

Communicating with the Media

TOOLKIT

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Communicating with the Media

Open and Honest Communication

Simple and naive as it may sound, the best approach with news media is to tell the plain truth and tell it as quickly as the facts are known. Successful organizations take the lead in delivering information, even when the subject is unpleasant.

Some events will mean interacting with the news media. It's a good idea to set the tone for ongoing relationships with the media by being as open and honest as possible from the beginning. Journalists often suspect that persons who are evasive, difficult to reach, or offer only "no comment" may be covering up something. Confronted with a spokesperson that refuses to cooperate, some journalists may employ aggressive methods to obtain the information they seek. Some may even use other, possibly less responsible, sources for their information. Therefore, your organization's goal should be to control the public message by delivering adequate information in a timely manner.

Stick to the facts. Sometimes journalists tend to draw a conclusion that makes more of a situation and their complete understanding may take time. Don't inadvertently encourage them to spot a trend where there is only one isolated case. Stick to the facts of each case and be careful not to try to interpret its meaning unless there is enough information to do so. If, for whatever reason, your organization has released incorrect information, correct it through official channels as soon as possible. Often, the least damaging way to deal with mistakes is to simply own up to them.

You will need to identify the person(s) within the organization who will speak on behalf of the organization concerning various issues. Additionally, make sure everyone knows who those individuals are and proper reporting procedures to follow. The spokespeople will work closely with the crisis team and management personnel. The spokespeople will be the only ones authorized to disseminate information to the media. It is important to "speak with one voice" and not provide conflicting statements from multiple sources that may be ill-informed or ignorant of the issue. When dealing with the media, the following suggestions will promote clear communications:

- Deal up-front with reporters. Be honest, forthright and establish good communication with the media before problems or a crisis occurs.
- Do not try to stonewall the media or keep them from doing their job.
- Identify a single information source.
- Advise all staff members of media relation procedures.

Communicating with the Media

Crisis Timeline

How a Disaster Unfolds: What to Expect

Although each crisis is unique, there often is a common pattern to the media's response in the aftermath of any tragedy that affects whole communities. The type of information sought by the media as the trauma unfolds often follows the following pattern.

0 - 12 hours: In the immediate aftermath of a crisis the media is scrambling to get information to answer the question "What happened?" The media attempts to piece together a story, based on eye-witness accounts, monitoring police radios, and, in many cases, grabbing anyone to talk about what happened. This results in incomplete, conflicting and inaccurate accounts of what actually happened. In the worst case scenario, the media has monitored the police radio frequency and arrives at the scene of the crisis before the police or rescue workers, thus obtaining unrestricted access to the crime or disaster scene.

12 - 24 hours: As the crisis unfolds, the next question the media seeks an answer to is "Who?" Who are the victims? There is often a struggle over the timing of the release of the names of injured and deceased victims as the authorities try to notify the surviving family members. No one is immune from the media's search for identifying information about the victims. The media will seek this information from a variety of sources, including hospitals, the police, rescue workers, families, neighbors, schools, passenger lists, co-workers, or through encampments at the crisis scene - all in an effort to identify who has information about the crisis and its victims.

24 - 36 hours: The next question the media tries to answer is "Why?" Why did this tragedy happen? It is a normal reaction on the part of many people, including victims, survivors and community members, to try to understand what happened by finding someone or something to blame. Everyone has their own version of who is to blame and the media feeds into this hysteria by speculating on who or what may have caused the crisis well before the actual facts of the situation emerge. In cases of serious accidents there will be questions of safety, security and quality.

36 - 72 hours: At this point during a crisis the media continues to speculate on what happened and why, and in addition, often begins to evaluate the rescue efforts as to whether they were effective and timely. Often, this occurs even as the rescue or cleanup operations continue. Ensuring privacy for victims as they are released from the hospital, return to work, or begin to make arrangements for funerals or memorial services is critical at this time.

72 hours - Forward: The details of what happened at the crisis site may now be old news, and the news story that is current concerns the funeral services of the deceased. In addition, the crisis story is now old news. In order to continue coverage, the media often tries to put a "spin" on a story to keep it in the news. The media looks for twists, or a new angle by which to present the same information. Issues concerning the lifestyle, social and religious pursuits of the victim, stories about victims who have suffered through similar misfortunes as well as any previous doubts about the employer being blamed for contributing to the crisis may now surface.

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Guidelines for Spokesperson

- Be prepared. Understand all that has happened and why the media is at your job site. Be prepared to discuss in detail the facts of the situation.
- Develop a few key messages. Write these down on note cards and refer to them during the interview. These should be brief and to the point. Place emphasis on the positives as much as you can.
- Decide how much time the interview will take. Set some ground rules before you get started. This will make it easier to end the interview, which might run on aimlessly if no limits are set beforehand.
- Simplify your statements. Be brief and direct. Most reporters will only have limited knowledge of your work and limited time to prepare the story. The more you simplify it for them, the more likely that the story will be accurate, informative, and that your statements won't be taken out of context.
- Avoid industry jargon or technical language. You must be understandable to everyone.
- If you don't know the answer, say so. It's OK to tell a reporter you don't know the answer to a question. Offer to find out and get back to them. Don't make up an answer that may turn out to be incorrect.
- Always be professional and polite. Anything you say and do can be quoted and used by the reporter. Keep calm. Don't forget that you are always "on the record".
- Speak slowly. Everyone tends to speak faster than normal when they are excited, stressed and/or under pressure. Practice speaking slowly in order to prepare for when the camera is on.
- Remember that you are the face of the organization. Always assume the camera is rolling. Never speak "off the record". Relax only after the reporters have left.
- If a question is offensive, don't repeat it, not even to deny it. Reporter's questions are seldom quoted. Your responses will be. If a question or comment contains incorrect "facts", don't let them pass. Challenge and correct immediately.
- Remember your appearance. If you are doing a TV interview, remember to dress professionally; speak confidently; maintain good posture; don't wear bright colors or large, noisy jewelry that will distract viewers.

On-Camera Suggestions

- Relax. Take the attitude that the reporter can ask you any question. Don't appear to be upset or caught off-guard by any questions. Think of responses that provide a positive way to answer.
- Speak informally. Use everyday language.
- Give your attention and look directly to the reporter, or to others in your audience, when responding or listening to questions. Minimize distractions from the cameras, microphones, and other media personnel as much as you can.
- Be aware of, and avoid, any actions or personal mannerisms that would indicate nervousness, stress or guilt. Do not cover your face, wear sunglasses, avoid making eye contact, etc.
- Answer questions openly, honestly, and candidly. Keep your answers short and understandable.
- When you have finished your answer, stop talking. Don't ramble. Avoid feeling the need to continue talking to fill silence. Politely ask if there are any other question(s) and/or complete the interview.
- Don't use expansive gestures on camera. Keep your hands in front of your chest when gesturing.

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Responding to Sensitive Information

- **Cause of the incident?** Let the officials release this information.
- **Specific damage estimates?** Depending upon the type of crisis, this information would usually not be available and would require speculating.
- **Reciting events as they occurred.** Avoid initial explanations until all witnesses have been debriefed and all facts are gathered regarding the incident.
- **Project shutdown/construction delays?** Fully assess the damage and verify information before making any statement. This information may not be readily available and hence you would only be speculating.
- **Who or what is at fault?** Avoid comments that place blame or point fingers. This information will only be released later on, once the investigation is complete.

Handling Aggressive Media Tactics

- Be prepared by knowing all the important facts and details.
- Turn negative questions around by giving positive responses.
- Try to slow yourself down. Give yourself time to think before responding. Pause for a few seconds, or restate the question in your own words before answering.
- Respond to a series of rapid-fire questions by picking one which best relates to your point you wish to make.
- Maintain your position of authority by making eye contact and using positive body language.
- Don't let a reporter interrupt. If a question is posed while you are making a statement, wait until the reporter is silent and complete your original thought.
- Always stay in control. Keep calm and be confident with your statements.

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Expected Questions

1. What happened?
2. Where did it happen?
3. How did this happen?
4. When did it happen (day/date, time)?
5. Who did it happen to?
6. What is the current situation (as verified by facts)?
7. How many, and who, were injured/killed?
8. How much damage was done?
9. What's the potential for additional damage or danger?
10. Who was/is responsible?
11. What went wrong/What caused this to happen?
12. What is the status of the investigation/who is conducting it?
13. When will more information be available and who will provide it?
14. Has this happened before?

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Buy-Time Statements

If the accident has just happened, you won't have any verifiable information to release to the news media. However, the media will expect someone to say something. Avoid the urge to stonewall the media while you're gathering facts. Instead, deliver what is called a "buy time" statement. This acknowledges the situation but doesn't really divulge any information. It would go something like this:

"My name is [____] and I am [title] with [company]. The incident has just happened and I am not prepared to answer your questions at this time; however, I will do my best to gather whatever facts I can and share them with you at [time]. For your protection and for the safety of those directly involved, I ask that you please remain in this secured area. Thank you and I will be back by [time]."

Understand everyone wants additional information, but it would be irresponsible to answer questions now. If a reporter starts asking you questions, simply state that you need to get back to the site and that you will return at the stated time.

Remember, if you say you'll be back in 30 minutes, be there! Even if it's only to say that you still don't have any additional facts. Bear in mind that the "buy time" statements are only a temporary tool to be used during the onset of a crisis situation. After that, you better have something to say.

Statements That Can Be Used

- "We are aware of the situation and are investigating the details as quickly and thoroughly as we can. We will keep you informed as the situation progresses."
- "The cause of the incident is not known to us at this time. The investigation is continuing and we are working closely with authorities."
- "Our management team can not be reached at this time because of their involvement with this emergency. As soon as we receive verifiable information, we will share it with you."
- "We are working to get information regarding the extent of the emergency and the injuries at this time. As soon as we receive verifiable information, we will share it with you."

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Sample Statements Following a Crisis

- We are shocked and saddened by the loss of life, injuries/damage caused and are doing everything we can to help the victim(s). Our thoughts are with him/her/them and his/her/their families and loved ones.
- We have launched our own internal investigation while also cooperating fully with [name of investigating authorities].
- What we know so far is (provide basic facts, but leave details to the investigating authority). The cause of the incident is not known at this time. The investigation is progressing and we are working closely with the local authorities.
- Our primary focus right now is on helping the victim(s).
- It is our policy to cooperate with the news media to the maximum extent possible. However, at this time it is not possible to permit access to the site of the incident because (whichever is true, or both) it is not stable nor is it safe for non-emergency personnel as providing access to the site at this time may compromise ongoing investigations.
- (If sub-contractor is involved, then:) We ask our sub-contractors to do everything possible, as we do, in compliance with safety regulations and guidelines, including site incident prevention. (or, if true, then:) We require our sub-contractors to follow the same safety regulations and guidelines as the organization mandates.

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Do's and Dont's for Dealing with the Media

The most important communications strategy in a crisis, particularly in the first few hours, is to be open with the public by being available to the news media. Perception is often reality to the public, and the media creates the perception following a crisis. For those who would even think of implementing a "no comment" philosophy with the media, please consider the following: The trade journal, PR News, cites a survey that says 65 percent of the public perceives "no comment" as an admission of guilt.

Do:

- **Tell the truth.** Never lie. It can come back to "bite" you. Reporters will be encouraged to dig into your story, check into company background and expose every detail they can find.
- **Provide accurate information.** Verify information and ensure accuracy before providing it to the media. Once this information is released, it's extremely difficult to retract.
- **Condense your information.** The media works with short clips and "sound bites". They will take long-winded explanations and shorten to fit their time lines. Keep your comments short and to the point.
- **Emphasize the positive.** Turn negatives into positives – "damage and injuries were minimized due to the quick actions of management on site". Stress your company safety record/history and your cooperation with local authorities.
- **Stay away from liability issues.** Don't talk about who may be responsible. Don't make accusations or place blame.
- **Use understandable language.** Avoid industry jargon that the public may not understand.
- **Use visual analogies when possible.** The building process and equipment used can be difficult to explain in words. Use visuals if you can - "A picture is worth a thousand words."
- **Correct incorrect or misleading information.** Within the first few hours of a crisis, there may be rumors and other erroneous information flying around. Correct this as quickly as possible.
- **Be willing to say "I don't know".** When asked a question and you don't know the answer, say so, then offer to find out and provide the answer at a later time.
- **Be prepared.** Prepare in advance and have a response to all potential questions. Be aware of questions which might violate confidentiality or hinder the investigation.
- **Insist that reporters respect the privacy rights** of the investigative personnel, authorities, and others on the job site.
- **Make sure reporters know who the spokesperson is.** The company spokesperson should be the only one authorized to disseminate information to the outside world. It is important to "speak with one voice" and not provide conflicting statements from multiple sources.

Don't:

- **Say "no comment."** No comment may imply guilt or that you are hiding something.
- **Say anything "off the record."** Don't say it if you don't want it used. Always remember that anything you say can be used by the media.
- **Wait for the story to go away.** Reporters have a job to do. If you don't cooperate, they may go to others to get their story and you can lose all control of how the story will be told and how your company may be portrayed.
- **Try to cover-up.** The truth will ultimately come out. Do your best to turn negatives into positives.
- **Ad-lib.** Be prepared for the tough questions that will be coming. Don't be caught off-guard.

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- ***Speculate or try to predict the future.*** You can only answer to the facts.
- ***Chew gum/have anything in your mouth.*** You want your speech to be clear and concise.
- ***Wear sunglasses.*** Hiding your eyes gives off a negative feeling and the perception to others that you are hiding something.

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Crisis Management Role Play Examples

Once a detailed Crisis Management Plan is developed, it is vital that it is communicated throughout the organization, practiced regularly, and kept up to date. The following are fictional examples that provide different scenarios you can use to prepare. Whether you use these fictional examples, or create your own, it is important that key personnel practice their crisis management skills regularly by assigning responsibilities, monitoring emergency procedures, preparing for media attention, and anticipating events that would be expected to follow these incidents.

Role Play #1: Traffic Accident

Your company truck that is transporting a large piece of construction equipment and materials to the jobsite is involved in a highway collision. Your driver is seriously injured. Two other vehicles are involved in the collision. There are a total of 5 occupants from these vehicles and one of the drivers is said to have been killed. State police have temporarily shut down the highway and traffic is backed up for miles. Rumors indicate that your driver was talking on a cell phone at the time of the accident.

Role Play #2: Excavation Collapse

You receive a call from the jobsite. While setting forms for a footing, the north face of a 10-foot deep excavation fails and soil engulfs the two workers. One employee is killed instantly. The other is trapped and immediate rescue efforts fail because of the danger that exists with the instability of the collapsed excavation. EMS has been notified and is on its way.

Role Play #3: Gas Leak

You are laying pipe to replace an old sewer line within an existing residential neighborhood. While performing this work, the backhoe strikes a gas line, causing an explosion. The operator survives the blast but is in critical condition. A nearby grade school has to be evacuated and the students are sent home early because of the nearby danger. The utility owner has a crew on the way to fix the leak.

Role Play #4: Business Interruption

You are building a new office building near other existing commercial properties. Excavation work for the footings undermines a concrete pad which supports a large transformer. The transformer falls into the excavation, disrupting power to many businesses and residential properties within a 4-block area.

Role Play #5: Company Vehicle Accident

A foreman, driving one of your company pickup trucks, collided with a school bus full of elementary children during the evening rush hour. Your foreman is seriously injured. The driver of the school bus has minor injuries and approximately 10 of the 23 children are injured. Your foreman has a history of reckless driving and it's suspected that he had just left from a restaurant/bar located near your work site.

Role Play #6: Crane Accident

You are working on a highway overpass of a two lane highway. One lane has been closed to accommodate your equipment and work area. The space is extremely tight and has restricted the crane from extending its outriggers. As the crane swings over the side, it overturns, falling over the guardrail of the elevated highway to the ground below. The operator is killed and the crane now rests on the railroad track below.

Role Play #7: Gas Spill/Environmental Issue

Two large dump trucks hauling material during a major earthmoving process have collided. One of the drivers is seriously injured. Fuel and other liquids from both vehicles are spilling freely. Due to the location of the spill, there is a possibility that the spill may migrate to a nearby creek which feeds into a larger body of water.

Role Play #8: Structural Collapse

You are constructing a 6-story elevated parking ramp, adjacent to a major hotel chain, in a large metropolitan area. Upon performing a concrete pour on the 4th level, the deck collapses causing the two levels below to fail under the weight from above. The accident has resulted in three fatalities and seven other workers are taken to different area hospitals. News of the collapse has spread quickly and reporters are on the scene.