irving Rein, Ph.D., a professor of communication studies at Northwestern University, who has conducted research on crisis communication. "This means that you've really got to hone your communication skills, including the nature of the message, when to deliver it, who should deliver it, and how it should be delivered. You have to be prepared for anything, whether that means working with staff internally or seeking outside consultants."

Ideally, the time to get outside help is before a crisis arises. If the organization is fortunate and moves quickly, there might be time between the onset of a problem and the inevitable press conference to arrange for expertise. During that period—say, while food is being tested for E. coli or an employee investigation is being conducted—the organization can determine how it will respond with professional guidance.

"During that time, a company must decide if it will be proactive or reactive. A recall costs money," explains Jennifer Sheehy, director of Clarke & Company's Crisis Communication Center, which develops crisis strategies and plans, facilitates crisis drills, and provides media training services. "Do you choose to recall at the preliminary stages of testing or wait and see if somebody gets sick? Is your company going to behave responsibly? Answering these questions is critical—as critical as composing the appropriate messages to deliver to your audiences."

Once an investigation is complete and a problem is indeed confirmed, it's critical to move on the situation—and fast. "If your management team is getting more and more information that points in a particular direction, they've got to make some pretty important decisions," Sheehy says. "They need to consider the pros and cons and take action, however difficult that might be.

Then they need to publicly communicate that decision."

Sheehy recalls working with a company where a key employee was surfing inappropriate Internet sites while on the job. "This individual denied it up and down, saying that the allegations were an attack on his character," she says. However, as the investigation continued—including examination of a report documenting every site he had visited and for how long—it became pretty clear that the accusations were on target. Top management determined they needed to fire the individual—and that they had to make that decision public to repair damage to the company's reputation.

"We put together a statement that was made upon his termination," Sheehy says. "And we also prepared an internal communication for another audience—the employees—to let them, know he was let go without going into great detail."

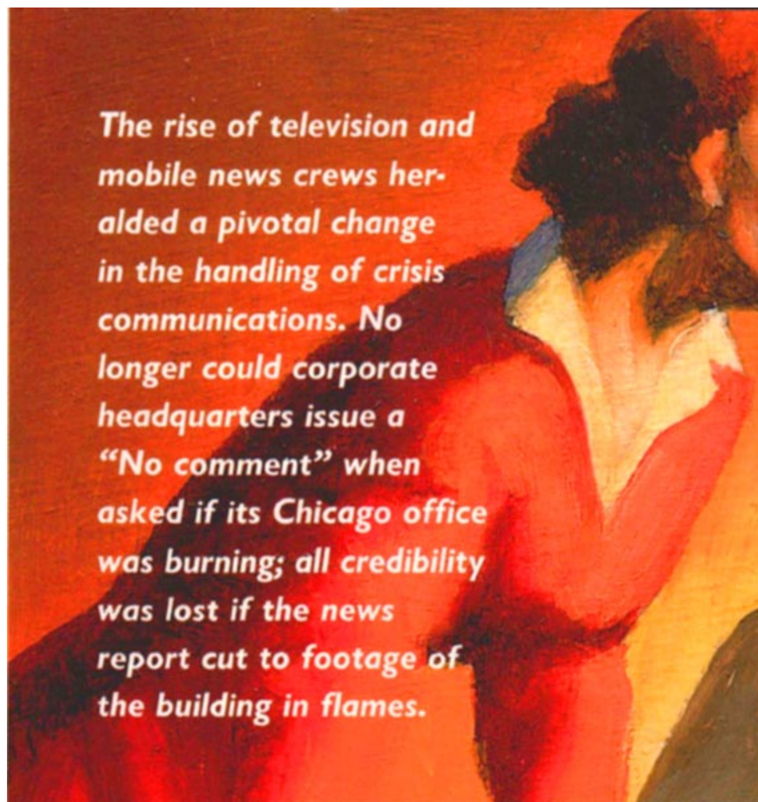
As in this instance, determining who your audiences are—and the vast majority of the time there's more than one—is crucial. Take, for instance, the closing of a huge automotive plant in Detroit. The communication team works to craft the message of the plant's termination. But before creating the message, it needs to ascertain who will receive it, for this helps determine everything from the information they provide to who will deliver it, from the language they use to the medium chosen.

Think about who would need to find out about the plant's closing: stockholders, employees at many different levels, customers, vendors, the local community, local elected officials, the chamber of commerce, and industry associations. Even other employees of the company may wonder if their own facility is next.

"You need to ask yourself, 'Who do we want to talk to? What do they need to know?" " Sheehy says. "Considering what kinds of questions they might ask helps prepare your spokesperson to answer them."

About three years ago, Cheryl Campbell, vice president of corporate communications at Convergys, a customer-care and billing-services company, developed guidelines for crisis communications. She interviewed every senior manager to evaluate readiness for all types of crises. Not only did she put into place a business recovery and continuity plan, but also a plan for how the company would communicate during a crisis: to employees, to clients, and then to the media and other external audiences.

"You need a preset holding statement that within an hour of any emergency gives you the ability to communicate with employees and key clients. That statement might simply be that the company's senior people have met, are working on a response, and will keep you apprised of the situation as developments occur," says Campbell.



As part of the planning, Convergys conducts training and mock exercises. "We always ask our PR professionals, 'What is the worst thing that could happen at any of our facilities?' " she says. "Preparing for the worst helps you be prepared for anything."

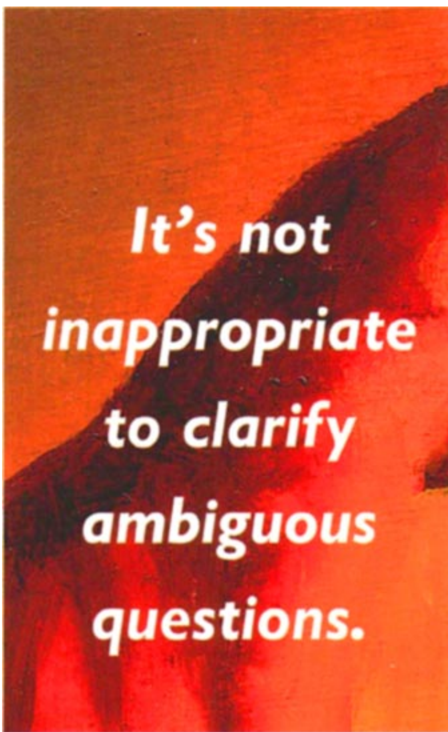
Lawson agrees. "Most organizations don't have a plan. And those that do seldom practice them," she says. "When you're making decisions so quickly and constantly, there's no time to look in the book to figure out what to do next."

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? Here are a few tips to keep in mind.

Remain accessible. "Don't stonewall the press by refusing to take calls," says Merna Skinner, a partner at Exec/Comm, a New York communications training company. "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 usually sufficient, especially in the early stages of the event.

Avoid speculation. By its very definition, the media needs to gather information, assess what occurred, and speculate about causes. "Don't fall into the trap of responding to reporters' speculations," Skinner advises. "Your responsibility is to give a frank assessment of the situation to date and provide the facts as you know them." Stress that you are doing everything possible to gather information.

Anticipate and clarify questions. "During a crisis, you won't be able to have all the facts and all the answers, all of the time," Skinner says. "But knowing in advance the types of questions reporters tend to ask will put you at an advantage." Some of these might include a description of the event, the number of people impacted, possible causes, parties responsible, and the dollar amount of damages. It's not inappropriate to clarify



ambiguous questions before responding (i.e., "If you are asking whether our top management has reviewed the report from quality control, the answer is 'yes' ").

Speak simply. A statement laden with technical language only serves to place distance between you and your audience. Use simple visuals or analogies to clarify key points. "We always recommend that clients steer clear of technical language," Sheehy says. But in some cases, such as an incident involving food contamination, you'll need to use specific terms to explain what happened and what's being done to rectify the situation.

Deliver what you promise. Don't commit to anything you can't provide. "Get back to reporters with more information when you say you will," Skinner says. "You will build rapport and credibility if you are honest and straightforward."

Try to remain cool and professional. Concentrating on what needs to be done versus how you're feeling can help you remain focused during the crisis.

"During a crisis, there's something that kicks in that says, 'I am a professional. How I behave reflects on my abilities, my department, and my institution,' " Lawson says. "You just need to muster up your confidence and remember that you are prepared for this. You know what to do."

Reproduced with the permission of Executive Female magazine, the official magazine of the National Association for Female Executives (NAFE)