

Put Your Best Foot Forward With the Press

■ by Merna Skinner

Getting mileage out of your public relations program takes planning. How you relate to reporters, what you say to them, and how you say it can make or break your company's public reputation. Your company's image is particularly challenged when an unplanned crisis occurs and grabs the attention of reporters. 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.

Dealing with the press is really like a chess game. The reporter has one set of needs and you have another; when these are mutually fulfilled, there is success. The disadvantage you have during a crisis situation is that you do not always have immediate answers to all of the questions posed. Hence, your job is to be as honest and straightforward as possible in providing information. Demonstrating an eagerness to help and following simple rules of courtesy should be your priority.

Ultimate success in dealing with the media comes with knowing how you can help reporters tell their story. Often, spokespeople are so focused on delivering their rehearsed corporate message that they neglect to really listen to an interviewer's questions. To portray a strong, cooperative response, you should always have a crisis communication plan in place to address any possible crises that could occur. This plan should include a designation of appropriate people to respond to different types of questions: senior managers, technical experts, human resources executives etc.

It is equally important to know what your overall message will be. In speaking with various audiences—both internally and externally—it is imperative that all messages be consistent. The main corporate message should be repeated several times, in the exact same word order, to make sure the various audiences fully understand it.

Immediacy is the watch word when it comes to responding publicly to a crisis. Many corporations make the mistake of

waiting too long to get all the facts before responding. The best strategy is to issue as soon as possible an initial statement summarizing what happened, what impact it had, and the steps being taken to correct the event.

An essential ingredient to this message is humanity. Often spokespeople only focus on data, facts, and statistics. In addition to the news of what happened should be a discussion of how it impacted employees, clients, etc. A spokesperson



who addresses only the facts will come across as wooden and cold, thus harming the company's image. The press and the audience they reach want to hear concern, but if it is insincere, they will immediately recognize it as such 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 what is often an ever-changing situation?

- Remain accessible. Don't stonewall the press by refusing to take calls. You should be available for one-on-one interviews. Similarly, you should feel free to give information updates as often as possible. When human life is at stake, hourly updates are sometimes appropriate. For other crises, daily updates are sufficient, especially in the early stages of a crisis.
- Understand their needs. Recognize that the press needs to gather information,

evaluate what happened, and speculate the 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 speculations offered by the media. * Be prepared for 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 be put you at an advantage. During crisis events reporters typically want to know such items as:

- a complete description of the event;
- body counts;
- possible cause(s);
- parties responsible;
- dollar amount of damages; and
- mistakes and who made them.

In responding to these type of questions, give consistent information. Don't be afraid to clarify ambiguous questions before responding. Remember that reporters are always looking for controversy and opposing points of view to give their stories appeal. A good way to answer "off-limits" questions is to acknowledge a question as a good one but explain that the content is proprietary.

The press will ultimately control how your company is portrayed in a crisis. Knowing what you want to tell them and how to tell them is half the battle. The other half of the challenge is responding with "grace under fire." The calmer you are and more professionally you communicate, the stronger will be your public image. Similarly, treating reporters with respect and helping them to do their job will work to your advantage. You obviously cannot control crises, but you certainly can control how the public perceives your company during an event by cooperating with the press. ■

About the Author

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