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Special Report:

Crisis Management & the Media

Access Intelligence

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If you find yourself with hours, or even minutes, before a crisis occurs there is still time to train.

–Joe Hodas, executive VP of channels, and partner, Vladimir Jones

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Play The Role of The Tough Reporter in Your Crisis War Room

By Joe Hodas

Executives don't want to think about crises before they're in one, and they certainly don't see the point of spending money and time on a crisis that hasn't yet occurred. Too often, they think that if a crisis does arise, they can wing it. As a professional winger, I can safely say that nothing can prepare you for cameras, lights and questions as you try and explain loss of life, loss of shareholder value or other crisis scenarios with limited information, muffled by a veil of chaos and fear. Nothing.

Create a simple plan. If you find yourself with hours, or even minutes, before a crisis occurs, there is still time to train. Better yet, you can actually kill two birds with one stone because you will also have to craft messaging for your various responses and communications. There's no better way to test your messaging than to run it through a real-time, iterative process grounded in media training. If it doesn't sound good the first time it rolls off the lips of your CEO, odds are likely that it's not the right message.

Below are eight steps/considerations for media training in a storm that should help you prepare for, though maybe not conquer, whatever crisis you face:

1. **Find a dedicated war room immediately.** If it has presentation capabilities, that's great. But mostly it just has to be a room large enough to hold a crowd and convenient enough for all to access.
2. **Identify your team.** Keep it managable. In a crisis, when time is of the essence, less is more. Otherwise you'll never get to consensus on the messaging and you won't get to run through any of it for practice. I recommend some combination of at least the following representation:

If you find yourself with hours, or even minutes, before a crisis occurs, there is still time to train.

- Legal counsel: Just to be safe.
- CEO/president: If at all possible, and depending upon the nature of the crisis, this should also be your spokesperson.
- Subject matter expert: This will vary depending on the crisis.
- PR counsel: That's you.
- Note taker/researcher: If you are going to act as the PR counsel, it's beneficial to have someone there to capture words, expressions, facts etc., so you can focus on driving the discussion.
- CFO: Why the CFO? CFOs tend to have a very analytical mind and they often know the risks associated with certain messaging and have a good sense for any insurance or third-party vendors that should be involved.

3. **Development of messaging.** Ideally, you have spent about two hours developing two columns:

- Facts: These are the elements you know to be true about the situation.

Don't Panic: Use This Checklist for Containing a Crisis Situation

For organizations mired in a crisis, having a plan, swift stakeholder communications and active reputation management are crucial to help mitigate controversy. David Kalson, CEO of Ricochet PR and 20-year crisis-management veteran, recommends an organization use this checklist to work through a bad situation:

- ❏ **Draft a team.** Assemble a crisis response team with the CEO as the ultimate decision maker and choose your spokesperson(s). Ensure that operations and communications are closely coordinated by including both operational managers as well as communications managers on the team. Also include legal experts and subject-matter experts, e.g., if the crisis is an IT security breach, the head of IT must be on the team.
- ❏ **Categorize the seriousness.** How many people are victims, real or perceived? Is the media covering it? Which media? Some are more influential, hence consequential than others. Can the crisis be contained at a local facility or does it impugn the entire corporation, nationally or globally?
- ❏ **"Tell it first and tell it fast" to audiences affected by the crisis.** Make your organization the authoritative informational resource on the crisis, or else someone else will take that role from you. Tactics could include an apology to victims, Web site content, op-eds, remuneration to victims, ads, regulatory filings, legal actions, etc.
- ❏ **Focus Internally.** Make your employees a primary audience so they are equipped to carry your crisis-related messages to customers and into the community while they maintain their productivity and morale.
- ❏ **Break out the influencers.** Whenever possible, use respected third-party experts to tell your story during a crisis.
- ❏ **Be media savvy.** Use media/presentation training during a crisis and rehearse before going before the media or groups.
- ❏ **Rule No. 1. Empathize (be human) to victims, real or perceived.** They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

— PR News Editors

- Messages: These are the words that you'll use to communicate the facts. What you really want to get to, for the purpose of media training at least, is a series of three to five (three is ideal) broad messages that cover only the most essential points of the situation. Each of those can be supported by three messages/facts. If you go any deeper than that, it's easy for your spokesperson to get confused, share too much or the wrong information. One of the downsides to media training during a crisis is that as you go through the messaging process, it's easy to forget what was merely part of the "discussion" versus an actual key message.

4. **Now that you have your messaging, it's time to try it out in front of an audience.** If you have the time and technical capabilities, it's best to capture the training on video. This way, you can play back the critique via video, rather than interrupting it in real time. Also, the video will help you see exactly how your spokesperson might come across on camera, which can be much different than seeing him or her in person.
5. **Opening Statement.** Start your training with your spokesperson making an "opening statement" to set the stage/tone for questions.
6. **This is the fun part; you get to be the nasty reporter.** Really grill your spokesperson and switch up the style. Try to use as many tricks of the trade as you can, such as:

- Silence: So often, when a reporter lets the silence sit for a few seconds, the interview subject will try to fill the silence with words—sometimes words that should never have left

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his or her mouth.

- Interruptions: Don't let your spokesperson finish his or her sentence. See how many times you can do that before they get flustered.
- False or misleading info: Feel free to throw out a question or some information your spokesperson has never heard or considered. See if he or she can bring it back to the key messages.
- Confrontation: Ask your spokesperson something that borders on personal/emotional and see if he/she can come across as sympathetic, but not necessarily as the bad guy.

7. **Analyze, analyze, analyze.** Which messages worked, which didn't? Which facts did your spokesperson get wrong? Did he/she lean too much to one side of the camera? Was the spokesperson able to convey sincerity and integrity? Did he/she fall for any reporter tricks?
8. **Finalize the messaging document and make sure everyone who needs it has a copy.** And go ahead and use that messaging to begin drafting that first release/statement to post to your Web site, Facebook, Twitter, the company blog and the wires.

In all, this exercise requires at least three hours. The media training itself, however, shouldn't go on for more than two hours. You don't want your spokesperson to get run down before the crisis even hits. Also, make sure everyone in the room agrees to a specific time frame to declaring a situation a crisis or not. If it's decided that the situation is not a crisis, then you've still come up with a wonderful way to get your spokesperson invested in media training. PRN

Joe Hodas is the EVP of channels for Vladimir Jones, and is a partner in the agency. He has more than 17 years of experience in consumer branding.

Doing It Right: Message Mapping, Construction and Framing

By Cindy Rakowitz

In today's world, where news spreads like wildfire through digital platforms, it has become mandatory for individuals and organizations to develop a clear, unified message for times of crisis. We no longer enjoy the luxury of a 24-hour news deadline; the media and members of the public now demand an immediate response to a crisis situation. Immediacy, simplicity, honesty, responsibility and repetition drive a powerful message home.

Doing It Right

After a U.S. "Mad Cow" disease scare, authorities on the condition issued a report through the traditional press and social media platforms. The report stated that:

- This was an isolated incident.
- Tainted meat and dairy never became a part of the food supply.
- It is safe to eat beef and drink milk.

Through an immediate internal investigation and response, there was never the need for spin control. Written with authority, the report prevented uncertainty and potential panic. Ultimately, the response to this contained incident reinforced consumer trust in our food inspection and distribution system. Effective crisis public relations— quenching rumors, correcting misinformation and refuting lies— can save lives, reputations, reduce damage and disruption and expedite rescue and recovery.

When an organization devises a comprehensive crisis-management plan, the communications section should focus on message development. This should include these items:

> Delay, default and denial are weapons the public and media will wield against you.

1. **Designated spokesperson.** It is best to use a single individual to represent the company, respond to media questions and release statements. In addition to the spokesperson, designate technical experts to provide supplemental information and support to the spokesperson. The designated spokesperson should also collaborate with outside agencies to ensure consistent messages.
2. **Mission statement.** A mission statement defines the company's reason for existence, guiding the actions of the organization. It provides the framework for all business strategies and decisions, including crisis response.
3. **Positioning.** This is where a company needs to empathize with how the public perceives the crisis. If responsible, apologizing immediately wins sympathy and allies. Crisis-response messaging should be planned for these situations:

- Unauthorized procedures,
- Misuse of confidential information,
- Errors in judgment and honest mistakes,
- Attacks from hostile competition.

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4. **Media procedure.** The PR director's strong relationships with the media will help in the midst of a crisis. The PR staff should know how to handle the barrage of inquiries via telephone and social media. In today's digital environment, the best source for updates and new information can be an organization's Web site. In the event of a physical disaster, an off-site media center should be predetermined. All spokespeople should be media trained.
5. **Prepared statements.** Statements and news releases include the answers to who, what, where and when in response to a crisis. Demonstrating immediate concern along with an action plan will have a positive impact on public opinion.
6. **Message mapping.** It is imperative to anticipate every possible question in order to construct the best answers. This reinforces the public's confidence and trust. For example, in the event of a railroad train collision, prepare to answer the following:

- Cause of the crash and location,
- Number killed or injured,
- Number of survivors,
- Nature of injuries suffered,
- Care given to injured and where they are located,
- Rescues in progress, blocked escapes,
- Evacuations, shelter, relocation,
- Testimony of participants,
- Testimony of witnesses,
- Responders from other agencies,
- The number of rescuers and where they came from,
- Prominent members of the response team,
- Special equipment used,
- Delays or interference with the rescue,
- Property saved or lost,
- Acts of heroism,
- Only releasing the identity of victims to first of kin—not the mass media.

7. **Key audiences.** Prepare a list of constituents and tailor statements to address specific stakeholders, such as:

- Local, national, global, digital and vertical media,
- Employees,
- Shareholders, analysts, bankers, stockbrokers and investors,
- Customers,
- Community organizations,
- Distributors, wholesalers, retailers and consumers,
- Suppliers, trade associations, strategic alliances and licensees,
- Legislative, regulatory, judicial and government,
- Special audiences, including the physically challenged, minorities, senior citizens and religious groups.

It is important to note that "no comment" is never the right answer. In the face of uncertainty, admit that you lack answers and explain what actions you have underway to find out more information. Most professional news reporters appreciate the fact that you will work with them as you gather pertinent information. There are also situations where you may have to say, "Due to litigation, we are not at liberty to discuss the situation." These words are substantially different from "no comment" or, even worse, avoiding the media.

If at fault, deal with the situation immediately and take responsibility for your part. Delay, default and denial are weapons the public and media will wield against you. Being honorable and responsible does not automatically place you at a disadvantage with your audience. It means apologizing and making things right. Thoughtful advice from legal counsel and communications staff can go a long way. Constituents will use multiple methods to double- or triple-check your message and your responses to their questions. Formulate your responses through considering:

- This is what we know,
- This is what we do not know,
- This is what is uncertain.

Framing, Bridging And Transitioning

Crises, disasters and emergencies have tremendous emotional impact. The way you frame a message can either reassure or elevate concern. If announcing a warning message about a flood, it is reassuring to hear, "Water is approaching the flood stage, but the levies are holding, which will prevent considerable damage." This brief notification addresses the warning, framed with an optimistic update.

Many audiences have no fixed opinion about an organization or public figure until a crisis occurs. The way the message is framed (by responders and crisis communicators) plays a significant role in winning people over or alienating them. Once an audience forms its opinion, it is difficult to alter.

Framing influences people who have not yet made up their minds. Properly framed written and verbal statements have to be balanced, honest, relevant, timely, reliable and accurate. Framing can present bad news with compassion. Consider two different presentations with very different framing. Which of these medically equivalent MDs would you choose based on message framing?

- Oncologist Dr. Davis, a gruff and experienced MD, enters the patient's room and says, "The kind of cancer you have is inoperable (Frame 1). Radiation will be ineffective (Frame 2). Traditional chemo is useless (Frame 3). Experimental treatments have a 45% chance of failing (Frame 4). What do you want to do?"

Now consider this:

- Oncologist Dr. Roberts bounces in and says, "Hello, how are you feeling this morning? I studied your chart carefully and we are going to attack this. The FDA has given us permission to run human trials on a new drug. The results are encouraging. About 55% of the patients treated with this drug experienced a four-month remission and 35% a six-month remission (Frame 1). Dr. Johnson was correct in his assessment that traditional treatment will not work (Frame 2). But breakthroughs come each day and we can manage your pain while you have time with your family (Frame 3). Let's move forward as a team and do our best to beat this thing."

Framing messages for TV news is essential, especially in response to a negative situation. One Friday night at a large **Playboy** media event, Hugh Hefner was seen smooching with young, attractive blondes. At that time he had not yet announced his separation from his wife. A master of framing messages, Hefner understood the urgency to announce his legal separation publicly before the news of the make-out sessions went public.

For media interviews, frame a message properly through the "bridge" and "transition" techniques. As demonstrated in this situation, transitional phrases connect the answer to the interviewer's question:

Bloomberg Television reporter: How do you explain your company's dwindling sales for three consecutive quarters since your appointment as CEO?"

CEO: "I agree with you, Linda, that our company's financials have been disappointing [non-defensive connect] and publicly traded companies face the challenge of reporting quarter by quarter, which doesn't reflect longer-term planning [bridge to the positive message]. We have hired a new management team and have made significant operational cutbacks. This will have a positive impact on performance.""

The tips shared in this article should help with simple pre-planning for a crisis situation. People have a tendency to think that they—or their businesses—are bulletproof. Companies ranging in size from a sole roprietorship to a large corporation should acknowledge risk and accept responsibility for safety, security, corporate sustainability, image and credib ility. PRN

Cindy Rakowitz is the CEO of Blackman Rakowitz Public Relations. She has more than 25 years of experience in marketing, communications and public relations and was previously a division president for Playboy Enterprises.

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Crisis Tale: Under Intense Fire, Communicator Puts Out PR Blaze

By PR News Editors

It is a typical 9 a.m. (Atlantic Standard Time) workday morning on Oct. 19, 2011 at **Canaport LNG**, a state-of-the-art liquefied natural gas receiving and regasification terminal in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada.

Typical until management is alerted to a fire at a petroleum company that borders Canaport's property.

As the first liquified natural gas terminal of its kind in Canada, fire is not Canaport's friend. Hearing the news from Canaport's incident manager, Kate Shannon, the company's media relations director, moves to the Emergency Operations Center—one of Canaport's large conference rooms. In the room are Canaport's management team, including Fraser Forsythe, director of operations and incident manager during crises. It will be critical that Shannon and Forsythe work together for a successful conclusion to the crisis. "I have to coordinate operations and make the calls to emergency services, but it's important to integrate those actions with communications," says Forsythe.

9:30 a.m.: After soaking up as much information as possible within the emergency operations center, Shannon meets her goal of issuing a press release within a half hour of the first call. Targeting the local press, partners and stakeholders (including local government officials), the release covers the basic facts: There is a fire from a neighboring property that could threaten the Canaport facility; all emergency steps are in place, including calls to police, fire and ambulance personnel.

> PR during a crisis is still treated as an afterthought. On top of that, many organizations still don't have crisis plans at all from which to draw.

9:35 a.m.: Shannon calls each of Canaport LNG'stsven familieis living in the near vicinity to give an update.

9:45 a.m.: The the fire is now spreading—getting closer to crossing into Canaport LNG's boundaries and near its tanks and lines. Shannon starts revising the first release to reflect the update.

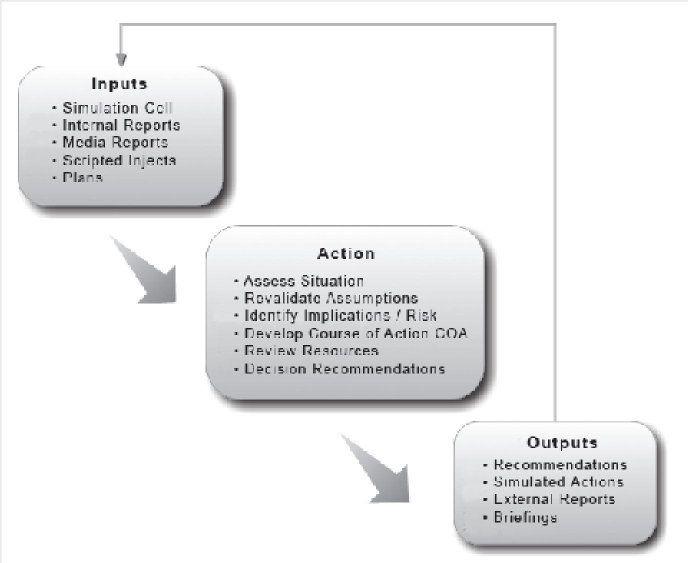
Shannon checks with her communications response team of three, set up in one corner of the emergency operations center, which helps take calls while monitoring Twitter and Facebook chatter.

10 a.m.: A member of the local media shows up at Canaport LNG's main gate, confronting security and insisting on access to shoot video of the fire. Shannon drives to the location, and directs the media crew to the best possible vantage point—without breaching the facility's tight security perimeter. The updated news release goes out.

10:30 a.m.: Back at the operations center, the calls are coming fast and furious. One of them is from a neighbor. They don't have a car, and are worried if they have to evacuate. Shannon lets them know that if that time comes, they will have transportation away from the terminal.

10:45 a.m.: A father calls, frustrated in his

Crisis Drills: A Three-Step Process



When crisis consultancy Blue Water Partners takes corporate clients through its comprehensive—and Web-based—crisis exercise, it first tells participants what they can expect in going through the process, which includes inputs, action and outputs.

Source: Blue Water Partners

inability to contact his daughter, who works at the plant. Shannon works to get them connected.

11 a.m.: The fire department is now getting the upper hand on the blaze, which Shannon is happy to report in her next briefing.

11:30 a.m.: The entire Canaport team listens to a local TV news special report of the fire. The station's information is on the mark.

12 noon: The fire is close to being completely out—all that is left is scorched earth that has come a bit too close to the Canaport facility.

For Shannon, it's been a good day. Performing under pressure and discovering strengths and weaknesses is a positive thing, she says. And, she'll be more prepared than ever for the "real thing."

Real thing? This was actually a crisis drill, engineered via an online application created by **Blue Water Partners**, a company that creates and executes "corporate war games." The application is designed to be as real as a drill can get and involve as many staff, partners and key stakeholders as needed. Burton says up to 90 people have participated in a Blue Water drill.

And "war games" is apropos, considering the experience of Rob Burton, Blue Water's director of risk management and the person who creates the games. Burton has served as a crisis management consultant in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and before that was in the U.K. Special Forces, where he admits that military drills featured bullets whizzing by participants. Organizations' crisis plans need to be tested under fire, says Burton—though not in the literal sense. "Crisis plans are living documents," he says. "They need to be built into an organization's system, and they must be tested regularly."

There are some challenges unique to PR when it comes to these drills, says David Kalson, CEO of Ricochet PR, which has partnered with Blue Water to handle the PR aspects of the drills.

One of the biggest PR hurdles? "Just to be in the room," says Kalson. "PR during a crisis is still treated as an afterthought." On top of that, many organizations still don't have crisis plans at all from which to draw.

For Shannon, the drill was an improvement over one deployed a year before. Information was flowing more freely from other sources, like HR and communications, she says.

And while Blue Water provides realistic "injects" that take a crisis to the next levels—including simulated TV broadcasts, social media posts, and even live "actors" breaching security fences—Shannon says it's tough for communicators to fully realize the intensity of emergency situations. That's why she feels strongly about PR's involvement in the planning of crisis exercises.

As for the results of Canaport's drill, Forsythe has just received an initial report on the drill created by two outside firms. A more formal, final report comes later, which gets shared with government agencies.

Besides making an organization more crisis-ready, Burton sees another value of these drills: "Simply bringing people within an organization together who may not have much contact otherwise is very beneficial," he says. Now that situation is a crisis in and of itself. PRN

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The Media Orchestra: Interpreting The Interplay of Media Types in a Crisis

By Eric Koefoot, Chris Bolster and Sam Neer

In today's media landscape, there are many potential flashpoints from which a crisis can originate and—equally importantly—many mechanisms to facilitate its spread across media formats. Perhaps the trigger is as simple as a misinterpreted comment by your CEO that has lit up Twitter. Maybe it is a YouTube video showing misuse of your product that has gone viral and is suddenly generating thousands of views.

Or maybe the crisis was slower to come to a boil, like a customer's rant in the blogosphere gradually shared across social media until a mainstream journalist picks it up and blasts it nationwide. When these events happen, your normal day quickly stretches to a 24-hour marathon.

The digital media environment has permanently changed the environment in which crisis communications professionals operate. Three of the more vexing problems that have resulted from the new environment include:

- **Difficulty maintaining an up-to-date view of the influencers in a particular subject area.** The days of knowing the key influencers by looking at the byline of the local or national newspaper are long gone. The key influencers who impact the industry and the key issues that matter to you are scattered across many different media channels, and they have diverse audiences and followings that reach niche audiences that did not even exist 10 years ago.
- **The absence of an effective (ideally predictive) early warning system.** Sharing and amplification across social media is becoming the norm, and coverage can spread like wildfire under your radar if you are not paying attention. Unless you understand and harness these sharing tools yourself, your chances of successfully intervening are significantly reduced. Like a bucket brigade combating a forest fire on a windy day, you are at the mercy of powerful forces.
- **The unmet need for a cross-media perspective on influence and the propagation of a story.** The flow of information and opinions today is vastly more complex, so a holistic view of the media landscape is becoming critical to addressing any issue. A "siloed" approach can no longer do the job, and the crisis professional must understand and manage a complex mix of constituents and media types.

> Responding quickly and effectively during a crisis is difficult because there is no clear indication of which influencers should be targeted for engagement and advocacy.

Who Has The True Influence?

Anyone can now make his/her voice heard. The advent of social media has considerably expanded the set of people who could become influencers. Despite this, many companies do not yet have a consistent approach to identifying and managing influencers across traditional, social and

Questions To Ask For a Quick Crisis Response

During a crisis, communications teams need to assess the situation quickly in order to effectively focus efforts and resources. Many data points need to be collected, distilled and regularly updated with speed and accuracy in order to keep the team's response focused on the right leverage points and to assess the effectiveness of the team's intervention.

Some key questions to answer when in crisis include:

- **How much traction is the issue getting across social media?** Is it still gaining momentum, or has it peaked—and can we let it die out on its own?
- **Is cross-pollination among media channels contributing to the spread of the issue?** Is it still contained in social media, or has it broken out into other channels? Or after starting in traditional media, has it transitioned to social media as a "cause"?
- **Who are the most important influencers on this issue/topic?** Which of these influencers have reacted, and which have so far remained silent on the issue (and thus may still be influenced)?
- **What are the best channels to use to address the crisis?** Can our response to this issue benefit from sharing using social media?
- **Is our team prepared with the right information and insights to quickly respond to the right audiences using the right channels during a crisis?**

— Eric Koefoot, Chris Bolster and Sam Neer

broadcast media. Teams are often organized by media type, making it more difficult to see patterns across media and to identify the most important influencers. Responding quickly and effectively during a crisis is difficult because there is no clear indication of which influencers should be targeted for engagement and advocacy.

These days, most journalists and other influencers are producing complimentary content across multiple media platforms. A Twitter star may have a YouTube outlet account for multimedia, while a well-known journalist may have a Twitter account or personal blog to break news or offer deeper personal opinions free of some level of editorial oversight. Digital influencers frequently use multiple channels to share and amplify their opinions. Crisis-targeting efforts must adapt to this new world.

Playing on a New Field

So what is a crisis professional to do? First and foremost, influencer tracking and analytics should be implemented across all key media channels to identify and determine who really matters to the organization. Crisis preparedness should include compiling a list of influencers by topic in advance, so the team will be able to swiftly focus on a short list for outreach in the early stages of a crisis.

Teams need to measure all influencers using a consistent methodology. That is not to say media type shouldn't impact the level of influence assigned to a person, but it does mean the entire ecosystem must be considered (and various outlets properly weighed) before accurate conclusions can be drawn. Influence within a particular field or subject does not automatically extend to others.

When planning outreach, other factors that should go into a comprehensive influencer metric include their most discussed topics, frequency of writing, the prominence of their primary outlet(s) and the range of their coverage across media types (as well as influence within each). Such data can provide a powerful, actionable set of targets to act on in a crisis.

Social Momentum

Your crisis strategy often depends on how much attention coverage is getting. Sometimes a top negative story just fizzles and fades, and you're happy to just let it go. Then there is that really bad story that just won't die. During a crisis, understanding and tracking conversations around

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the key topics is vital to narrowing your team's focus to the items that need the most attention and action.

Recent advances in social media have given users the ability to quickly amplify opinions of their peers, creating a “social momentum” that can blindside the best communications teams if they have limited their focus to traditional media. If a crisis breaks for your organization, and suddenly it is all over Facebook and Twitter, people may post rants and get dozens, hundreds or even thousands of likes and shares. In the Twitter world, abrasive 140 character comments are being re-tweeted across the Web like a spreading wildfire.

It is critical to recognize that it is not just social media itself that warrants attention. Often it is the interplay among postings that gives you the actionable early warning you need. Concentrating on the key influencers in the social sphere is vital, but it is often more important to identify the specific content catching fire. As you observe the likes, shares and retweets, drill down to find the influencer(s) that started it all. This is a logical place to begin your counter-offensive. When you address the issue at the source, rather than focusing on the side-effects or collateral damage, you may be able to create a second “follow-on wave” of positive reaction based on your thoughtful response to the issue.

Once the origin of the negative posting has been established, your next actions should leverage the same sharing tools that initially enabled the problem to spread. Taking advantage of the same chain of media sharing can be an effective method to touch many of the people (including influencers) who were exposed to the original problem coverage as it spread.

Your crisis team needs to be well-versed in a variety of social sharing tools and have an appropriate plan of action (and established accounts) for each one. They should practice with these tools often enough that they don’t have to learn them on the fly during a crisis. With a media-savvy communications team, a rapid response in social media is an important first step of a smart, well-orchestrated response to a problem, and a conciliatory and informative post or Tweet can begin to win over those with negative opinions.

The proper understanding of the sharing of social media is vital to creating a smart, appropriate crisis management response using the same tools that contributed to the crisis in the first place.

The Conductor’s Toolkit

In many organizations today, crisis management involves segmenting coverage by media type; traditional, social and broadcast are all separate data sources, analysis tools, and analytical approaches, and in many cases they are managed by different teams (and sometimes even different departments). Traditional (offline or online) media relations usually falls under the communications team, while with surprising frequency responsibility for social media can be shared among the communications team and the often much larger marketing and customer care groups.

This approach poses a challenge to properly coordinating strategy and activities, a factor that is only compounded in a crisis. Each group identifies its own influencers to target, and some of the same people can be active in both traditional and social media. The difficulties in coordination certainly can result in wasteful, duplicative effort. But perhaps even more concerning, they can lead to a missed understanding of what position the influencer is taking on an issue and even which influencers the communications team should focus its limited resources on.

In order to avoid this missed opportunity to understand the reach and distribution of key influencers, PR teams must begin to take a holistic view of the media landscape, recognizing both the power and authority of traditional media and the publishing and sharing power of social media. Studying these different media types together can build a more robust and accurate view of where teams should focus in a crisis.

Any tools that teams implement should help them understand which influencers are acting in multiple media channels, what they write about, how they share coverage and how broadly they are published, shared and followed. Using sophisticated monitoring tools, teams can isolate the influential conversations, target the right people across multiple channels and ultimately react more quickly and effectively in a crisis.

Sometimes the conversations that matter can be a surprisingly small slice of the total volume of coverage—particularly in the critical period just before or after the crisis materializes. If you want to detect these problems early, be sure to look for tools that can strip out the meaningless noise and detect the fainter signals that often precede a full-blown crisis.

Bringing It All Together

The changes in the media landscape over the last five years require us as crisis communications professionals to adapt our tools and approaches to dealing with crises in new and innovative ways.

We need to understand how issues get momentum in social media, and effectively use those same tools to address the problem. And we need to understand the interplay between media channels and use it to surgically intervene to help get the crisis under control. The many types and forms of media, like instruments, have unique characteristics to contribute, and in the hands of a well-equipped conductor they can be brought into a pleasant harmony. PRN

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Six Important Tips For Message Clarity

By David Hamlin

Getting the media and those they inform to understand the elements of a crisis and your response to that crisis right away is easier when one simple premise is applied: The audience is composed of total strangers. Once you understand that you're talking to strangers—people who don't have your background or knowledge and are considering the crisis for the first time—the vocabulary rules become obvious:

1. **Junk the jargon:** While attorneys and legal beat reporters know exactly what a "TRO" is, the rest of the world doesn't. Use "temporary restraining order" instead, at least for the first usage. Better yet, define it in context: "Our client does not believe that there is any need to restrain sales of their products temporarily or permanently."
2. **Ax the acronyms:** You may know what a NOFA is, but most folks don't. "Notice of Funds Availability" is a perfect example of insider vocabulary. Even in cases where the acronym is reasonably familiar–EPA, ACLU, SPCA–a segment of the audience doesn't know or has forgotten what those shorthand versions mean. Acronyms can also lead to confusion, since similarly named entities are commonplace (California Environmental Protection Agency, Hartford SPCA, Illinois ACLU). Full definitions help the audience.
3. **Illuminate:** Saying "...the First Amendment will be violated..." is less effective than saying "...the First Amendment right to freedom of assembly will be violated..." The first is ambiguous—free speech, free press or the right to petition? The second helps everyone understand the precise nature of the dispute.
4. **Fill in the blanks:** Don't assume that strangers exposed to your statements share the same base of knowledge. Your clients may know to an absolute certainty that their actions were perfectly legitimate, but if you don't say so, many will inevitably wonder why. Don't leave room for anyone to fill in the blanks.
5. **Craft carefully:** A simple preposition can lead to significant misinformation. A "demonstration in Chicago" is not the same as a "demonstration through Chicago." One stays put with modest disruption, and the other is a traffic snarling, logistically challenging parade. Since initial statements may well define the issues, there is a significant advantage to be gained; by writing and speaking with extraordinary precision, the crisis can be defined on your terms.
6. **Share and share alike:** Before you release anything, make sure you have communicated with strangers effectively—share your communication with someone outside the communications team. Even under time pressure, take a moment to present your statement to a colleague who is not familiar with the crisis. Ask them to tell you what they read or heard. If the answer isn't exactly the message you seek to communicate, fix it—spending weeks or months trying to correct misinformation or incorrect impressions is far more challenging than getting it right, right away. PRN

David Hamlin is partner at Weisman Hamlin Public Relations in Los Angeles. He has worked on crisis campaigns for law firms, associations and nonprofits.

Blood on The Floor or Name Adored? Choose Your Spokespeople Wisely

By Jane Jordan-Meier

At no time is an organization more vulnerable than when a crisis strikes. Crises are defining moments for organizations and their leaders. They are "make it or break it moments."

Rudy Giuliani became a national hero as New York mayor on September 11, 2001. President George W. Bush's slide began when he took three days to properly respond to hurricane Katrina. Tony Hayward was sidelined not long after his now infamous "I want my life back" quote during the disastrous **BP** oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

As the legendary businessman Jack Welch, former CEO and chairman of **General Electric,** said, "there is always 'blood on the floor' in a crisis and typically someone pays with his or her job."

Communicating in a crisis is not for the faint-hearted or the untrained. In a crisis, you need speed, decisiveness, authority and often significant courage. Welch says that even those who are "extraordinarily gifted" try to make the problem "disappear" by giving it to someone else to solve. Indeed, not the best strategy.

The choice of spokesperson is a critical component for effective crisis management in this age of what Ian Mitroff, Professor Emeritus at the **University of Southern California** calls, the "super crisis."

Crises have the potential to destroy entire industries, bring down governments and adversely affect large regions of the globe. We now know that protests organized via Facebook can topple governments.

And crises today are not only bigger, costlier and deadlier, but they come at us faster and faster.

So who makes the best spokesperson? For many, the default is the CEO. After all, the CEO is (or should be) the most prized communications asset at a company's disposal. He or she drives corporate strategy and gives voice to performance and progress. The CEO establishes the building blocks of corporate culture and is often the public face of the company. They exemplify all that is good, bad, promising or disheartening about an organization. So when the CEO takes ownership of a crisis, and is the vehicle for the response, the reputation stakes rise dramatically.

> Communicating in a crisis is not for the faint-hearted or the untrained.

The bottom line is this:

- Is the CEO capable of connecting with stakeholders in a compelling, compassionate manner?

It is a matter of credibility. As Martin Newman said in his report, 'Shaken not Stirred', for **The Company Agency** (London, 2008), "People are much quicker at spotting inconsistencies when times are tough. CEOs should never underestimate that every twitch of their facial expression is interpreted. When people are looking at leaders, they are constantly trying to interpret them in ways that are often subliminal."

It would be unthinkable that the president or CEO wouldn't speak nor be present when an event is as devastating as the Fort Hood shootings or Joplin tornadoes, or when there are serious questions about national security, or the safety of employees and consumers. Alan Joyce, CEO of Australia's iconic national airline,

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Qantas, was quick to defend its safety and reputation during its Airbus troubles in 2010. Notably, **Rolls Royce**, the makers of the engine that blew apart on a Qantas A380 Airbus, said very little.

Often, the presence of the CEO conveys that the situation is serious enough to impact the company's future. In this light, the CEO can fuel the bushfire rather than dampen the flames. Think of Tony Hayward's performance during the disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Questions When Determining Crisis Communication Spokespeople

Rushing the CEO to the front lines is easy. But my advice is to think very carefully about the issues at hand and the long-term implications when and if the CEO is put out front.

As a basic rule, go for the person that is most credible, most believable, most authentic and has the genuine interest of the affected community at heart. Will they pass "the grace under fire" question? Are they believable in that first nanosecond?

Research shows that it takes just a staggering 115 milliseconds for us to make a judgment based on body language. "Phony expressions usually do not fool us," says Professor Beatrice de Gelder, a cognitive neuroscientist at **Tilburg University** in the Netherlands and **Harvard Medical School**.

Generally, the best spokesperson is local, accountable and likeable (read likeable as respected and perceived to be competent).

Recent research shows that, to be trusted in a crisis, stakeholders have to perceive an organization and/or leader as having a high degree of competency.

Strong actions, demonstrating empathy and compassion will earn respect. Actions speak louder than words—especially in a crisis.

However, if your crisis is truly a show-stopping event and the company's reputation is clearly on the line (e.g., there have been multiple deaths, the scale of the crisis is huge), then it's imperative that the head of the organization is quickly on the scene, getting their hands dirty and talking with the affected people. They may know less, but their physical presence sends two powerful messages: "I care and I am accountable."

Selecting a Crisis Spokesperson

Core leadership values in recent years have focused on moving away from command and control to principles grounded in persuasion, enablement and empowerment. Here are the guiding principles to help with selection of a crisis spokespeople. Can you tick the following boxes for your designated spokespeople? If not, then think again.

Are they authentic, genuine and convincing in what they say.

- ❏ Keep emotions under control.
- ❏ Speak persuasively.
- ❏ Think fast and formulate clear, succinct answers.
- ❏ Work under intense pressure.
- ❏ Handle the anxiety of standing before cameras.
- ❏ Command a high level of respect.
- ❏ Talk in simple, every day, jargon-free language.
- ❏ Use positive, active language rather than default to negative, toxic language.
- ❏ Know their stuff and exude confidence.
- ❏ Understand the needs of the media and are media trained.
- ❏ Be prepared to rehearse and speak to a "script."
- ❏ Are they truth tellers.

Excerpt from: The Four Highly Effective Stages of Crisis Management: How to Manage the Media in the Digital Age

Training and Support

So should you decide you need the CEO there because the scale and the potential damage to reputation are just too big, then make sure that he/she is very well trained and prepared. It should be obvious, but please never, ever let the CEO out without serious, professional and regular training and coaching.

At media conferences:

- Back up the CEO with relevant operational managers who can supply the more concrete details of the crisis—the boat captains, the engineers, the factory supervisors, etc.
- The CEO is there to say they're accountable, they

take responsibility to make sure that everything will be done to fix the problem and, above all, to provide empathy and demonstrate genuine concern, particularly at the beginning of a crisis.

- It is the role of the front-line management, not the CEO, to provide the finer details of the recovery and response. They can speak to the technical and operational aspects better than most CEOs can.

Since engagement is created by mid-level employees with serious knowledge of products and less perceived bias to exaggeration, test, test and retest your spokespeople. Train like your very life depended on it—it might. Scenario-based crisis training is critical. It will bring bad or weak elements to light. Cross-train for multiple roles so that you have maximum flexibility in a crisis and, more importantly, a deeper coverage of responsibilities.

Remember the Boy Scout's motto, "be prepared." Know your values, know the end game and, most of all, know how your key spokespeople will act. Remember, they will default to type and you will want to test that "default" mechanism before the crisis hits. PRN

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Put Potential Victims First, Organization Second in a Crisis Plan

By Jennifer Miller

You see it all the time. Organizations that should know better fail to prepare for the one threat that could take down their business: a crisis. To be clear, this isn't just a bad day at the office, the loss of a client or a customer who can't be satisfied. This is an event or issue that creates victims and has the potential to damage the organization's reputation and likely impair the way you do business.

It Doesn't Need to be That Way

You can't prepare for a crisis while you are having one. You need to have a plan and you need to train your team to use it. Thick, all-encompassing dusty manuals that sit on the top shelf really aren't much good in the adrenaline-fueled moments of a crisis. Your plan needs to be something you can implement immediately.

Think of a crisis plan as a comprehensive and managed approach to every aspect of a crisis. It includes the makeup of your crisis team (which, by the way, should not mirror the leadership team). At a minimum, a good crisis plan includes a first-hour response checklist, a buy-time statement, emergency contacts and a method for engaging via social media.

The first hour is often called the "golden hour." It is when most organizations make their biggest mistakes. They focus solely on the operational issues, at the expense of identifying with victims and engaging the news media.

In a crisis, you must certainly continue operations. The advantage of a crisis team, however, is that is not their job. The crisis team's job is to manage the crisis, identify victims, reach out to them and communicate with key audiences and news media.

> The questions reporters throw at you may seem fairly innocuous, but they are the gateway to a larger, more probing interview.

The Victims

There are three types of victims: people, animals and the environment. Most audiences will judge your organization by how you manage the victim aspect of a crisis. For example, in the case of an oil spill, if you clean up the spill but fail to acknowledge that people were inconvenienced and the environment was damaged, then you're missing the point.

Step One: Determine who has been affected and reach out to them.

Often times, when it comes to the victims of a crisis, the best question to ask is, "What is the right thing to do?" In cases of injuries or fatalities, you will want to assign a victim liaison to each individual victim. In those cases, you might not be able to make things right, so offer services and provide comfort. Ask, "What do you need?" "Would you like us to arrange to pick up the children, walk the dog, drive you somewhere, call a friend?"

1. **The Buy-Time Statement.** The buy-time statement buys your organization time in the initial stage of a crisis. Almost anyone from your organization can deliver it, as long as he/she delivers the statement and does not take questions afterward. Here's a template for such a statement.
   "My name is ___________________ and I am with _________________. I can confirm that there has been an incident regarding (limited, non-speculative facts such as time, place and nature of incident). We want to help you with your story, but we need to gather the facts before saying anything. I don't have enough information to answer your questions. I know we all want to get the story right. Our spokesperson will be back in contact with you within 60 minutes to give you an update. All briefings will come from this media center."

   — Jennifer Miller

2. **The Role of the Spokesperson.** Not everyone is fit to be a spokesperson. Spokespeople need to be articulate, cool under pressure and unflappable. Beyond being able to stand up to the glare of the news media's spotlight, spokespeople should create key messages and anticipate questions in advance.In most cases, reporters' questions in the early stages of a crisis will call for speculation. Rather than speculating or saying "no comment," tell them why you can't comment. Here are some examples of often used, and accurate, responses in the early stage of a crisis:
   "That's part of the investigation."
   "That is a personnel matter."
   "That information will have to come from the proper authorities."
   "That's private information and we respect people's privacy."
   "I don't know."

   — Jennifer Miller

3. **The Reporter's Point of View.** Reporters love covering crises where organizations have failed to train their teams to deliver a buy-time or hold statement. The poor company's managers "plan" was to respond to the media the way it always did, thinking "If we have a crisis only our spokesperson will talk to the news media." Do you really believe the news media are going to wait?
   Reporters will go wherever they need to go to get the story. The sneakier and more resourceful they are, the better. They are aware that they are supposed to wait for the official spokesperson, but they don't care. Reporters feed off your disorganization like sharks in a tank; circling for that moment of weakness, such as an employee's off-the-cuff remark, an overheard conversation, revealing body language or, better yet, a lone employee leaving the office.
   Reporters move in charmingly or, if necessary, aggressively. Why wait for the "official spokesperson" when they have this person in front of them? A lower-level employee working the front lines—who was an eyewitness to the company's mishap and may know the victims—will do just fine. Reporters prey upon your lack of preparation to get the information, quote and sound bites they need, all before the "official spokesperson" ever shows up.

   — Jennifer Miller

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If the crisis is ongoing or lasting several hours, impair the way you do business.

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If the crisis is ongoing or lasting several hours, then consider providing for victims' basic needs. Ensure people are comfortable, that the facilities are appropriate and food and beverages are available.

Finally, communicate with them. Don't keep the victims in the dark. Let them know what is going on. In a crisis, more than ever, you need to maintain your credibility. You may not have the answers to most questions and you shouldn't speculate, but you can't lie.

The Media

The media calls a crisis "breaking news." Crises are like unexpected gifts from the news god. They make the job interesting. And they provide a platform for reporters who, by their nature, are very competitive, to battle it out for the top spot. Crises also put pressure on news outlets to get the story first and not miss any aspects of it.

When an alert crosses the wires, the newsroom receives a tip, or an emergency call is picked up by the scanner, and reporters hone in on the distress signals. They gather around the assignment desk pleading, "Pick me! Pick me!" to newsroom managers selecting the team to cover the Big Story.

As the crew heads to the scene of the crisis, newsroom management monitors coverage and suggests locations, people and angles to get the best story. Newsrooms often send more than one team to cover catastrophes. Once in the field, reporters and photographers jockey for position. It's a competition. The team with the best visuals, the most compelling interviews and the most accurate information wins.

Step Two: Engage the news media.

This is where you come in. You can ignore themedia and simply tell reporters, "We're in themidst of getting this figured out and we can't talk right now. Stay back." Or, you can engage withthem. One of the best practices is to employ a buytimestatement as soon as members of the mediabegin to show interest. It is a simple idea, but often overlooked.

The buy-time statement does exactly what it says: It buys you time in a crisis. In a crisis, the buy-time statement, sometimes called the "hold statement," allows you to address the news media and acknowledge the situation. It tells the media you don't have enough information to answer their questions, but that you will be back to them with updates in a certain amount of time (15-60 minutes). It also tells the media where they need to be in order to receive live, in-person updates from your organization's spokesperson. Most important, the buy-time statement lets reporters know that you are going to engage with them. This is critical. When reporters sense you are not going to cooperate and provide information, they will go elsewhere for it. Chances are the people who are willing to talk to reporters about your crisis—what went wrong and why it went wrong—are not your friends. You need to engage directly with the media. Warning: There is a catch. The buy-time statement only works if you use it properly. This is where our human tendency to help others gets in the way. Upon delivering the statement, prepare to pivot and walk away. Don't pause and nonverbally ask, "okay?" Reporters will seize on that opportunity. In fact, good reporters aren't going to let you deliver the buy-time statement and then walk off. They will throw questions at you. So prepare to reiterate, "I don't have enough information to answer your questions; our spokesperson will be back in touch with you once we have information that we can confirm." If you begin answering questions, you've defeated the purpose of the buy-time statement. Instead of giving a hold statement, you're now giving an interview.

Here is why this can be so tricky. The questions reporters throw at you may seem fairly innocuous, and perhaps some are, but they are the gateway to a larger, more probing interview. Skilled reporters use the information to lay the foundation for their story, to lead them to other sources or to hold against you when there is conflicting information. The buy-time statement nets you about 15-60 minutes, but eventually you'll need to present a spokesperson.

News media can get very aggressive in a crisis. The good news, however, is that the media will act in a predictable way. They try to get close to the action, they interview anyone, they seek out third parties, research past incidents and they ask you to speculate.

The media want to know what happened, how this happened and why it happened. They want a timeline of events, and will ask you to paint of picture of the event. Don't fall for it. In the early stages of a crisis, most questions cause you to speculate. Rather than speculate, say why youcannot answer the question. "That's part of the investigation" is the proper response for many questions.

Spokespersons are well served if you prepare a few, good key messages in advance of talking to the media. These messages should be true, useful statements that you can back up if necessary. Key messages are high-level statements that address the victim dimension of the crisis, but leave no room for speculation. In many cases, you can prepare key messages before the crisis even occurs. For example, if there has been an incident where an injury or worse has occurred, saying "We place the highest value on the safety of our employees and the public," can be useful no matter what the facts reveal. It's a statement about who you are, not what happened.

Although your inclination may be to preserve your reputation, self-serving key messages do more harm than good. Instead, express compassion for the victims, reiterate your commitment to the investigation and stress that you place the highest value on safety. Think of who your audience is and what they care about. Speak to that. As an example, another strong message is, "Our focus right now is

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taking care of the needs of those who have been impacted by this event." This will also speak to the concerns of your audience.

The Inevitable

It bears repeating: That big, thick, allencompassing dusty manual sitting on the top shelf in your office isn't a bit of good if you can't really use it. And to know how well it will —or won't— work, you need to train your team. Training means taking four to eight hours out of everyone's day for an exercise they believe they will probably never use, but a real crisis is going to cost a lot more than a few hours, especially if it's mishandled.

Step Three: Train your team.

Good crisis training involves the creation of a multi-layered realistic scenario that over the course of the session reveals plot twists, victims, "Oh No!" moments, multiple media engagements, snarky questions and aggressive reporters. Role-play training is where you'll begin to see chinks in the armor. Teams will revert to their instinct to duck and cover from the media and instead focus solely on operational issues. Employees—who are simply trying to appearhelpful—will speak to reporters and answer questions, but that pesky reporter just won't let them get away. In the end, the helpful employee might say something he shouldn't. Some reporters can be so charming! Especially when they want information and know that with a little more persistence, you'll give it to them. If they aren't charming, reporters may become aggressive and badger an unsuspecting employee until he or she gives in with information that likely is not based on fact.

Crisis training is where you discover your own vulnerabilities and find your voice. Yes, it can be stressful. But when crises strike, the training proves worth it. Many organizations, however, fail to see the value of good crisis training until it's too late. They pit an untrained crisis team against a band of surly reporters competing against one another for the best story, something reporters do every day, and the result can be a disaster. PRN

Jennifer Miller a senior counselor at Rockford Gray, a Denver -based communications firm, which specializes in crisis management planning and communications, media training, social media, presentation skills coaching and strategic communications. She has more than 15 years of news reporting experience, including seven years at CBS News.

Your Best Adviser for Crisis Planning: A Working TV Journalist

By Dick Pirozzolo and Barry Nolan

When PR firms develop crisis communication plans, they sometimes fall into the trap of repeating the old Madison Avenue story about how the ad agency created the perfect ads for a new dog food. The agency had designed the perfect logo and packaging, and the brand name was perfect along with the slogan.

The only problem was, the dogs didn't like the food.

The same goes for PR professionals who try to help their organizations or clients train for or handle a crisis without getting advice from current practicing TV journalists.

It’s a mistake to do all of the planning and executive training by working exclusively with other PR pros—many of whom may possess only rudimentary video skills. Of course, lots of PR pros are former journalists and feel they can handle it all on their own. But, no matter how savvy they once were as journalists, when they implement the campaign, they discover too late that they are out of touch with today’s newsrooms and 24/7 news cycle. Their crisis plan falls short: the journalists (the dogs) don't like it.

Bring in The TV Journalist

Input from a TV journalist who is current in today's broadcasting environment can take your client or chief executive to a far higher level of capability and deliver tremendous insight into how the crisis will look—not from the shareholders’ and management’s viewpoint—but from the journalists' perspective. If you do decide to hire a practicing journalist for training, rather than hiring one who used to be a reporter or anchor, look for journalists who do some training in addition to their daily or weekly appearances on broadcast or cable TV. One place to start is with people you see appearing on cable or broadcast TV as expert commentators or anchors.

> The higher the stakes, the more carefully and thoroughly you should prepare.

TV sometimes gets short shrift with so much focus today on social media. In addition to being up to the minute in TV, working TV journalists are also savvy when it comes to understanding the convergence—and interplay—between TV, social media and digital PR. This is especially true when the news is bad. Frankly, if you can master TV, working with bloggers, social media outlets, print journalists and radio hosts will become far more comfortable.

TV journalists also understand their media peers and their perspective on covering the news. Sometimes having a client hear it from a journalist rather than their own PR counselor adds credibility.

Two Camps

TV journalists know that the two biggest hurdles to a great TV appearance break down into two camps: Really bad reporters and really good

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reporters:

Really Bad Reporters. One of the things really bad reporters tend to do in a crisis involving a corporation is "play to the cheap seats." They will often incorporate either highly speculative or highly judgmental words and phrases into their questions. "Are you going to stop using 'pink slime' – yes or no?"

"Are you going to take measures to prevent such outrageously risky investments in the future that put the burden on the taxpayer?"

They will demand answers. They may talk very loudly with a kind of angry intensity that can aggravate your CEO. And if your CEO does get mad, or plays the victim card, the bad reporter will have won.

Bad reporters wish to appear to their audience as crusading truth tellers—even though it may be far too early to know the truth. The bad reporter wishes to appear unafraid of confronting those who have done something wrong with the horrid effects of their crime. What the bad reporter wants most of all, is to make someone powerful or famous get flustered, feel sorry for themselves or lose their temper. And that's because that's what makes great TV. It can go viral, be linked to on the Drudge Report, be uploaded to YouTube and be splashed out on Twitter in a matter of minutes.

Reporters who take this approach tend to be younger, working in smaller markets, or employed by news outlets with a known tabloid approach to story telling.

So, be ready. Take deep breaths—remember your happy place and do not lose your temper. Be ready to spot embedded negative assumptions in questions. In the example above—it is an embedded assumption that pink slime is a valid description of the lean meat trimmings that are a part of your product.

If someone uses this approach—calmly and thoughtfully point out the unproven assumptions of the question. You also don't have to answer speculative questions. "If it is shown that pink slime causes health problems, will you stop using it?"

In these cases, just bridge to a point you want to make, "The real importance is that children will be deprived of a nutritious product that …"

You don't have to share their assumptions. But you do have to share their wish to find out just what happened and what went wrong. Don't just deny all blame unless you know with iron bound certainty that it was not your fault. If you start feeling sorry for yourself—take a break. You are well paid, you have a nice car, a good job and a loving family. Saying, "I'd like my life back," while someone somewhere else is suffering will play

The Words We (Shouldn't) Use

People in business speak mostly to other business people, using words like "float" or "profit margin" or "executive compensation."

But when trouble comes, those words can grate on a public impacted by an oil spill, plant closing or having their credit card hacked. On-air training gives the PR counselor a chance to red flag the industry lingo before real interview occurs. The TV trainer can challenge the use of such terms to show how they can box in news source. For example, "What do you mean 'corporations are people'? What do they eat?"

Sometimes you just have to hit the answer head on: How many workers are being laid off. If you say, "It is an employee restructuring that will reduce the associate staffing in Boston by 4,000." The reporter will then ask, "How is an employee restructuring different from massive layoffs?" Better to call a layoff a layoff than let the answer linger for 10 seconds instead of 40 and then be repeated on YouTube.

There are some minefield words and phrases to avoid. Although they may play well to your "base of supporters" in a crisis, they signal to others a political position they may not share. And they will view any message with some distrust. A minor change in the wording can make your message more likely to be considered by a wider cross section of the public.

— Dick Pirozzolo and Barry Nolan

badly. Don't play the victim card.

Really Good Reporters. They have been there before. They know how to speak fluent corporatese. They understand your business and your industry, often specializing in finance, healthcare, heavy industry, religion—you name it. While waiting for your press conference to begin—they have already been gathering information. They have someone in the newsroom monitoring the competition and the 24/7 cable news shows and sending them text messages of the latest developments and updates on the damage that the crisis has caused. Disgruntled former employees are sending them tips.

They have already Googled your CEO. They can read a balance sheet and quarterly report and know what he made last year and what your corporate profits have been and they have read all of your press, bad and good. Don't try to baffle them with high-blown corporate speak or play the "if you understood business, you would be an executive and not a reporter," or "the media is just out to get us" card. They will take you apart. Remember the biggest lesson of Watergate. It's the cover-up that kills you.

If they ask you a question you can't answer—don't try to guess. Say: "That's a good question, I will find out the answer and I will get back to you." And then do it. If you don't, they will tear you apart. If you can't ever answer the question, explain why, "The case is being investigated," or "the answer would give our competition an unfair advantage."

Take a look at how Jamie Dimon responded to the loss of $2 billion by **JP Morgan Chase**. Dimon told NBC's *Meet the Press* that "We made a terrible, egregious mistake." Then he added, "There's almost no excuse for it." He shouldn't have used the modifier though. A simple: "There is no excuse for it." would have been better. Dimon, though, does get a solid B+.

Finally, feel the gravity of the situation—and let it show in your face, in your voice, and in your body language. If remorse is called for, show it, feel it and acknowledge it. And then be ready to do it again tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow. And know that being truly remorseful for the duration of a crisis is a lot harder than you can ever imagine.

Say This Not That

Instead of saying, "Over regulation," say, "Unnecessary rules."

Instead of saying, "We all have to take risks to have the energy we need" (during a nuclear meltdown), say, "To have the energy we all need, some level of risk is simply unavoidable."

Instead of saying, "average people," say, "hard-working American families."

Instead of saying, "hysteria" as in "hysteria over pink slime," say, "Understandable, yet unwarranted concerns."

Instead of saying, "The mainstream media," say, "in some carelessly written accounts" or, "inaccurate reports."

Instead of saying, "No Comment," say, "We are still looking in to all the facts in this case and will brief you at 3 p.m. when we know more." Or, bridge to the question you want to answer with, "The real issue in this situation is…"

Instead of saying, "Yes or No," keep in mind that one word answers won't make the cut or will live on in infamy. As with Newt Gingrich's answer regarding whether he thought Mitt Romney lied, "yes," instead of a one-word answer, explain what you mean.

Instead of saying, "Union bosses and rank and file," use the appropriate titles "executive director" or "president" and "managers." Don't make new enemies while you play to your friends for sympathy.

Instead of saying, "we are downsizing," say, "We are forced to make these painful changes if we hope to successfully compete." This approach expresses more of a "we are all in this together" message.

— Dick Pirozzolo and Barry Nolan

It Takes a Team

The higher the stakes, the more carefully

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and thoroughly you should prepare. Training should start before the crisis and be repeated at least annually. We recommend bringing in an experienced team of a PR consultant, a reporter/consultant and a video crew and essentially war-game the worst-case scenarios.

Have the crew tape aggressive interviews under a number of different circumstances and then review the results. Have them ambush your CEO in the parking lot. Have the CEO practice doing a remote interview where there is no human in the room—just the unblinking red eye above the camera lens. It is different than talking to a warm body. Successful communicators need to get used to it.

An experienced reporter will ask questions in a way that is designed to make you uncomfortable, questions you may not have thought of, questions you might not like. One of the things **NASA** used to do to train astronauts was to sit them in a simulator and just have them experience, again and again and again, the noise, vibration and the huge adrenaline surge of take-off. This was done so that when the real liftoff happened, no one was going to end up screaming, "Oh my God, what is that noise? We're all going to die!"

Bad Messaging

There's another component that comes entirely from the organization's side and it's called "really bad messaging." It can turn a manageable crisis into an unmitigated disaster.

Remember Katrina. Brownie did not really do a good job. Remember Bill Clinton. He did have sex with that woman. Remember Richard Nixon. Watergate was not a second rate burglary. Each statement was made for totally different reasons. And yet they are all similar. They seemed like good ideas to somebody at the time and they were not true. Never lie. Listen to criticism with patience and acknowledge the concerns of others with respect. Show remorse when others are suffering. Breathe deeply.

Everyone on the crisis response team should have a copy of a handy directory assembled in calmer times with the home and cell phone numbers of everyone who might possibly provide answers and information during a crisis. And there should be a designated team monitoring the news, the Internet, Facebook, the Twitter, Flickr and whatever they invent tomorrow morning. A Twitter bomb can be deadly if it begins to trend and you are caught unaware. If a reporter leaves you a message to please call him, Google him first and read his or her latest story.

You are in the middle of a crisis and a crisis implies that real damage has been done to someone somewhere. That someone is likely to appear to be a more sympathetic figure than you. You are wearing a nice suit and tie—you make a lot of money and you are currently just experiencing the wrath of TV and print reporters—not a mine cave-in or a birth defect linked to a new drug. It may be unpleasant. Remember, nasty questions won't kill you, but not being prepared can make you wish you were dead.

Maximize Training Time With a Pro Video Production Team

When setting up a training session, PR pros may be tempted to grab the video camera used to shoot shot the kids' birthday parties and videotape the client or CEO. Bad move. It just doesn't prepare for the tension and crush of a real live TV interview situation in which the studio or location can fill up with production people and techs. Considering the valuable time the boss is putting into training, doesn't it make more sense to come away with an experience that actually replicates a real TV interview?

In addition to retaining a working TV journalists to play the role of reporter and act as coach we recommend first-rate, broadcast-quality video. "Whenever we are called on to provide video for a training session, we always think about long-term needs for the client and how they can get the most out of the time we spend together," says Marc Nager owner of **Creative Media Group** in Natick, MA who produces video for everything from training to news and feature items for broadcast.

Here is what we recommend: Before you even begin the formal training, give the boss practice with an Ambush Interview. We tell the CEO to show up at 10 AM for training and then work with his PA to find out where he or she will be at 9:30 - perhaps getting out of a car on the way to the office. We look for a spot where the lighting will be harshest. We make the questions aggressive and having a real journalist asking the questions enhances the reality. Most “trainees” will get caught up in the moment and play along. The ambush provides a benchmark—great before and after evaluation.

Plan the training day to maximize the number of situations. How many different situations can you create that are likely to come up for the executives – a studio environment at the company, behind the desk, in front of the building, interview with a hostile co-guest, and a “remote” where the journalists ask questions through an earpiece and are unseen by the client.

Apply some common tricks, like saying the interview is over but keep the camera running. Ask the CEO about his golf game and then demonstrate how a discussion of ones handicap can be used against the organization during a crisis. “While the water table is being polluted the only thing green on this CEOs mind is the putting green at his private country club.”

Script a hostile co-guest for a mock talk show. Have the guest talk over your client and dispute his statements to see how he reacts. Get the client thinking, that no matter what, the hostile guest is not your audience. Put the focus on your stakeholders and ignore the outrageous comments.

Get some footage of your organization’s operation and make it available – often called B-roll. When someone complained that hypodermic needles were being found in cans of cola, the company distributed B-roll showing the cans being sealed at the speed of light. No one could possibly tamper with the produce as it moved along at breakneck speed.

Think visually. Most managers are word and number people and seldom think about the visual elements of their presentation or the sound quality for that matter. If the CEO is going to be in business dress then formal business attire - ties for men - is in order. Don't try to make the CEO look casual by taking off his tie while wearing a pinstriped suit or monogrammed shirt with cufflinks.

Scrutinize the CEOs office. See it the way a reporter would. Family pictures are great for humanizing the boss in a crisis. Unless you are cultivating an image akin to Richard Branson or Ted Turner, get rid of pictures of the boss in a yacht race, flying his own Citation or in the winners' circle at Kentucky Derby.

Get a custom fit earpiece for the CEO. We have all seen on air guests fiddling with an ill fitting earpiece that was just handed to them by a production staffer.

Do at least one session for radio while the resources or on hand. This gives you the PR person a chance to sit by and hand notes to the CEO containing suggested answers.

Think “multi-purpose” and you will come away from training with at least a 2-minute video that communicates the Chief Executive and organization's personality and post it. It will pay off when a crisis occurs, as journalists will go to your Web site to check out the players ahead of time. No matter what, it is harder for a reporter to be ultra tough on someone they feel they know, respect and is forthcoming. PRN

Barry Nolan is formerly the communications director of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee and is a frequest television host and on-air contributor. Dick Pirozzolo founded Pirozzolo Company PR in Boston. He has handled multiple crisis communication efforts.

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Media Relations Crisis Cheat Sheet

Checklist for Containing A Crisis Situation

For organizations mired in a crisis, having a plan, swift stakeholder communications and active reputation management are crucial to help mitigate controversy. Here's a checklist to work through a bad situation:

✔ Draft a team.
✔ Categorize the seriousness.
✔ "Tell it first and tell it fast" to audiences affected by the crisis.
✔ Focus internally.
✔ Break out the influencers.
✔ Be media savvy.
✔ Empathize (be human) to victims, real or perceived.

They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

When an organization devises a comprehensive crisis-management plan, the communications section should focus on message development. This component should include these items:

✔ Designated spokesperson
✔ Mission statement
✔ Positioning
✔ Media procedure
✔ Prepared statements
✔ Message mapping
✔ Key audiences

Questions for a Quick Crisis Response

During a crisis, communications teams need to assess the situation quickly in order to effectively focus efforts and resources. Some key questions to answer when in crisis include:

How much traction is the issue getting across social media?

- **Is cross-pollination among media channels contributing to the spread of the issue?** Is it still contained in social media, or has it broken out into other channels? Or after starting in traditional media, has it transitioned to social media?

Media Relations Crisis Cheat Sheet

- **Who are the most important influencers on this issue/topic?**
- **What are the best channels to use to address the crisis?**
- **Is our team prepared with the right information and insights to quickly respond to the right audiences using the right channels during a crisis?**

Six Important Tips for Message Clarity When in Crisis

Once you understand that you're talking to strangers—people who don't have your background or knowledge and are considering the crisis for the first time—the vocabulary rules become obvious:

- Junk the jargon
- Ax the acronyms
- Illuminate
- Fill in the blanks
- Craft carefully
- Share and share alike

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