

CHAPTER 14

Being Ready For A Crisis [Tell it *First* – Tell it *Fast* – Tell it *All* – Tell it *Yourself*]

Crisis is defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as “a crucial point or situation in the course of anything; a turning point.” It is also defined as “an unstable condition...in which an abrupt or decisive change is pending.”

The same publisher defines *communication* as “the exchange of thoughts, messages...speech, signals or writing.”

Successful public relations practitioners view a crisis as “a situation you plan for but hope never occurs – but if it does, you are prepared.”

Firms and organizations should develop two types of *crisis plans* – an *operational* plan and a *communication* plan. Operational plans are designed to keep organizations functioning. This chapter concentrates on the communication plan – successful communication techniques used during an unstable period or during a surprise situation that might have a short decision time.

A lack of crisis planning could make a bad situation worse, could have dangerous side effects or it could even spell doom. The book, *Public Relations...Strategies and Tactics* (Wilcox, Ault and Agee), states, “How an organization responds in the first 24 hours (of a crisis) often determines whether the situation remains an incident or becomes a full-blown crisis.”

Strategic communication guru, Anne Sceia Klein, APR, PRSA Fellow, of Anne Klein Communications Group (Mount Laurel, N.J.), has years of experience that prove the first hour or two following a crisis are the most crucial. “After that,” she says, “It’s a whole different ballgame.” Her advice, “Be prepared for that first news media call” (no matter how quickly it comes).

Practice Your ABCs

Those first few hours (two to four) are considered the communication director's Golden Hours. Successful strategic counselors think about their "ABCs" –

- A=Anticipate
- B=Be prepared
- C=Communicate clearly, calculatingly (measure each word), concisely, consistently, completely (specifically and simply) – and correctly.

Tell it **FIRST** – Tell it **FAST** – Tell it **ALL** – Tell it **YOURSELF**.

Like so much in our profession, the key to a successful crisis communication plan is *anticipation*. Anticipation is not predicting, but rather being prepared beforehand. Even the best communicator can boast all he or she wants about having advance knowledge or a premonition. But whether or not the practitioner possesses that innate ability isn't the key. The key to a successful reaction is planning – being ready for that event "just in case it happens." However, it must be kept in mind that a plan is just that – a plan.

Live and YouTube videos and case studies of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing are proof positive – and reinforce – that well-planned crisis organizational and communication plans do work. Federal, state, local law enforcement and other officials (more than 30 agencies) did their best to collaborate and cooperate so that Plays 14-1 and 14-3's rules could be followed as closely as possible – maintaining the proper emotional tone.

Klein suggests that one way for practitioners to anticipate is to answer the question, "Is there anything that keeps me awake at night?"

No matter the response, practitioners must recognize that no two crises are the same. Thus, there is no "cookie-cutter" approach.

"Nothing is more important during a crisis than good, quick, effective, accurate communication," says J. William Jones, retired corporate public affairs officer at PECO® (an Exelon® Company) in Philadelphia and the former director of public affairs for the School District of Philadelphia. "Effective management response is the key to credibility."

That was evident on Dec. 14, 2012 – a day most will never forget. Soon after classes began on that Friday, a mass shooting occurred at Sandy

Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Twenty first graders – 6- and 7-year-olds – and six teachers and other educators were brutally murdered by a 20-year-old gunman who earlier had shot his mother to death in her house and eventually took his own life inside the school.

The details of the horrific event – a tragedy of unspeakable terms – remained in the news for months. The following paragraphs are not about the tragedy, but rather about textbook crisis communication led by Connecticut State Police Lt. Paul Vance, whose years of experience were obvious. He followed the “Three Rules of Crisis Communication” by immediately controlling the message, getting the information out quickly and in his own terms (See Play 14-1) and link to:

<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/video/8069787-gov-dan-malloy-and-lt-paul-vance-brief-on-connecticut-school-shooting/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFWA29yhTuE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfW9cBnHeJ0>

It was evident from the moment Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy turned the news briefing over to Lt. Vance the media respected and trusted him. Vance was direct and forthright. Like other first responders, he was making extraordinarily difficult decisions under time pressures – fully understanding his responsibilities.

Said Vance soon after arriving on the scene: “This is an active, ongoing investigation. There’s a great deal of work to go. And there are a lot of things we cannot confirm or discuss as of yet.”

He recounted what he knew detail by detail commencing with the first 911 “call for help at the Sandy Hook Elementary School” shortly after 9:30 a.m. He said the response to the first call “was instantaneous.”

Showing compassion, he said first and foremost police were concerned for the safety and welfare of everyone inside the building “knowing it was a potential active shooter situation. They (first responders) immediately entered the school. Their focus was to search for students, faculty and staff and remove them to a safe area outside of the school.”

“They did search every nook and cranny, every room, and every portion of that school and accomplished that task. They took the rescued to a ‘staging area’ to reunite them with family members. As has been reported, there were fatalities,” he said.

Lt. Vance went on to painstakingly describe the gruesome details including the death of the shooter who was found inside the school. He said there is a “great deal of work going on” including identifications and crime scene examinations.

“We need to establish identity,” he said. “We need to document the entire scene. Simply stated, we need to answer every single question so we know how and why this incident occurred. We are not even putting a time stamp on when we will complete this project.”

Lt. Vance then took questions reminding the media, “This is an active on-going case and there are things that we cannot and will not discuss at this time.”

While he did attempt to answer all of the questions, he clearly demonstrated his crisis communication expertise in employing the “pseudo no comment.” Not once did he say “no comment” or even mention the word “comment” as he dodged sensitive questions or those for which he did not have the facts.

Lt. Vance explained why he could not discuss certain aspects – often reiterating what had been said explaining, “that’s as much as we want to go into detail.” At no time did the media appear dissatisfied.

He said a final report would contain answers to all questions. That initial briefing and those that followed ended with Lt. Vance scheduling the next briefing – some within “60 minutes at which time I will try to have answers to some of your questions and more detail.” When a scheduled briefing did not start promptly, media appeared patient because of the trust he evoked, his preparation and thoroughness. He was both credible and believable.

As he was leaving the first briefing, Lt. Vance turned back to the microphones stating, “One thing I would like to say is we have been meeting with all of the family members. It’s a very difficult scene for the family members – all of the first responders. It’s a tragic scene. We have been asked by the family members to ask the press to respect their privacy and to please leave them alone at this time. They are going through a tremendous amount of grief, which I am sure you can appreciate.”

In response to a question about the scene, he said out of respect to the families and others he would not describe what he saw: “I have been a trooper a long time and my lieutenant to my left has been in law

enforcement a long time and describing it serves no useful purpose. It is a horrific scene. Between our mutual experience we have never seen anything like this. It is heart wrenching for us as it is for the families. I would just like to leave it at that.”

Throughout each briefing, Lt. Vance’s compassion and incredible patience with the media never wavered. As he responded to many of the same or similar questions, he repeated the facts, as he knew them, about the “massive investigation.”

“An investigation like this,” he said, “is like a puzzle. We want to put this puzzle together and form a complete picture so that everyone without any doubt what so ever can truly understand what occurred. We will send you out a news release, a press release. If you are not on our email list get it off the Associate Press (wire service). Primarily, it will contain all the details of all the briefings.” Reporters were assured that fact sheets and releases would be available at the media “staging area,” on the state police website and on (the) AP.

He made a point of commending the partnership between Newtown Police, state police, federal law enforcement and local police from other states and then urged the media “not to read anything (speculate about other police jurisdictions) into what he was saying. We are not going to hide anything from you.”



Lt. J. Paul Vance

Lt. Vance’s concluding statement from that – lengthy – first briefing illustrated the mutual respect he, his colleagues and the media had for each other: “(It’s) all hands on deck. We will get this done in a timely fashion. Give us until morning.

Hopefully we can tie up some loose ends first thing in the morning. We will fill in the voids tomorrow as much as we possibly can.”

During the briefing, which was quintessential crisis communication, Lt. Vance touched on the crisis operation plan – a description which could be used for the communication plan, as well: “First responders who were first in the door with surrounding police departments and the

troopers – this is something that you train for...you plan for. You work towards. You hope they'll never have to use. Their training kicked in. They saved a lot of lives. They did a great job. They did a great job.”

Another example of how the ABCs of strategic communication was implemented would be actions taken prior to and during the October 2012



Connecticut State Police Lt. J. Paul Vance and other state and local police fielding questions near Sandy Hook Elementary School during the first of many news briefings. Such impromptu media conferences are described as “media scrums.”

Superstorm Sandy, which struck much of the coast from the Carolinas to New England. It, especially, wreaked havoc on the New York and New Jersey coastlines. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and dozens of mayors demonstrated their crisis communication prowess by holding news conferences days in advance – unveiling their operational plans.



While property damage was in the billions and more than 110 died, the consensus was clear – without Anticipation, preparation (**Be prepared**) and clear Communication, human loss and suffering would have been far worse.

The nonpartisan cooperation – established days before Sandy hit New Jersey – is best illustrated by Gov. Christie, staunch backer of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. “It’s been very good working with the president,” Christie said on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*. “He and his administration have been coordinating with us. It’s been wonderful.”

On NBC's "Today," Christie said the president had been "outstanding" and FEMA's response has been "excellent."

The Republican governor also sent out a thankful tweet: "I want to thank the president personally for all his assistance as we recover from the storm."

Christie said, "The president has been all over this and he deserves great credit. I've been on the phone with him personally (sometimes) three times a day including midnight. He gave me his number at the White House, told me to call him if I needed anything. And he absolutely means it."

It was 17 years earlier that PECO's Jones had to deal with tragedy. He was a member of the strategic counseling team that advised PECO® management to accept blame after a 1995 gas explosion in its service area left two people dead and rocked a neighborhood in Suburban Philadelphia. PECO's® president and CEO uttered the magic words, "It was our fault." At the time, other than Johnson & Johnson® taking the direct approach, few organizations had. The PECO® team received universal praise as evidenced by some of the newspaper headlines below:

Some Headlines from PECO® December 1995 residential gas explosion

SORRY

Peco prez: Response in fatal gas blast was 'unacceptable and regrettable'

Philadelphia Daily News – December 20, 1995

PECO does the right thing

Philadelphia Daily News – December 26, 1995

PECO takes blame in fatal blast

The Reporter – December 20, 1995

PECO: It's our fault

Daily Times – December 21, 1995

Peco's mea culpa hailed as 'brilliant'

Savvy PR, Despite firm's blast liability

Philadelphia Daily News – December 22, 1995

That same direct approach was evident when with both engines out, a cool-headed pilot (Chesley Sullenberger) maneuvered his crowded jetliner over New York City and splash landed in the frigid Hudson River (January 2009). Miraculously, all 155 on board were pulled to safety as the plane slowly sank. One victim suffered two broken legs, a paramedic said, but there were no other reports of serious injuries.

New York Governor David Paterson called it “a miracle on the Hudson.”



STEVEN DAY / Associated Press

Passengers and crew wait on the wings of a jetliner that safely ditched in the Hudson River in New York after geese knocked out both of its engines.

The plane, a US Airways Airbus A320 bound for Charlotte, N.C., struck a flock of geese during takeoff three minutes earlier at LaGuardia Airport and was submerged up to its windows in the river as rescuers converged from both sides of the Hudson – Manhattan and Newark, N.J. Rescuers arrived in Coast Guard vessels, ferries, water taxis, tugboats, inflatable rescue craft and ships from Circle Line. By the time the first vessels arrived – within 90 seconds of the plane hitting the water – passengers were exiting onto the partially submerged wings while others waded in water up to their knees. The crash took place on a 20-degree day, one of the coldest of the season in New York. The water temperature was 36 degrees.

Within two hours, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his crisis team leaders – with his gathered facts in hand and for distribution to reporters – faced the media on national television from the New York side of the

Hudson. He opened: “Let me tell you what we know happened and what we don’t know, yet. We have just witnessed grace under pressure.”

It was clear, both his operational and crisis communication plans had been carried out flawlessly.

Even before Bloomberg spoke, about 90 minutes after the plane “ditched,” US Airways Chair and CEO Doug Parker was addressing the media from company headquarters in Phoenix, Ariz. He did not take questions so he could immediately fly to New York City. His strategic statement follows:

I can confirm US Airways Flight 1549 was involved in an accident. The Airbus A320 was en route to Charlotte from LaGuardia. It had 150 passengers on board. The flight was operated with a crew of two pilots and three flight attendants. US Airways is confirming passenger and crew names and will issue those as soon as possible. At this point, no additional details can be confirmed. Our preliminary report is that everyone is off the plane and accounted for.

We’ve activated our US Airways care team of specially trained employee volunteers to assist those affected by this accident. Individuals who believe they may have family members on board Flight 1549 may call US Airways at 1-800-679-8215 within the United States. The number can be reached toll free from international locations through AT&T’s U.S.A. Direct. To contact an AT&T operator please visit www.usa.att.com/traveler for U.S.A. Direct access codes. Others are asked, please, not to call this number so the lines can be kept available for those who truly need them.

It’s premature to speculate about the cause of this accident. Out of respect for those affected we would ask that you also resist the temptation to speculate.

The National Transportation Safety Board will conduct a thorough investigation to determine the probable cause with our complete support and the support of many others. Further, we are working with and will continue to cooperate fully with the N.T.S.B., local, state and national authorities and answers will emerge during the course of that investigation.

Right now we're working to care for those who have been touched by this accident. Members of our airline family will come together with these families to help however we can. I am on my way to New York shortly.

In closing, safety is, has been and forever will be our foremost priority at US Airways. All of us at US Airways are committed to determining the cause of this event and to assisting in every way possible in preventing a similar occurrence.

US Airways will continue to release information as it becomes available. Please monitor usairways.com for the latest information.

Pennsylvania Gov. Mark Schweiker also used the direct approach when he took control of a crisis in Pennsylvania (July 2002) after nine coal miners were trapped underground. Schweiker, the point person, was described as responsive, forthright and compassionate throughout the ordeal. His care and concern were visible at every news briefing. When it was determined that all nine miners were alive and relatively healthy, it was Schweiker who delivered the good news enthusiastically, raising his arms in triumph. Pennsylvania had a plan.

In contrast, it soon became apparent Pennsylvania State University followed none of the crisis communication rules in the Jerry Sandusky child sex-abuse scandal. Penn State did not react within the Golden Hours. In fact, its administration and ultimately its board did not respond to the crisis for days and in some cases, weeks.

A scientific survey conducted by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* proved perception is reality. The phone survey of 601 likely Pennsylvania voters conducted from Aug. 21 through 23, 2012 had a statistical margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

"*The Philadelphia Inquirer* Pennsylvania Poll found the state's voters widely disapproved of the way figures such as former Pennsylvania State University President Graham Spanier, head football coach Joe Paterno, and Gov. (Tom) Corbett handled allegations against the former assistant coach convicted in June 2012 of molesting 10 boys.

"Only 10 percent of those polled said they approved of Spanier's handling of the crisis, as opposed to the 77 percent who thought he had bungled the job.

PR Play 14-1

Three Rules of (Damage Control) Crisis Communication

1. Get information out early.
 - Respond within 2-4 hours (quicker, if possible) – if only as an acknowledgment that you are on top of the situation.
2. Get it out yourself.
 - The spokesperson should be a high profile representative of the organization.
3. Get it out on your own terms – control the message.
 - Tell it **First**
 - Tell it **Fast**
 - Tell it **All**
 - Tell it **Yourself**

“Paterno fared slightly better with a 28 percent approval rating and 65 percent who said they were disappointed by his actions.

“Only 17 percent of poll respondents said they approved of how Corbett had approached the investigation, while 61 percent found his decisions lacking.”

Public Deserves Answers

Whether the crisis is the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, child sex-abuse at Penn State University or some less visible organization, or a mass shooting at a school or movie theater, a major charity executive embezzling funds, the (seven) Tylenol-related deaths in 1982, or a space shuttle tragedy, the public wants and deserves answers.

As J. William Jones says, those answers must be based on accurate information and should be given by “unflappable” professionals who know what they are talking about.

The need for crisis management policies has become a major priority for many corporations and other organizations. Thanks to effective plan-

ning, victim organizations can control a crisis through rapid systematic dissemination of information – being proactive rather than reactive – so long as that information is factual.

Strategic counselors and reporters alike agree there is no substitute for believability (truth) and credibility (trust). Once lost, they are nearly impossible to regain. Avoid any instincts to minimize or cover up bad news. If not totally truthful and trustworthy, the media will eventually discover your unprofessional approach. Whatever trust you once had will be gone forever.

Keep in mind, when dealing with a crisis, the goal should be more than just “damage control.” If the crisis communication plan is carried out properly and successfully, the damage control will take care of itself.

When a crisis hits, your publics want to know: what happened; how it will affect them; what is going to be done about it.

For the most part, there are two major categories of crises – *natural* and *man-made*.

PR Play 14-2

Phases of an Emergency

- Initial Crisis
- Successive Events
- Follow-up Management

PR Play 14-3

Communicate Early and Often

- Contact the media before they contact you.
- Communicate internally first, then externally.
- Put the public first.
- Take responsibility.
- Be honest.
- Never say “No comment.”
- Designate a single spokesperson.
- Set up a central information center (staging area).
- Provide a constant flow of information.
- Be familiar with media needs and deadlines.
- Monitor news coverage and telephone inquiries.
- Communicate with key publics.
- Be accessible.

Examples of *natural crises*:

- Created by acts of nature – tornados, hurricanes, blizzards
- Flood
- Flu epidemic

Examples of *man-made crises*:

- Terrorism
- Bomb threat
- Stock market crash

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan

No matter under which category your crisis falls, you will need an effective, proven, near-flawless (proactive) plan.

- The first step in any well-crafted strategic plan is research. But during a crisis, there may not be time enough to find the source or cause. If resources permit, appoint someone on staff to try to locate the cause. Meanwhile, others should be gathering the facts. Those facts will greatly assist in communicating accurate information and minimizing rumors. No matter the magnitude of the crisis, only one person should be designated as a spokesperson. This helps assure control of the situation, which should sway public opinion to your side.
- Gathering the facts and implementing your plan should be simultaneous. During the first session (within those Golden Hours) with the media or the first communiqué from the public relations office, it may have to be explained, “This is the information we have thus far. As additional facts are gathered we will continue to keep you informed or we will schedule media briefings.” This will help manage and control the flow of information. Operating from a “staging area” or “situation (“war”) room” – possibly at an alternate site (to help control the situation and maintain calm) – has proven successful. It could be a small conference room or a large office. No matter where you choose to locate your staging area, a central facility should be used to gather and disseminate information. It should be a room equipped with hardline phones, wireless technology (Wi-fi), computers, copiers, etc. (See Emergency Management Kit, PR Play 14-11.)

- All employees should be aware, in advance, that management does have a crisis plan. They don't have to know how the plan works unless they are part of its implementation. However, if a crisis hits, that plan should be publicized, first internally and then to outside publics. It is the internal family who helps communicate calm and control to external publics. That internal family should include more than employees. It may include stakeholders (possibly neighbors of an oil refinery that may be emitting fumes into the atmosphere).
- If you have the luxury of running *crisis drills*, do so. During the drills, gather feedback from people you trust. They could be employees, reporters, key communicators (Chapter 15 – Other PR Tools), independent evaluators or crisis management personnel from other organizations.

PR Play 14-4

The Role of Public Relations in the Johnson & Johnson® Tylenol® Crisis

The public relations decisions related to the Tylenol crisis and the product's strong comeback came in two phases.

Phase one was the crisis phase, which began on the morning of September 30, 1982, with the grim news of the cyanide poisonings. Since the extent of the contamination was not immediately known, there was grave concern for the safety of the estimated 100 million Americans who were using Tylenol. The first critical public relations decision, taken immediately and with total support from company management, was to cooperate fully with the news media. The press was key to warning the public of the danger.

Later it was realized that no meeting had been called to make that critical decision. The poisonings called for immediate action to protect the consumer, and there wasn't the slightest hesitation about being completely open with the news media. For the same reasons the decision was made to recall two batches of the product, and later to withdraw it nationally. During the crisis phase of the Tylenol tragedy, virtually every public relations decision was based on sound, socially responsible business principles, which is when public relations is most effective.

cont.

PR Play 14-4 continued

Almost immediately, planning began for phase two, the comeback, and this involved a more detailed and extensive public relations effort that closely followed important marketing decisions and reached out to many audiences. The comeback began officially with a 30-city video press conference via satellite, an innovative approach suggested by Burson-Marsteller, the public relations agency responsible for Tylenol product publicity.

The video conference and all other key decisions were discussed and debated by a seven-member strategy committee formed by Chairman and CEO James E. Burke to deal with the Tylenol crisis. The committee included a public relations executive and met twice daily for six weeks. The decisions it made dealt with every aspect of the problem – from packaging to advertising to appearances on network television. Many required follow-up by the public relations staff at corporate and at McNeil Consumer Products Company – the subsidiary that manufactures Tylenol.

The Tylenol tragedy proved once again that public relations is a business of basics, and that the best public relations decisions are closely linked to sound business practices and a responsible corporate philosophy.

Lawrence G. Foster
Corporate Vice President-Public Relations
Johnson & Johnson

- Just as research is the first step in any plan, evaluation is the final step. As Jones puts it, “All crises have at least one thing in common. Eventually, they end.” That’s when you evaluate your plan, its successes and its failures. If you made a mistake, do as PECO® did, admit it. Just don’t let it happen again. By recognizing mistakes or shortcomings, you should be able to build a better plan for the next crisis.

Every step should be reviewed (keep a minute-by-minute diary). Don’t be afraid to ask everyone involved for feedback – staff, reporters, key communicators, other members of the public, etc.

PR Play 14-5
Lessons Learned

- Don't duck the issue.
- Take responsibility.
- Offer to make good on broken promises.
- Cover all the bases.
- Measure results.

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PR Play 14-6
Get Down to Basics

1. When a crisis breaks, first, before anything else, get the facts – gather information.
2. Once you have the facts, determine which changes must be made in the strategic plan to best manage this particular crisis.
3. Communicate your plan, first internally, then externally.
4. Seek feedback.
5. Evaluate your plan.

PR Play 14-7
The 10 D's of Crisis Communication

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| • Direct | • Diffuse |
| • Distance | • Defuse |
| • Deflect | • Dilute |
| • Distract | • Dissolve |
| • Divert | • Dodge |

Initial Crisis

- Recognize there is a crisis.
- Inform staff of the crisis.
- Put both crisis plans – communication and operational – into action (“everyone to their stations”).

- Establish command post (staging area – situation room) and begin gathering facts (first true step):
 1. Extent of the disaster
 2. Names of all involved
 3. Are there injuries and if so, at what locations
 4. Retrieve information from computer
- Activate communication network:
 1. Smartphones, tablets, PCs and laptops
 2. Establish contact with team members (your so-called crisis cabinet)
- Establish communication with emergency agencies
- Decision making:
 1. Assign and reassign staff depending on type of crisis
 2. Schedule news briefings
 3. Determine need for such support services as food, shelter, security, counseling, etc.

Successive Events

- Determine who will communicate with families of victims (injured or killed).
- Maintain contact with media through briefings, news conferences, releases, interviews and continuous blast texts. (Do not play favorites.)
- Deal with rumors (as resources permit, one staff member should be assigned the task of dissolving rumors).
- Be prepared for additional emergencies.

Follow-up Management

- Continue the flow of information.
- Continually evaluate and adjust your plan.

Knowing the difference between media training and presentation training could be pivotal. Media training is more concerned with looks, gestures and mannerisms. Actual presentations need rehearsals to work on delivery, key message points and tone setting. Rehearsals and presentations should be video and audio taped – and viewed and listened to – so that adjustments can be made (Chapter 10).

Hindsight is 20-20. But one thing has been proven time and again — the lesson to be learned when dealing with a crisis is to adopt a philosophy similar to that of KDPaine & Partners, LLC headquartered in Berlin, N.H. (www.measuresofsuccess.com):

- ***Don't duck the issue*** – Every time a company tries to “stonewall” or deny the story, the media will gather information and print or air it. Companies that take a forthright approach to their crises reduce publicity almost immediately.
- ***Take responsibility*** – It is important to accept responsibility immediately and offer to fix the problem. Take a page from Taco Bell®. In December 2006, an E.coli outbreak struck a relatively small number of its 5,800 restaurants, but sent dozens of customers to hospitals – some seriously ill. Taco Bell® took action. “We immediately notified health officials and voluntarily closed several restaurants in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware,” said Greg Creed, Taco Bell® president. “The public’s safety continues to be our utmost concern, and we will actively support an industry coalition including government regulators, competitors, suppliers and other experts to develop improved guidelines and procedures to safeguard the product supply chain and public health.” Taco Bell® established a toll-free number to answer questions and deal with concerns. That’s the kind of decisive action that must be taken.
- ***Cover all bases*** – In the Tylenol tragedy, J & J® removed its product from store shelves and warehouses nationwide, absorbed the losses, eventually developed an improved product with several safety devices on the packages and offered consumers “gift certificates” for any product they disposed of. Simultaneously, J & J®, through its corporate public relations office, cooperated fully with the news media (using a single spokesperson).

PR Play 14-8

Crisis Management Tips from Professionals

1. Even the most carefully laid plans must be constantly re-evaluated and refined.
2. Planning is just the beginning.
3. Every crisis is different and when one occurs, it is a mistake to assume a plan will handle all the answers.
4. In a crisis, the best defense is staying on your toes.

- ***Offer to make good on broken promises*** – During alleged “profiling” of minority drivers on the New Jersey Turnpike, Gov. Christine Todd Whitman promised to correct it. When it became apparent that wasn’t happening, she called for the resignation of the state police superintendent. (He sued the state and governor for forcing him out of office. The courts found in favor of the governor.)
- ***Measure results*** – Monitor the news media – using search engines and alerts. Press clipping services are more efficient than ever. This is also a wonderful opportunity to tap your key communicators (feel their pulse [Chapter 15]) to help determine whether your approach is on course. Kathryn (Katie) Paine of KDPaine & Partners, LLC, reminds us, “In a crisis, the goal can never be to squelch negative coverage completely. Rather, it must be to shorten the life span of the bad news, to minimize those messages you don’t want to see in print and get as many of your key messages out there as possible.”

Almost immediately after a crisis hits, management must determine which of the so-called 10 D’s it is going to use in its approach to communicating. Whichever is chosen, credibility must never be in doubt.

- ***Direct*** – to take charge with authority. (This is the newest approach to dealing with a crisis. It is a head-on approach to controlling or managing a situation. NASA’s top administrators took the ***Direct*** approach [at the four hour mark] following the disintegration of the space shuttle Columbia in February 2003.)
- ***Distance*** – attempt to separate itself from the cause. (During Vice President Al Gore’s presidential campaign, every effort was made to distance himself and other Democrats running for office from President Clinton because of Mr. Clinton’s involvement with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.)
- ***Deflect*** – attempt to shift the blame. (In the Tylenol case, law enforcement officials did the deflecting for J & J[®]. Investigators determined that the tainting of the capsules was not done on J & J[®] premises and J & J[®] was not to blame.)

PR Play 14-9

**Considerations Your *Single Spokesperson*
Must Keep in Mind (During A Crisis)**

- Do your homework.
 - Be accessible.
 - Be prompt and dependable.
 - Avoid being pushed into easy solutions.
 - Accept responsibility.
 - Be responsive and forthright, and show compassion for victims and their families.
 - Bluffing an answer is not acceptable – wait until you have the correct information.
 - Speak and write your information clearly.
 - Be prepared to respond to incorrect information.
 - Remain calm and confident – at all times maintaining the proper emotional tone.
-
- ***Distract*** – attempt to divert focus or attention from a firm or organization. (Also called “The Tail Wagging the Dog,” meaning an item of minor importance is created to intentionally influence events or gain more attention than the larger and more important event [in this case, the crisis]. This is not recommended. J & J® never attempted to sidetrack the media or consumer by placing blame elsewhere. It took quick, forceful and responsible action. In contrast, Penn State did not communicate for several days and its board of trustees avoided blame.)
 - ***Diffuse*** – attempt to soften the blame on yourself by spreading out the cause. (In May 2000, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration issued a letter to Ford® and Bridgestone-Firestone® requesting information about the high incidence of tire failure on Ford Explorer® vehicles. During July 2000, Ford obtained and analyzed the data on tire failure. “The data revealed that 15 inch ATX and ATX II models and Wilderness AT tires had very high failure rates: the tread peels off. Many of the tires were made at a Decatur, Illinois, plant. Worse, when the tires fail the vehicle often rolls over and kills the occupants.” Initially, Bridgestone-Firestone and Ford Motor Company attempted to shift the blame to each other. In the end, they did the right thing. Even though they eventually accepted responsibility, the diffused approach was taken, with both companies attempting to ease

PR Play 14-10

Successful Crisis PR Depends on Planning and the Practitioner's Mindset. Needed Are:

- A strategic communication process in place
- Support from senior management
- Communication with the chief strategic counselor or someone with direct access to senior management
- Good relations and credibility with the news media
- Effective internal communication
- Strong peer relations, especially with attorneys
- Ability to “fly the plane” so to speak

C. Fernando Vivanco – The Boeing Company – and
Kathleen L. Lewton – Fleishman-Hillard, Inc.

the pain and prevent a similar crisis. Penn State’s board could be accused of diffusing blame.)

- **Defuse** – attempt to prevent the “explosion” before it occurs. (J & J® did defuse the situation by accepting, or giving the perception of accepting, full responsibility whether or not it was fully at fault. J & J® manufactured the product. That was enough for upper management to do what it could to pull the plug [fuse] on a popular product, make good on consumer losses and maintain the public’s confidence.)
- **Dilute** – to weaken. This is similar to *diffuse*, but isn’t necessarily the spread of blame. It is an approach that clarifies a situation by demonstrating that it is not as “bad” as perceived. (In the Lewinsky matter, President Clinton was asked a number of questions about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Mr. Clinton attempted to weaken the interrogator by asking him to define “sex” and convincing enough senators that he should remain in office and not be convicted on impeachment.)
- **Dissolve** – to cause to disappear or vanish. (It is nearly impossible to dissolve a crisis or alleged crisis. That is why rumors can be so damaging. Too many times, people remember the first thing they hear about a topic. [Who was it that said, “We get only one chance to make a good first impression”?] Johnson and Johnson® did *dissolve* its Tylenol® crisis by launching the “caplet,” which replaced the “capsule.” J & J® not only regained its market share for Tylenol, but increased it – almost unheard of.)

PR Play 14-11

Emergency Management Kits

No matter the industry or profession, when a crisis or emergency hits, you should be just as ready with your own Emergency Management Kit (EMK) of communication-type items as you would be with a first-aid kit containing bandages, antiseptics, alcohol, etc. Below is one strategic counselor's suggestion for an EMK. Its contents might depend on the type of company or organization and staff size. You or your staff should customize your own, determine quantities and keep it current. Emergency Management Kits and copies of a Crisis Communication Plan should be in several locations so that if an emergency hits, the plan and kit will not be in a quarantined area. It should be quickly accessible by smartphones, tablets and other devices.

At the very minimum, it should contain:

1. Copy of Crisis Communication Plan (keep the plan on a password protected website link, USB "flash" drive, CD and hard copy.) Be certain it is up to date. The website could be kept "dark" until a crisis hits – known as a "dark website."
2. Legal pads.
3. Pens (ballpoint, felt tip [Bic® and Sharpie® brands are dependable]).
4. Large felt-tip markers.
5. Plain white peel-off stickers (used to identify injured staff at the emergency site).
6. List of (electronically accessible) phone numbers for various offices and satellite company locations, local law enforcement agencies, emergency medical services, fire department and other agencies that need to know of the crisis. Include cell phone numbers and email addresses on this list. Fax lines and emails at major offices should also be included.
7. List of cell and beeper numbers for staff.
8. Local phone directory with email addresses.
9. Current staff directory.
10. Floor plans showing locations of all exits, telephones and wall jacks, computers, and other devices that may be useful in communication during an emergency.
11. Fully charged battery-operated bullhorn.
12. Local street and zone maps.
13. For all trips from the site, a map showing the most direct and safest routes to be traveled to and from the destination.
(For GPS navigation purposes, all addresses should be complete with street number and zip code.)

cont.

PR Play 14-11 continued

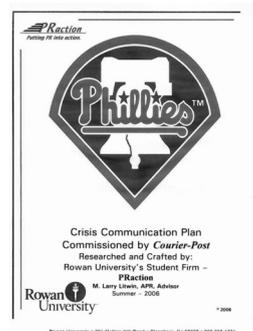
14. List of assigned roles for personnel.
15. Summary of information that can be made public during an emergency. Include Freedom of Information Act summary, company policy and others.
16. List of professional and community contacts for organizing a crisis care team of counselors, clergy and others.
17. Laptop computers and tablets (iPad®) with fresh batteries.

- **Divert** – a combination of *deflect* and *distract*. It is both shifting blame and turning attention away from the issue(s) at hand (not a responsible approach). (Turner Broadcasting System’s Cartoon Network® – either planned or unintentional – attempted to *divert* attention when its marketing campaign for the *Adult Swim* show “Aqua Teen Hunger Force” caused a massive panic in Boston – LED signs of Ignignot and Err [Mooninite Marauders characters from the show] were mistaken as explosive devices. Boston authorities may have overreacted when it shut down part of the city and detonated the cartoon publicity devices, but TBS and its Cartoon Network® should have taken immediate and *direct* responsibility for guerilla marketing that went bad and caused “panic.”)

PR Play 14-12

An Award-Winning Crisis Communication Plan

To view the award-winning plan, “Philadelphia Phillies – A Crisis Communication Plan Commissioned by *Courier-Post*” go to www.larrylitwin.com and click on Student Resources, Classroom Handouts, No. 49. Plans use a decimal system for easy reference. The plan earned the 2006 Peppercot Award from the Philadelphia chapter of the Public Relations Society of America for Crisis Communication and the Frank X. Long Achievement Award for “excellence in writing and creativity.”



- **Dodge** – avoid answering questions or use of excuses (not always truthful).

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association suggests that the chief spokesperson must do his or her homework. The spokesperson must be prepared and knowledgeable about the situation.

Accessibility is important. Reporters must be able to contact the so-called “point person.” Editors and reporters have been heard to complain that key personnel are not available when bad news breaks. Remember, if you want your strategic message heard, you have to say or write it.

Promises made to the media must be kept. But don’t allow reporters to push you into a corner or into easy solutions. Many times, reporters and their editors are looking for “quick-fix” answers. Remember though, no matter the medium, there are deadlines.

The spokesperson is expected to act responsibly. It is recommended that legal advice be readily at hand.

If you don’t have the answer to a question or are lacking some information, say so. Promise to get whatever is needed and provide it as soon as you can.

While much of the information the spokesperson is disseminating is verbal, it is advised to back it up with written copy. In all cases, avoid jargon that might be pertinent to a particular industry or profession. Communicate in terms that everyone can understand.

If there is incorrect information floating, be ready to respond. But first, ask this question: “Should a response be made?” If resources permit, attempt to locate the primary source of this incorrect information or rumor.

Other Suggestions

As you prepare for the worst, hoping it never happens, follow the advice of *BusinessWeek* magazine: “Be visible, be sympathetic, be responsible.” Gov. Schweiker (coal mine crisis) was all three. He also followed the magazine’s other suggestions: “Don’t delay, don’t deny, don’t hope it will go away.”

Remember to keep your firm or organization’s website current. Get information on it rapidly. In fact, many firms have what they refer to as “dark sites” – available only in the event of a crisis or some other emergency. It links from the main website. Remember too, if there is no “new” news, say it on the website. Include the date and time of the latest update.

Dealing With the Media When a Crisis Strikes

One instance in our business or private lives when you cannot ignore the presence of the media is during a time of crisis. When a crisis hits, in a matter of seconds, it can forever change the course of your business – or someone’s life.

In the moments and days following a crisis, the media will be a part of your life – visiting your facility, talking to employees, neighbors, government officials, self-proclaimed “experts” and more importantly, wanting to talk to you. Yes, you, the public relations practitioner – the center of the crisis. Should you grant an interview? Yes. All of the people involved in the situation will present their points of view. This is your opportunity to tell the story as you see it.

Here are some tips from Peter J. McCarthy, vice president, public affairs, Elf Atochem North America, Inc. They are designed to help you manage the crisis:

- Boil down your message to no more than two or three points and make certain you deliver those points no matter what else the reporter wants to talk about. You have every bit as much right as the reporter to set the agenda and terms of the interview.
- A word of caution – the reporter is not your friend. He or she is a professional who, no matter how personally charming, will get all points of view into the story. So don’t feel betrayed when that “nice guy” reporter also presents your opponent’s point of view – that’s his or her job.
- Your job is to use the interview as an opportunity to hammer home – simply, briefly and repeatedly – those messages that you believe are important for your audience to understand.
- One last thing – in every relationship someone is in charge. During the interview, make certain the public relations practitioner is in charge. During a time of crisis, damage control is the reason for giving the interview. Making certain that you are in control maximizes the likelihood of successful damage control.

The message is simple: Be prepared; anticipate the crisis; know your message; and most importantly ask yourself, “Who is in charge here?”

Peter J. McCarthy – Vice President – Public Affairs
Elf Atochem North America, Inc.

The Philadelphia Inquirer/Feb. 24, 1997

PR Play 14-13

Bernstein's 10 Steps of Crisis Communication

“Crisis communication’s function is to preserve the value of the brand. That’s accomplished by minimizing the impact of the crisis.”

1. Identify your crisis communication team
2. Identify spokesperson
3. Train spokesperson
4. Establish communication protocol (notification systems)
5. Identify and know your stakeholders
6. Anticipate crises
7. Develop holding statements (quick response)
8. Assess the crisis situation
9. Identify key messages
10. Riding out the storm

Jonathan Bernstein – Bernstein Crisis Management LLC –
www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com

Anne Klein Communications Group, strategic counselors, takes the guesswork out of what should be said during a crisis:

1. **Description of the general nature of the incident**, i.e., fire, injury, lawsuit, etc.
2. **Time of occurrence.**
3. **Location and description of the facility or geographic area involved.** Supply maps and diagrams of the site, if they are available.
4. **Whether the incident (e.g., fire) has been controlled.** This description should be in general lay terms. Don’t go into technical details that might lead to confusion on the part of the media and the public.
5. **Policies**, particularly safety and training – already adopted or approved.
6. **Corrective measures being taken at present** and, if you know for sure, what will be done in the long term. Example: “The fire department has the blaze under control. Everyone has been evacuated from the building. While the damage is being repaired, we will move our operations from this site to another location.”

PR Play 14-14

Jack Welch's Five Stages of Crisis Management

1. **Denial** – Denial in the face of disaster is human. It is the main and immediate emotion people feel at the receiving end of any really bad news. That doesn't excuse any official from not reacting quickly and staying "in front of the story." Rather than denial, the reaction should be forthright, calm, fierce and bold.
2. **Containment** – In companies and other organizations, containment usually plays out with leaders trying to keep the "matter" quiet – a total waste of energy. All problems, and especially messy ones, eventually get out and explode.
3. **Shame-mongering** – This is a period in which all stakeholders fight to get their side of the story told, with themselves as the heroes at the center.
4. **Blood on the floor** – Too many times, officials believe that someone has to pay for the crisis with his or her head.
5. **Galvanizing effect** – The fifth and final part of the pattern – the best part – is the awareness raised by a crisis.

Jack Welch – Former Chairman and CEO – General Electric®

7. **Emergency officials on the scene**, including fire, police, highway transportation department.
8. **Presence or absence of injuries**, but do not give names of individuals involved.
9. **Name(s) of hospitals being used** in case of injury.
10. **Identify organization officials coming to the scene** (in general, by type or title rather than by name). The key message is to express management concern.
11. **Details of the media briefing process, time and place of the next update and/or continuing media briefings.**
12. **Name and phone number of an organization official to contact for further information.**

PR Play 14-15

Bill Jones' 10 Commandments of Crisis Communication

1. *Perception is reality.* If your audience thinks it is, it is.
2. *Response is control.* The community wants access to information, and no crisis is unmanageable if you give clear, cool facts.
3. *Information is power.*
4. *Credibility is survival.*
5. *Body language is crucial.* If you behave like you have something to hide, people will think that you do.
6. *Calmness is essential.* Unflappability is your best asset. Always act knowledgeable and calm.
7. *Give a confession.* The public and the media want a confession; so don't be afraid to admit mistakes.
8. *Tell the franchise what happened.* It is in the best interest of the community to keep them informed.
9. *Preparation is 99% of success.*
10. *Out of every crisis comes the chance to "build a better mouse-trap."* From every crisis there are major lessons to be learned.
11. *Pray like hell that you never have to handle numbers 1 through 10!*

Here are some of Klein's "Important DON'Ts in Dealing With the Media" during a crisis:

1. **Do not speculate about anything.**
2. **Do not give out unconfirmed facts.** Give only the facts you are sure of until further information can be obtained.
3. **Do not speculate on the potential impact of the incident** on employees, neighbors, the community-at-large, etc., unless you know, for sure.
4. **Do not estimate on dollar figures for damage that occurred.**
5. **Do not release the names of anyone injured or killed until family members have been notified.**
6. **Do not give out any medical reports on condition(s) of the injured.** This is the responsibility of the attending physician or hospital spokesperson and is restricted by the federal medical privacy laws outlined in HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act).
7. **Do not assume liability for the incident or guess how the incident occurred.**

8. **Do not ever respond to a question with “No comment.”** It is never an acceptable answer. Say you don’t know if you are unsure of the answer or that you will put reporters in touch with someone who can answer their questions. If a question requires an answer that you feel is proprietary to the organization or would violate confidentiality, just explain that fact.
9. **Do not speak “off the record,” “not for attribution” or “on deep background.”** This is an area of high risk, and it is best not to venture there. (See Chapter 9.)
10. **Do not get angry with a reporter or raise your voice.**

Anne Klein and others who have been successful in dealing with the media during crises agree on the importance of remaining calm. Take time to compose yourself and craft your message as you formulate your answers. Remember, you are a professional doing your best to be helpful. Practice the highest ethical standards. Succinctly, you want to be open, honest, thorough and valid (relevant) in your responses and dissemination of information. Above all, never lie to a reporter, but do not answer a question if you don’t have the answer and don’t offer unsolicited information unless it is to your benefit.

Klein recommends you notify the media before they contact you when the community is in danger; your organization’s operations are affected; if having the media first learn about the situation from someone else would damage your organization’s image or credibility; a good number of employees know or could possibly know about the situation; or if there are regulatory infractions that would embarrass your organization if the media learned about them in some other way.

Crisis Communications Since 9/11: Where Do We Stand Now?

Op-ed submitted by Howard J. Rubenstein, *Founder, Rubenstein Associates* – New York

First published on Sept. 11, 2006, and reprinted from “Expert Recommendations” – *Crisis Communication Plan – Philadelphia Phillies*

On September 11, 2001 a few hate-filled individuals changed history for millions by destroying the World Trade Center (owned and operated by my longtime client, Larry Silverstein). Not only the larger sweep of history, but also the mindset of millions of individual Americans was forever transformed.

This change directly affects my approach to public relations. No longer can we wait in relative security until there's a new crisis. Instead, public relations professionals have to begin advising clients on how to anticipate and prepare for a crisis that doesn't yet exist — and that could take any number of forms, including terrorism, pandemics and economic downturn. We now need to be more serious and attentive than ever before. This transformation increases the value of having ready at hand a list of "DO's" and "DON'Ts" for meeting a crisis of any type.

First off, when you see early signs of a brewing crisis, take them seriously. These signs might take various forms: information from an outside source, warnings from whistleblowers or disgruntled employees within a company, media calls, inquiries from government entities, etc. Whatever form they take, don't ever assume they'll go away if you avoid them. To the contrary, be as proactive as possible.

In other words, prepare in advance. Put together a crisis team composed of management, legal personnel, communications experts and human resources professionals. Designate one or two people who will respond to media calls. Once the team is together, ask yourselves, "What's the right thing to do?" rather than, "What do we say?" Gather all the facts you can and identify the audiences you want to communicate with. These could include readers, public officials, stockholders, employees, the general public, etc. Respond quickly and, most important, accurately to all queries. Set the ground rules with reporters before you talk and, wherever possible, prepare written responses rather than winging it. But get the bad news out quickly — avoid "water torture."

What you don't want to do is lie, adopt a bunker mentality, automatically say "no comment" (doing so implies guilt) or make up answers. Never fight with reporters or gossip with them. Remember: The reporter has the last word in print and gossip almost always gets out.

If you put together your own aggressive crisis communications plan along the above lines, you'll have a good chance of minimizing the damage of negative news. An Oxford University study found that corporations that managed crises effectively enhanced their stock prices while those that handled the crisis poorly damaged them.

Sept. 11 (2001) got public relations professionals thinking about survival in a whole new way. You could say that because of the larger crisis in which the world is locked right now, we have more respon-

sibility than ever before to manage those crises that can be controlled as professionally and effectively as possible. Public relations has become a key back-up system, like an emergency generator, that more and more people realize they can't do without.

Howard Rubenstein founded Rubenstein Associates in 1954. The agency has an extensive list of more than 450 clients, including the New York Yankees, The New York Post, the Guggenheim Museum, BMW, the Mt. Sinai/NYU Health System, the Bowery Mission, Rockefeller Center, Columbia University and the Empire State Building.

EXERCISES

PR Challenges 14-1 and 14-2

Below is one, all encompassing challenge fashioned after those that too many institutions have had to face in recent years:

How would *you* handle the following?

You are strategic communication director for a private college in a small Iowa town. The college has an enrollment of 7,000 students in a town with a population of 8,000. The 105-year-old Fairfield College had been planning an expansion – possibly opening a satellite college on the east coast.

As luck would have it, Fairfield College appeared to hit the jackpot. A graduate offered to contribute \$150 million to the college. The only catch – the school's new convocation center be named after her. College President S. William Kramer calls you (the strategic counselor) into a one-on-one meeting for advice. During that meeting, Dr. Kramer informs you naming the new convocation center after Louise Roberts seems hardly enough. He proposes that Fairfield College become Roberts College of Iowa – with one goal in mind – becoming a nationally, if not, internationally known university.

a) Your assignment is to develop a “plan” with a strategic message or two on how the contribution will be handled and announced.

Some issues to keep in mind:

- Audiences
 1. Internal
 2. External
 3. “Townies”
 4. Alumni

- Tradition of name
- Rebranding plus brand expansion
- How do you propose Dr. Kramer respond to the “townies” who have given long-time personal and financial support to the college that carries the local name?

This just in...

After all is said and done, the college has the money. It has changed its name, built a new convention center and named it and the college, which became a university, after Dr. Roberts.

However, about three years after all of this was done, it becomes known that Dr. Roberts earned 10s of millions of dollars, including what she gave for the endowment, through illicit means. She is found guilty and sentenced to prison.

b) As strategic counselor, what advice do you give Dr. Kramer about the money in the endowment, about the name change and the university’s overall image?