**Managing Crises of Confidence:
When Bad Things Happen**

Feb. 21-22, 2013

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Crisis Communications Response/Roles

What Triggers a Coordinated Crisis Communications Response?

As soon as the port learns of an incident or issue which will require a coordinated response, key staff should gather at port offices, the site of the situation, or via conference call (phone and/or video). An initial set of questions should be considered by those gathering to coordinate the port's response:

1. What has occurred and who are the victims (or who has the potential to be affected)?
2. What will be the role of the port?
3. What property/facilities have been damaged or are threatened? Note public or private property.
4. How and why did this situation take place?
5. What is port's position on this matter and response to the situation?
6. Who needs to be informed?
    a. Employees
    b. Neighbors
    c. Public (or subgroups, such as local business community, etc.)
    d. News media
    e. Customers, tenants, shipping line owners, rail/pilot/etc. operators/owners
7. Does it have political or other high-profile characteristics?
8. Should these audiences be informed proactively or responsively? Will responding proactively alleviate or exacerbate the situation?
9. What internal resources/expertise can be called upon for assistance? Subject matter experts.
10. What external resources/expertise or allies can be called upon for assistance?
11. What can be done to anticipate how this crisis or issue may evolve and to contain further escalation of the matter?
12. Who should be the PIO?
13. What communications resources will be needed?

Types of Crises (general)

The following list includes examples of the types of crises which would require a coordinated public information effort. This list is not exhaustive.

Agency investigation
Controversial lawsuit
Accusation of discrimination based on race, sexual preference, or gender
Serious injury to employee or resident (particularly at a port facility)
Protest
Strike
Physical violence between co-workers
Theft
Embezzlement
Lavish or inappropriate spending by staff or elected/appointed officials
Death of top staff or elected/appointed official
DUI arrest of official
Plane crash
Train crash

Major service interruption
Computer system issues, including loss of data or stealing of data
Employee accused of high-profile crime
Sexual harassment case
Explosion
Rape or assault on agency property or in agency facility
Chemical spill
Radiation leak
Top official caught lying
Oil spill
Facility closing
Union grievance
Transportation issues, including roadway closure or public transit shutdown

Who is the Public Information Officer?

The port PIO serves as the lead communications strategist. The Department Director who initially coordinates the city's response (i.e., whose department is most directly affected) can also take overall responsibility for public information (the case in small ports with no designated PIO). However, should the Department Director's duties to manage the incident require a significant amount of time or focus, the Department Director may designate another staff member to serve as PIO. Unless otherwise determined, the duties will be handled by staff in the following order:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Role of the Public Information Officer

The designated PIO is a key staff member supporting the Department Director or management team coordinating the city's response to the crisis. The PIO recommends public information strategies, develops public information materials (often with the assistance of other departments or agencies), and implements the public information program.

Basic Public Information Officer Responsibilities

The basic responsibilities of the PIO include the following:
- Respond to inquiries from the news media and the public;
- Monitor the news media to detect and correct misinformation and to identify emerging trends or issues;
- Advise Department Director and/or staff team coordinating the port's response on public information issues, and advocate for the community to ensure its public information needs are addressed;
- Be the public's representative; and
- Coordinate, clear with appropriate authorities, and disseminate accurate and timely information related to the crisis.

Information Flow / Incident Progression

Step 1: Gathering Information

The first step in the process of getting information to various audiences during a crisis is information gathering. Information is collected from a variety of sources, a few of which include:

- **Department Directors/Department Staff,** who alert managers who will determine the need for a public information response.
- **First Responders,** emergency personnel who arrive at a scene, if applicable.
- **News Media,** who often learn of situations via calls from the public or others involved.
- **Field PIOs/Others On Scene,** if there's a specific site where an incident has occurred.
- **PIOs From Other Agencies, Organizations,** if the issue/incident involves more than just your agency.

Step 2: Verifying Information

The next step in the process is to verify the accuracy of the information that has been collected by consulting, among others:

- **Department Directors/Department Staff**
- **Port Manager**
- **Field Staff**
- **Subject Matter Experts**
- **Others**

Step 3: Coordinating & Planning

The next step in the process is to coordinate among all involved on the need for a public information effort and the strategies and tactics needed to prepare and deliver information to key audiences.

- **Consult This Information**
- **Prepare Key Message(s)**
- **Obtain Approval**
- **Determine, Prepare Communications Tools**

Step 4: Disseminating Information

The next step in the process is to disseminate information to the public. This step involves:

- **Using Multiple Methods.** In most situations, it's imperative to use as many different communications tools as possible.
- **Monitoring the Media.** Media monitoring is invaluable for ensuring that your message was understood by the news media and reported accurately and completely to the public. Address important inaccuracies before they are reported incorrectly a second time.

Crisis Response Checklist

Within the First 60 Minutes

❑ Contain the immediate crisis
  - ☐ Ensure that calls have been made to all appropriate emergency responders (i.e. call 911 if appropriate)
  - ☐ Coordinate and cooperate with emergency responders

❑ Follow internal notification process
  - ☐ Notify Executive Director/senior management and elected/appointed officials
  - ☐ Notify appropriate Department Directors

❑ First meeting or conference call to quickly assess and gather known facts
  - ☐ What happened?
  - ☐ How did it happen?
  - ☐ When did it happen?
  - ☐ What was the cause?
  - ☐ Were there any injuries?
  - ☐ What was the extent of the damage?
  - ☐ Is there any current or ongoing danger?
  - ☐ What recovery efforts are underway?

❑ Notify front line staff to direct calls from media, community, government, and family members to administrative support, an appropriate team member, or a pre-recorded voice mailbox

❑ Notify appropriate staff of the possibility that media may show up. Direct the media to a predetermined holding area, if possible

❑ Organize a public information response, based on what is known. Discuss whether to wait for more information or communicate proactively

❑ Draft appropriate holding statement/press release/talking points

❑ Draft Q&A document

❑ Outreach to and coordinate with outside agencies

❑ Determine if outside experts are needed

❑ Provide initial holding statement to the media

First 90 Minutes

❑ Determine crisis level and response needed

❑ Ensure clear understanding of internal roles and responsibilities

❑ Each team member should assume their role

❑ Assess the need to bring in subject matter experts or additional outside resources

❑ If the situation dictates, be sure that at least one PIO is at the incident site

❑ After discussing proactive vs. responsive communication, decide on best communication method
    ☐ Holding statement
    ☐ News release
    ☐ Individual reporter briefings
    ☐ Phone notification of key audiences
    ☐ Web site

❑ Identify spokespeople and potential third party subject experts for media

❑ Update key management on the public information response

❑ Send internal communication to employees

❑ Begin media and Internet monitoring

❑ Identify location for media briefings that is away from the incident site

❑ Discuss level of crisis response - Is this a local crisis? What are the national implications? What are the implications for employees? What are the implications for the public?

❑ Administrative assistance:
    ☐ Record or update all facts
    ☐ Screen media, government agency, and public calls and provide information to the appropriate staff
    ☐ Distribute public information materials

❑ Disseminate public information tools, as appropriate

❑ Consider all other interested parties/stakeholders/audiences and communicate appropriately

First Half Day

❑ Conduct team update

❑ Identify security, legal and liability issues

❑ Discuss and approve public information strategies/tactics

❑ Assess the need for additional resources. If the response becomes 24/7, sufficient personnel must be available to staff all shifts

❑ Update key stakeholders not already reached

❑ Continue communicating with employees

❑ Prepare and train designated spokesperson to communicate with external audiences

❑ Assess need to hold news briefing or other proactive communications

❑ Evaluate news coverage and correct inaccurate information

❑ Receive update from port staff in the field, if applicable

❑ Communicate, as appropriate, with the media

❑ Coordinate with outside agency PIOs, if applicable

By End of Day One

❑ Shift from reactive to proactive communications (emphasize concern and efforts to resolve the crisis and prevent future incidents)

❑ Evaluate news coverage and correct inaccurate information

❑ Assess need to address rumors circulating internally or on Internet

❑ Monitor the continuing crisis situation to determine next steps:
  ☐ Conduct news briefing as events warrant
  ☐ Provide periodic updates and individual interviews to the media
  ☐ Post updates to the Web site

❑ Evaluate the need for and prepare or update any of the following communications documents:
  ☐ News releases or media advisory
  ☐ Internal list of questions and answers
  ☐ Letters to key stakeholders

❑ Ensure all facts are documented and well-organized

❑ Ensure action steps are documented and well-organized

❑ Assess need for additional resources

❑ Assess need for further support from technical experts or third party experts

❑ Brief or update legislative and regulatory audiences, where appropriate

❑ Receive briefing from field staff

❑ Brief or update the media

❑ Continue coordination with outside agency PIOs

Day Two

❑ Create, deliver messages and train spokespeople

❑ Continue shift from reactive to proactive communications (emphasize concern and efforts to resolve the crisis and prevent future incidents, is possible)

❑ Evaluate overnight news coverage and news coverage to date

❑ Monitor news coverage and the Internet to assess stakeholder, media, and public reaction to the crisis

❑ Evaluate the continuing crisis situation to determine next steps:
  ☐ Conduct news briefing as events warrant
  ☐ Provide periodic updates and individual interviews to the media
  ☐ Post updates to the Web site

❑ Evaluate the need for and prepare any of the following communications documents:
  ☐ News releases or media advisory
  ☐ Internal list of questions and answers
  ☐ Letters to key stakeholders

❑ Prepare and train designated spokesperson to communicate with external audiences

❑ Maintain list of all facts

❑ Revise and update key messages and talking points

❑ Prioritize responses to external audiences

❑ Assess need for additional resources

❑ Receive briefings from field staff, technical experts

❑ Prepare a communications plan for the day and communicate with internal audiences

❑ Brief key legislators, local government officials, if applicable

❑ Update the media

❑ Continue coordination with outside agency PIOs

Ongoing

❑ Control messages and spokespeople

❑ Continue shift to proactive public information (emphasize concern and efforts to prevent future incidents; explain how incident happened, when available)

❑ Evaluate news coverage

❑ Monitor news coverage and the Internet to assess stakeholder, media, and public reaction to the crisis; gauge ongoing information efforts based on this assessment

❑ Evaluate the continuing crisis situation to determine next steps:
  ◻ Conduct news briefing as events warrant
  ◻ Provide periodic updates and individual interviews to the media
  ◻ Post updates to the Web site

❑ Update public information documents

❑ Update list of all facts

❑ Revise and update key messages and talking points

❑ Prioritize responses to external audiences

❑ Assess need for additional resources

❑ Receive briefings from field staff, technical experts

❑ Prepare a public information plan for ongoing information efforts and communicate with internal audiences

❑ Continue to indentify key audiences and provide information efforts accordingly

❑ Continue coordination with outside agency PIOs

❑ Determine when the conclude efforts; announce the conclusion to the news media

Crisis/Disaster Procedures Flow Chart

Step 1: Notification of Occurrence
- Assess Magnitude
- Notify E.D., other managers, if appropriate
- Notify Department Directors, elected officials if directed
- Monitor occurrence to determine if go to Step 2

1. Where did the incident occur?
2. What happened?
3. Are there injuries or deaths?
4. Who is involved and responsible?
5. When did events occur?
6. How could it have happened?
7. Where might the problem expand?

Step 2: Information Gathering
- Determine extent of situation
- Confirm facts; answer questions in box right ►
- Coordinate at incident scene, if situation requires
- Make determination if a full communications team should be organized

Step 3: Activate CCP Emergency Public Information Team / Plan
- Coordinate information flow with affected port agencies
- Inform Management, Department Directors, Public Information staff

Step 4: Initiate Response / Action Plan
- Draft materials (holding statement, press release, Q&A, fact sheet, web presence, employee notice)
- Make staffing assignments
- Determine need for Media Briefing area

Step 5: Initiate Internal Information Dissemination
- Inform managers not yet aware of or involved about the incident
- Disseminate alerts to all employees, board/commissioners, chamber of commerce, CBOs
- Work with HR to manage information about injured/impacted employees, if applicable

Step 6: Initiate External Information Dissemination
- Distribute media statements/materials
- Conduct briefings (phone, Media Briefing area)
- Post information on web site / activate site (inform media about web site as information source)
- Determine if other agency PIOs should gather to address media's needs
- Evaluate all external audiences and need for various available communications tools

Step 7: Incident Information Flow
- Continuous update of statements / releases using all appropriate communications tools
- Maintain incident log (written, visual: stills, video) & contact log
- Implement media monitoring for accuracy; correct reports as needed
- Evaluate need for additional staffing resources / implement shift system to meet staffing needs

Step 8: Conduct Incident Wrap-Up / Post Incident Review
- Analyze media coverage, community feedback
- Provide feedback regarding crisis response
- Revise crisis public information plan

Sample Messages, Press Release/Holding Statement

"Key messages" are the main points that all readers/listeners should know about the port, the response to the incident, and its ability to resume normal operations. These are employed in crises and disasters. Typically, three to four key messages will be developed for each major area of the crisis or disaster response.

A key message is the core content for all public information tools. A key message is not a fact or statistic, but rather a statement that succinctly communicates what the public needs to know about the port's perspective on the incident.

Message Development Questions

- What are the facts? What happened?
- Who are your audiences? Who has been affected by this event? Who is upset or concerned? Who needs to be alerted to this situation?
- What are those audiences' perceptions and information needs?
- What do the media want to know? What should they know?
- How should you show empathy?
- What are your policies on this issue?
- What are you doing about this issue? How are you solving the problem?
- What can you do to keep this from happening again?
- What other agencies or third parties are involved? What are they saying?
- What should the public be doing?
- When will more information be available?

Preparing an Initial "Holding" Statement

The public information staff assigned to preparing materials should prepare an initial holding statement at the onset of the incident. Reporters will likely call before all the facts have been gathered. In such an instance, a simple statement acknowledging the situation shall be prepared. The short statement avoids "no comment" and acknowledges that the port recognizes the need to cooperate with the media and inform the public. This document will be the foundation for all future written communications. By following a few basic principles when writing the holding statement or news releases, the port will better meet the news media's needs.

1. Tell the most important information in the lead paragraph.
2. Answer four of the five "Ws"--Who, What, Where, and When. Explain WHAT the incident is. Identify WHO is involved in the incident as well as the resources and equipment involved. Tell WHERE and WHEN the incident occurred. Explain WHAT action the port is taking to mitigate or respond to the incident. Do not explain WHY the event occurred unless complete information is available and has been approved. Attempting to explain the WHY without complete information is merely irresponsible speculation and can seriously undermine communication efforts.
3. Write remaining information in descending order of importance. If the media cuts off the bottom of your story, they will cut information that is least important to the public.
4. Explain technical points in simple language. A direct quote can add the human element to otherwise technical information and help explain a situation or event in layman's terms. Tell the real story. Avoid using language that is overly bureaucratic.
5. Be concise. A good news release is judged by the quality of information it communicates, not by its length. Stop writing when you've said all you need to.

Workplace Violence at Port Facility (Sample)

Messages

- The violent act that occurred at the Port of _____ facility/property has activated a comprehensive emergency response. Port officials have diligently prepared for many types of incidents, including ones like this.

- The incident was contained within one facility, and although investigations and related follow-up activities will continue for several days or weeks, all other facilities are in full operation.

- The Port's top priority is the safety and security of our employees, citizens, businesses, and visitors.

Sample Copy for "Holding" Press Release

The violent act that occurred at the Port of _____ facility/property has activated a comprehensive emergency response. Port officials have diligently prepared for incidents of this nature.

The incident was contained within one facility, and although investigations and related follow-up activities will continue for several days or weeks, all other port facilities are in full operation. The Port's top priority is the safety and security of our employees, citizens, businesses, and visitors.

The following emergency personnel and agencies responded to this incident:

_____

_____

We know of the following fatalities/injuries. State and federal privacy laws limit our ability to provide any additional information:

_____

_____

The following facilities were affected:

_____

_____

Other information:

_____

_____

Delivering Messages: Transitions/Flags/Bridges

"Transition to Message" Phrases

- That's an interesting question, it reminds me of . . .
- Before I forget, I wanted to mention . . .
- Let me put it in perspective . . .
- What's important to remember, however . . .
- What I really want to talk to you about is . . .
- What's most important is . . .
- And don't forget . . .
- Before we get off that subject/topic, let me add . . .
- That's not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is . . .
- That's a good point, but I think you'd be interested in knowing that . . .
- What I'm here to talk to you about is . . .
- Let me just add . . .
- That reminds me . . .
- Let me answer you by saying that . . .
- Let me give you some background information . . .
- Let's take a closer look at . . .

- That's an important point because . . .
- What you should know is . . .
- What that means is . . .
- Another thing to remember is . . .
- Now that you've covered _____, let's move on to _____ . . .
- You may be asking why _____ is true . . .
- While _____ is certainly important, don't forget that _____ . . .

Flags

Flag your messages by calling attention:

- The key thing is…
- The best part about…
- What you really need to know is…
- There are three points we need to remember…

Turning Negatives to Positives

- Yes, that's been said, but let's not forget that…
- I agree with you about _____, and I think it illustrates an interesting point…
- What we do know is…
- The real question here is…

Investigating the Local Budget . . . A Reporter's Checklist

The Budget
- *Spells priorities of a local government*
- *Check for responsiveness: citizens' concerns, development plans, mission statement*
- *Check against promises and pledges*
- *Get raw data; plug into spreadsheets*
- *Multi-year: 3-5 years; a decade's worth*
- *Compare with preceding years*
- *Proposed vs. final*
- *Distribution across sectors, departments*
- *Public hearings*
- *Line items*
- *Budget threshold limits*
- *Regular and supplemental budgets*
- *Budget realignments*
- *Budget codes*

Budget: Balancing Act
- *Income (Revenue) = Spending (Expenditure)*

Income: Taxes
- *Are there new or higher taxes?*
- *Who are tax exempt? Who got tax breaks or discounts?*
- *Who are the tax delinquents? Were they fined? Who benefits from tax amnesty?*
- *Who are the top taxpayers?*
- *How healthy are industries that make up the local tax base?*
- *How diverse is the local tax base?*
- *When was the last time the local government updated assessment values?*
- *What are tax valuations of public officials and their friends compared to their neighbors?*

Income: Other means
- *Regulatory and service fees*
- *Aids and grants*
- *Corporate: Loans, bonds, economic enterprises*

Spending (Expenditure)
- *Spending vs appropriated amount*
- *Comprehensive annual financial report*
- *Accomplishment reports*
- Budget document
- *Agencies involved in budget review and accountability*

Contracts: What to look at
- *Is there an appropriation?*
- *Is it in the procurement program?*
- *Who's on the vendors' list?*

- *Check everything: From big- to small-ticket items*

Contracts: Red flags
- *No public bidding*
- *Rigged bidding*
- *Narrow specifications*
- *Splitting of contracts*
- *Change orders*
- *Cost overruns*
- *Overpricing*
- *Under-deliveries and non-delivery (ghost delivery)*
- *Inferior or substandard products or service*
- *Double payments*
- *Red tape*

Contracts: Also look for…
- *Conflict of interest*
- *Corruption*
- *Sources of information*
- *Comparative analysis*

Payroll
- *Nepotism*
- *Special and confidential positions*
- *Casuals*
- *Appointments to juicy positions*
- *Ghost employees*
- *Employee overtime*
- *Incentives, benefits for select group*

Perks
- *Expense account*
- *Travel*
- *Cell phone calls*
- *Acquisition/use of government property and supplies for personal use*
- *Discretionary spending: intelligence funds, development funds*

Audits
- *Who audits?*
- *How thorough the audit?*
- *Which agency or unit is unaudited?*
- *How did auditors audit?*

The Art of Anticipation: Developing Effective Q-and-As

Public Relations Tactics
Walton, Susan Balcom, 12/2006

The news release has been sent. The employees have been informed. Your company's big announcement appears to be going as planned. And then, right in the middle of an interview, a reporter tosses out a question you and your executives aren't expecting. Instead of scoring a direct hit with a key message, you suddenly find yourself stumbling over your words.

How do you avoid this scenario? With complete preparation, including a good Q-and-A.

The Q-and-A is a fundamental part of any important announcement your company or client is developing. More than any other PR tool, a Q-and-A helps you target your communication to your audience's informational needs. It also enables you to transition back to your core messages without leaving the audience feeling that you haven't answered their questions.

Why a Q-and-A is essential

When an organization issues a major announcement, the news release should focus on the few most critical points. However, it's also wise to provide context and additional detail to ensure your story is understood and accurately reported. One approach is to provide a backgrounder, a collection of supplemental information distributed at the same time and to the same audiences as the news release. A Q-and-A, however, goes a step
further — anticipating and providing answers for additional questions those audiences might ask.

A good Q-and-A frames questions the way that they might be posed by a stakeholder —and answers those questions as directly as possible. The act of thinking through a consistent set of responses is valuable preparation for any spokesperson, even if the questions you actually receive are worded differently from those in your Q-and-A document.

Steps to producing an effective Q-and-A

1. Brainstorm stakeholder questions.
Gather a group of people from your organization which represents the viewpoints of each stakeholder audience. The departments represented could include human resources (for employees), government or community relations (for government leaders and community organizations), sales and marketing (for customers), supply chain/purchasing
(for suppliers), and investor relations (for the investment community). A face-to-face discussion is best, but if time deadlines or distance prevent it, a conference call will do.
In this brainstorming session, review the announcement and related key messages, and then generate the questions each stakeholder audience is likely to ask. Encourage the group to draw on their past experiences. Think broadly and consider all possibilities.

2. Tailor your answers.
Be aware that the answers to a given question may vary based on the needs of each stakeholder audience. For example, if you are announcing the closure of a manufacturing facility, you can expect a question about the impact of that closure. The answer you develop for employees would address any potential job losses, but the answer for customers would focus on whether the closure might disrupt product supply.

3. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.
Information from Q-and-As is most often used as needed as the appropriate question arises, rather than in unbroken linear form. Repeating the same concepts in different answers isn't redundant; in fact, it can help increase the chances that your key messages will be stated and heard.

For example, if your company is announcing a new product, you could be asked about how you succeeded in bringing this product to market. Your response might be that "Innovation has been a top priority of our company for many years, and we've focused our resources on new product development." The same concepts —innovation is a top priority and focused resources — might also be a part of the answer to other questions, such as "What differentiates you from your competitors?" or "What are your company's business goals?"   In each case, you can use innovation as the link back to your key product messages and go on to describe other innovations that make this product best in class.

4. Tackle the tough ones.
After you've struggled to come up with a good answer to a difficult or sensitive question, it's tempting to simply remove the question from your Q-and-A. Don't. Remember that eliminating a tough question is no guarantee that it won't get asked. Make an effort to answer every single tough question on your list as honestly and openly as possible, even if the only thing you can say is, "We don't have all the information right now, but we'll get back to you as soon as we do."

5. Keep it concise.
Each answer should be concise enough that the person using the Q-and-A can read through it a few times and pick up the thread of the discussion. Complex, multiple paragraph answers are not helpful to either spokespeople or audiences. A good Q-and-A response is no more than three to four standard sentences long. It's also a good idea
to limit the number of Q-and-As in your final document to those that the brainstorming group believes are most likely to come up.

6. Decide whether to broadly publish your Q-and-A.
Once a Q-and-A has been completed, you'll need to decide whether to publish it (on a company Web site or in a newsletter, for example) or simply provide the Q-and-A to spokespeople who will share the information verbally.

Publishing your Q-and-A is usually a good idea if:

- The information is straightforward and easy to understand. Highly technical or complex information may need to be explained by a subject expert rather than left up to individual interpretation.
- It doesn't matter who shares the information. Since published Q-and-As may ultimately be distributed through many channels, they should not depend on a specific spokesperson to achieve their impact. In some cases, however, a Q-and-A should be linked to a specific source or spokesperson. A company Q-and-A about the construction of a new facility, for instance, might best be communicated verbally by the CEO rather than published so that audiences know the project has top management support.
- The information is not sensitive and applies to general audiences. Broad distribution is usually best if the information is intended for broad audiences. However, some information is sensitive or audience-specific and should not be shared widely. For example, your organization might be advised not to discuss an ongoing lawsuit, even if

you are asked questions about it. Sensitive issues such as layoffs might be best discussed individually with affected employees rather than published.

- The Q-and-A contains information that audiences need to act on. Q-and-As about special programs, promotions, recalls, etc. may contain information such as consumer hotline numbers that audiences need to know. Such Q-and-As should be distributed in print or electronic version to key audiences as quickly as possible.

Watch, learn and improve

When your Q-and-A is complete and the moment of truth arrives, pay attention to which questions get asked — and which stakeholders ask them. Track audience response to the content and detail of your answers. Ask yourself: Did the Q-and-A meet my audiences' needs and reflect my organization's messages? By acting on what you learn, you can continue to refine and update your Q-and-A. Better yet, you'll be able to anticipate and produce a superior one next time around.

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Why Good Companies (and ports) Say Dumb Things

Being quoted in a news story often is viewed as a high-wire act by many business executives. Part of this anxiety comes from occasionally seeing embarrassing or simply daft comments in the press attributed to seemingly intelligent business people. At the same time, most businesses have a responsibility (and an enlightened self-interest) to create a dialogue with the media and to respond to press questions. The majority of U.S. companies now recognize that talking to the press is part of doing business. Increasingly rare is the situation expressed by Tom Cooper, former president of Bank of America, who noted, "Business people complain like hell about what's in the newspaper, then they turn around and refuse to talk to reporters."

Nonetheless, misunderstanding and distrust still mark the general business approach to the press, and interviews are put in the category of necessary but distasteful. How can business executives fulfill their responsibility to answer press questions, yet have confidence that the comments attributed to them and their companies will not be embarrassing? As a first step, they might see if their own organizations' shortcomings are reflected in the following list of ten major reasons why good companies say dumb things:

Shooting from the Hip - Talking before thinking is an error that cuts across all levels of an organization. It can arise from the unrestrained exuberance of management, exaggerations by line personnel or the release of unverified information by staff people. Intelligent comments in the press most often are the result of accurate and up-to-date information combined with forethought and preparation.

Reporting Relationship - Generally, the greater the distance between the CEO and communications staff, the greater an organization's propensity for saying dumb things. In some companies, communications is placed under the marketing or legal function and broad corporate goals may be, quite naturally, subsumed to the more narrow objectives of the operating or staff units. Under marketing, corporate comments may trend toward the promotional, while the lawyer's natural urge to protect against liability by saying little, can result in corporate comments that seem obtuse or unresponsive.

Organizational Hurdles - Some companies have such a complex and cumbersome organizational structure that a timely response to media inquiries is nearly impossible. In these instances, a newspaper could go to press with a story leveling charges against a company, noting that the company response was "No comment."

Attempting to Control Information - Some organizations seek to control information, particularly bad news, with the goal of limiting negative reaction. But attempting to hide the facts of a story only puts a company in a position of covering up, severely damaging its reputation. The tendency to stonewall reaches absurdity when managements face problems and say, "Don't tell the communications people, they may have to talk to the media."

Failure to Anticipate, Plan and Prepare - In crisis situations, a company's communication ability is severely tested, often bringing a higher incidence of potentially damaging comments. Through effective crisis communications planning, a company can anticipate and better manage its comments in stressful situations.

"Why Should We Talk to the Press?" -- An enlightened approach to the media is not universal. Some managements do not accept the legitimate right of the media to ask questions of public companies or large private entities. This attitude often is combined with a lack of appreciation

for the power of the media to influence, for good or bad, the perception of the company. Talking to the media can help an organization build a reservoir of understanding and goodwill with constituencies and the public.

Who Talks to the Press? - Some managements still fall into the trap of saying, "Have the PR people talk to the media, that's what we pay them for." Reporters are quite willing to talk with knowledgeable sources, but they also want access to the people who are managing and operating the company. There are issues and concerns which management must be open to discuss with the media. Otherwise, the organization looks foolish or appears to have a siege mentality. Management can help reporters write from an informed position, and more readily assure accurate, fair and balanced coverage.

Inadequate Briefing - Some embarrassing comments in the press are the result of inadequate preparation. Any dialogue with the media should be taken seriously, and briefings by media relations professionals can help executives tell their company's story more effectively and focus their comments on the interests of the reporter.

Unauthorized, Unprepared, Undaunted - A survey conducted for a major company found that individuals who were the very least qualified to talk to the media had the greatest confidence in their ability to answer press questions; while more knowledgeable and experienced individuals expressed caution. Having unauthorized or unprepared people talking to the press without fear can be a communications nightmare. While reporters may bridle at an organization's desire to funnel inquiries through a company's PR staff, this practice helps a company provide qualified spokespersons.

Communications People Not Involved - Most CEOs would not consider a financial issue without input from the chief financial officer nor make a legal decision without the general counsel's advice. However, many managements make policy and operating decisions with vast communications implications, with little or no involvement by the company's public relations professionals. One company, for example, made a quick personnel decision to have employees sign a silence agreement as part of their severance package. The furor rapidly escalated to a nationwide story based on the company's alleged attempt to stifle first amendment rights. The story above also is an example of an organization inescapably saying dumb things in the press because it has, in fact, taken dumb actions. Here, there is no remedy but to substitute good actions for bad actions, admit error and apologize.

Contrary to popular culture, the core of media relations and press communications is not the "spin doctoring" of messages. Communication that best helps an organization achieve its goals is based on a foundation of accuracy, honesty, completeness and candor. Certainly, the press is not perfect and errors inevitably will arise in stories. However, an efficient organizational structure, effective communications staff, and appropriate policies and practices can decrease dramatically the instances of good companies saying dumb things in the media.

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Sheri Benninghoven, APR is the former Communications Director of the League of California Cities, and one of California's most experienced public relations professionals in helping state and local governments develop strategic public communications programs.

Sheri has extensive experience and working knowledge of journalism, local government operations and finance, public relations and public affairs, State government, crisis communications, and communications research. A graduate of California State University, Fullerton with a degree in Communications and Public Relations, she also graduated from the Public Sector Marketing program from Public Technology, Incorporated (PTI) in Washington.

In addition to her experience in government, associations, and the private sector, Sheri served on the adjunct faculty of the University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication in Los Angeles. She is a former Vice President/Group Manager for Ketchum Public Relations (Los Angeles/Sacramento), the world's fifth largest public relations firm. She founded their Public Sector Marketing Group and also created their California Technology Practice Group. Her technology clients range from Packard Bell, NEC and Sun to Mattel's Barbie CDs, Encyclopedia Britannica's CD launch and NetRadio.

Her most recent hands-on crises experience involves managing all media and community relations for the worst mass shooting in Orange County, CA history: the "Salon Meritage" shooting in Seal Beach in October, 2011.

Sheri also served as Public Information Officer for the City of Anaheim, preparing and implementing communications plans for the city and each city department, including Anaheim Stadium, the Anaheim Convention Center, the Anaheim Redevelopment Agency, and two city-owned golf courses.

She is a past president of the California Capital Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, from which she's accredited; a member and past board member of the California Association of Public Information Officials (CAPIO) and a recipient of their Lifetime Achievement Award; is a founder/past board member of the City-County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA); and was a founder of the California Specialized Training Institute's (CSTI) crisis communications program.

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Scott Summerfield is an expert in public agency strategic communications with nearly two decades of award-winning public information/public participation experience, along with tenures at several other organizations focused on community issues. Scott specializes in assisting organizations with their communications plan development and training programs, and supervises SAE Communications' San Francisco Bay Area activities from his Pleasanton office.

Scott is the former Public Information Officer for the City of Newark and managed the largest grant program in League of California Cities history, supervising a team of nine consultants throughout the state who worked with local communities to implement waste prevention public education and public participation projects.

Community meeting facilitation and structuring of public input processes are a cornerstone of his municipal background, and Scott's public participation approach of identifying all possible affected audiences and then creating a communications program to reach each audience member has served his organizations well.

Scott also served as Director of Communications for the Oakland Chamber of Commerce. The Oakland native is a graduate of San Diego State University with a bachelor's degree in Telecommunications/Film.

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