

## McLoughlinMedia

### Um Plano de Comunicação na Crise

#### Barry McLoughlin

#### Part 1: How do I know we are in a crisis?

A tragic train crash in Maryland, a tunnel collapse in Japan, a mini van recall, Nick Leeson and Barings Bank, the Clinton's handling of Whitewater, the product tampering of Tylenol capsules and Diet Pepsi and the hypodermic needle. All of these have had something in common - they attracted enormous public interest, with potential damage to the individual or the organization involved. The results, however, have been very different - some were successfully handled while other were clearly not.

Welcome to our Lecture Series.

Over the next month, I will explore some of the issues and strategies for working with the media in a crisis. The topics that I will cover are:

- how to anticipate a crisis
- defining and differentiating a crisis communications team
- the roles of the media guide and the spokesperson
- timing, scheduling, responding and acting - when and how
- how the media will react and what you can do to anticipate
- the principles of crisis communications
- working with other players - industry, government and others
- how to utilize your CEO and when
- do's and don'ts of media communications

During this lecture, I will attempt to provide some insight into the nature of crises and draw some principles and lessons from them.

I invite you to share any case examples or "problems-for-solving" and let's see if we can generate some ideas or bring to life some of these concepts.

Let us begin with the first question: How do I know we are in a crisis?

I'm tempted to begin by saying, "if you don't know then you're really in trouble", however, the question is not as simple as it initially sounds. I have been involved in issues in which the organization is so determined to be seen as managing a crisis, that they are in a semi-permanent state of constant crisis. Other organizations, on the other hand, can be guilty of under-estimating the damage that an incident or allegation can cause them - especially in the court of public opinion. The two most common mistakes are to misunderstand the nature and scope of an event or issue, or to take ownership of an issue that is not yours.

Let's separate out three different situations which are significantly different from each other and which should not be confused with the other.

Daily Incident - an occurrence which is to be expected, in proportion to the public's expectations. For example, a fire, a shooting, a lay-off notice, a dip in stock price. These kinds of incidents are normal and that is why professionals are paid - to do their jobs in an effective and efficient manner. No big deal, right? Usually, but not necessarily.

If a 911 emergency call had been mishandled, for example, making the incident far worse than it had to be, and it wasn't the first time that such an allegation had been made, then that can trigger political action from City Council, protests from community groups, angry denunciations and calls for investigations and firings. Before you know it, that simple incident can snowball into something which moves beyond the direct ability of an organization to handle it, into one which will not go

easily away and the resolution to the incident is no longer within the power of your organization. Then you could have a crisis on your hands.

So in order to maintain the category of merely a "daily incident", the following factors need to be in place:

- capable and timely response
- admission of error, if appropriate
- open process, subject to public or peer review
- the issue is the incident itself; not on the handling of it, the communications surrounding it, or the unexpected or unplanned consequences of the incident. For example, if the 911 (Emergency) Operator misunderstood the call, misdirected the resources, lied about her actions, and the public affairs spokesperson mishandled the media questions, then a simple, though tragic, incident has begun to spiral out of control.

In our [next session](#) we will explore how daily incidents differ from emergencies, and what it means for your communications with the media.

## Part 2: Emergency!

In this second session I will move from the nature of a daily incident and explore the nature of an emergency and what it means for those responsible for communications with the media.

Emergency Response - An incident which requires an immediate and significant response by the responsible organization. A major marine spill, a significant flooding, an evacuation, a train derailment, a damaging financial report, are not minor or daily incidents. They are significant. If the public and the media's focus is limited to 24 to 48 hours, then it usually qualifies as an emergency. Again, it is not necessarily a crisis. It may test completely the capabilities of the responsible organization, but the professionals who handle it are paid to do so, and if allowed to do the job are capable of handling it.

Potential vulnerabilities will surface wherever the weak links are located. For example, a major marine spill requires several public and private sector agencies and companies to work smoothly as a team. If the agencies fail to do so, then that can have a significant effect on the perception that the emergency was well handled.

The communications focus in an emergency response is geared to several key roles:

- Inform the public and key stake holders, such as regulators, partners, customers, suppliers, local, state and federal officials and politicians.
- Anticipate and meet the needs of journalists.
- Set up and operate the public input channels, such as toll-free phone lines, on-line communications, fax-back systems, public meetings.
- Ensure the organization is visible throughout the process. Silence and invisibility are signs of unwillingness, incompetence and fear which undermines the perception that the emergency is under control.
- Manage the message. Keep the messages clear, honest and consistent. If your message is patently false, premature, or unsupportable by readily available facts, then don't say it.
- Manage the perception of competence as well as the reality. The media and the public react primarily on perceptions - of competence, truth, openness etc. If you are not communicating those values, then the opposite perception can take hold. If a negative perception takes hold early in the emergency response, then it is very difficult to shake. Note the EXXON Valdez. The negative perception took hold early on and became an immovable object. Acting responsibly later has 1% of the value of acting responsibly

instantly. It reminds me of what Richard Nixon once said about Henry Kissinger, "Henry always tells the truth.....eventually!"

Additional responsibilities for the communicator during an emergency:

- Ensure that inaccurate or misleading reporting is corrected immediately. Communicate internally before you make public statements. Otherwise chaos will truly reign and morale will sink even deeper; thus under-mining the quality of the response.
- Stay in contact with victims families. If they get all their news first from the media, then their trust in your abilities and honesty rapidly erode.
- Ensure that all the news, good or bad, is communicated as soon as you can confirm it. If there is bad news, get it out all at once - to all media at the same time. Don't make a public "strip-tease" of bad news. That's how media "feeding frenzies" are developed.
- Keep the emergency response leaders fully apprised of public, media and stake holder responses so that they are not operating in a vacuum.

### **When the Emergency Response Becomes Emergency Management**

The danger point for communicators is that the longer the emergency situation continues, the more the media need to be fed and the hungrier they get to fill their filing demands. When hungry, the media start looking around for other issues. This is where emergency response moves into the emergency management phase - that is, beyond the initial 48 hour period.

The communicators requirements then expand:

- "Process" oriented briefing of the media - as opposed to substantive, news-making briefing, which should be left to the CEO, Police Chief, Agency Head, On-Scene Commander, etc.
- Organize media tours for behind-the-scenes insights into the emergency response.
- Assistance to meet with witnesses, victims, families etc. By playing a coordinating role, you are able to demonstrate openness and cooperation with the media, which pays off in later news stories
- Conduct regular briefings to meet their deadlines and update media requirements.
- Provide access to key emergency management personnel without interfering with the handling of the emergency.
- Organize public outreach programs, for example to ensure that in an evacuation, families are kept abreast of developments and emergency personnel can communicate directly with them (and be seen to be communicating).

An example of how not to handle an emergency response was the recent tragic tunnel collapse in Japan. According to media reports, the officials refused to communicate with the families of the victims; they remained silent about their rescue strategies and basically angered everyone. It was only when the Prime Minister gave them a direct order that they began to communicate. This failure of communications moved the emergency response phase into a crisis mode. Their credibility was then drawn into serious question. It reinforces the point that the emergency response itself is one issue; how you communicate during it can often make the difference between a perception of confidence or one of failure.

Remember that the power of television to cover emergencies live in all their detail means that as you are responding, the public is deciding if you are competent. Sometimes judgments can be very

### **Part 3: Crisis**

There are many definitions of a crisis. The following one, in my view, captures the scope and intensity quite well.

**Definition:** A crisis is an event, revelation, allegation or set of circumstances which threatens the integrity, reputation, or survival of an individual or organization. It challenges the public's sense of

safety, values or appropriateness. The actual or potential damage to the organization is considerable and the organization cannot, on its own, put an immediate end to it.

Remember, if an allegation has been made from a credible source, or appears in a credible media outlet, it does not have to be true in order to be damaging. A serious allegation must be treated with as much importance as if it were true, because it has the potential to be believed.

Crisis Communications is the process of managing the strategy, messages, timing and distribution channels necessary to communicate effectively with the media, employees, core constituencies, clients, customers and stake holders. The focus of the crisis communications function is to facilitate the rapid de-escalation of the crisis through timely and effective communications methods.

### **Media Questions and Focus of Coverage < first news cycle**

- What happened? (focus on facts or allegations)
- How much? (damage, money involved)
- Who was involved? (victims, accused etc.)
- What are you doing to help? Is there a credible response underway?)

### **Nature of Initial Coverage:**

- The media must report immediately with little or no background or context.

Therefore, early on in a crisis, there is a heavy reliance on rumors, eye-witness accounts, unsubstantiated comments. Even though most journalists are responsible enough to label these comments appropriately, it doesn't prevent them from reporting rumors. This is particularly true of live radio or television coverage. "There is a report, Dan, which we cannot confirm at this time, that the company has had a history of these incidents

### **Media Questions and Focus of Coverage < second news cycle**

- What was the cause of the accident, incident, bank collapse? (every conceivable cause is explored)
- Is this part of a pattern?
- Who will pay?
- What is the potential damage to reputation, stock price, ability of campaign to survive, political support, or future plans?

### **Media Questions and Focus of Coverage < subsequent news cycles**

With full-blown media coverage, the media are in a feeding frenzy. It's no longer a case of defined "news cycles" (which live broadcasts have virtually eliminated anyway). Instead, the media are crawling over each other to report anything about the case. Every morsel of information is feasted upon.

Verified and unverified information is treated equally. It still doesn't have to be true, it just has to be "interesting". The mistake most organizations make is to keep adding "wrinkles" to the original story thus ensuring the issue stays in the news. ("Come on down, Charles and Die!") Welcome to hell on earth!

The event will spiral out of control into a full-blown crisis if a new and damaging allegation or revelation comes to the fore. When new issues emerge some organizations are unfortunately still fighting "yesterday's issue". The organization can become either frozen in fear or fires back all guns blazing in a transparent effort to shift the blame.

What will further seal the fate of the company is if the CEO tries to stay out of it (under the mistaken impression that the right image to convey is "business as usual").

In a crisis, the communicator's responsibilities include:

- Ensuring that the quality of communications itself does not become the issue.
- Driving the communications process pro actively rather than in a merely reactive manner.
- Maintaining tight control over who speaks on behalf of the organization. All media and public communications should be limited to one spokesperson wherever possible. Utilize the public role of the CEO or the Agency Head to the maximum benefit. This means making the CEO visible early and at key announcements throughout the process.
- Staying on message. Never make accidental news. Rigorously brief key officials prior to any announcement and role-play all awkward questions to ensure consistency of messages.
- Demonstrating empathy and caring about people; recognize public anxiety - don't dismiss it.

harsh and damaging if you are not focused on reaching out through the media to keep the public informed of what you are doing, what your options are and why you have acted the way you have. Even though a lot of resources have gone into an emergency response or emergency management, you or your organization are not necessarily in a crisis. If your organization is handling the emergency well, then you still have credibility. In fact, your credibility can be enhanced by the capability that you are demonstrating as you handle the emergency. In our [third session](#), we will deal with what constitutes a crisis and what it means for communications.

## Part 4: Key Goals and Principles

Welcome to the fourth lecture on Crisis Communications, which focuses on key goals and principles. The next five lectures will be refreshed every month, so please keep us in mind every 30 days or so.

### Major Goals

#### Phase I (as crisis begins):

- to facilitate rapid de-escalation of the immediate crisis, and
- to restore public order and to return to normal operations.

#### Phase II (as crisis is underway)

- to position the organization as capable of managing the actual incident, event or allegation which has triggered the crisis in the first place;
- to ensure that all decisions and public statements are made from a common up-to-date base of information, and
- to prevent crisis escalation.

#### Phase III (as crisis fades)

- to rebuild, recover, re-establish public composure and repair relationships;
- to prevent recurrence or development of a chronic crisis, and
- to enable the organization and its representatives to emerge with the highest possible credibility.

Well, those goals are fine, but how do we achieve them? It's important to be guided by principles of effective crisis communications, which are highlighted below.

### Principles of Effective Crisis Communications

#### 1. In a Crisis, Issues Mutate

Once a major story hits, the tendency for the media is to shift their focus to other aspects of the story. If the initial issue isn't put to bed in the first 24 to 48 hours, new issues will emerge. When something goes wrong, the best way to avoid issues "mutating", is to confront the problem head on, be seen to be acting immediately and turn the issue into what you are doing to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

2. **Designate a Single Spokesperson**

Who speaks for the organization - especially in the early days of a major emergency, is crucial to the organization's ability to get the message out with credibility. A good spokesperson is someone who is technically knowledgeable, in a position of authority, has strong professional credentials, is a quick study, has an even temper, a reasonable tone, an honest face, an ear for a good sound bite, and gets along well with reporters. Ideally, in the early stages, the more senior the spokesperson the better. The CEO, Agency Head, or Executive Director when in the role of spokesperson automatically implies: "we take this issue seriously and we are demonstrating our concern". Later on, as the crisis fades, the public affairs or Corporate Communications Director can be sufficient - especially for routine regular media briefings.

3. **Communicate Early and Often**

In the first few hours after an incident or allegation arises, your organization has an ideal opportunity to shape the media coverage or at least to develop credibility with the media and the public. By communicating early you demonstrate you have nothing to hide and that you are dealing with the problem in a responsible straight-forward manner. With prepared "boilerplate" tools such as fact sheets, backgrounds, news releases, and media statements, you create a better opportunity for accurate reporting from the outset. Throughout the crisis, if you communicate on a regular basis, you avoid the creation of an information vacuum. By so doing, you reduce the tendency of the media to fill the vacuum with minor, irrelevant, yet possibly "juicy" items, which merely serve to keep the story in the news. When you communicate accurately and regularly, you become the source of credible information, rather than others.

4. **Encourage the "Front Door" Approach**

If the media aren't welcomed through the "front door", then they will try to get the information through the "side window" or through the "back door". "Back door" entries include ex-employees, unnamed accusers etc. Welcoming the media through the front door can literally be that, or in a manner of speaking, by being up front, forthright, provide them with an already fitted-up media room very near the sight of the crisis and brief them there regularly.

5. **Get Ahead of the Curve**

Anticipate every conceivable bad news incident or allegation that could happen. Prepare fact sheets, backgrounds and have templated announcements ready to go to support your pro-active media relations.

6. **If There is Bad News to Come, You Announce It**

If the news media or another party reveals the bad news about you, the perception will be that you had tried to hide it. So "fall on the sword" and get the bad news out first - build in context as you do. Be the accurate source of verifiable facts -whether the news is good or bad.

7. **Get All of the Bad News Out at Once**

If you are aware that there are a number of embarrassments, either real or perceived, to come in this story, then announce them all at once. Have a bad day! If you announce them one at a time, you will, in effect, be conducting a public "striptease" of bad news, and you will be guaranteed a bad month! (Or career - as in Nixon and Watergate). In other words, avoid it becoming a soap opera which will whet the public appetite, which, in turn, the media will continue to feed.

Those are some of the crisis communications principles to live by. Note that the underlying currents among most of the principles is anticipation and attitude.

In the [next session](#), the key to anticipation: proper planning.

## Part 5: Development of a crisis communications plan

This fifth lecture on Crisis Communications covers the development of a crisis communications plan. Please remember that any questions or comments are always welcome and may be sent to: [communicate@mclomedia.com](mailto:communicate@mclomedia.com) - a reply is guaranteed.

### **Objectives:**

An effective crisis communications plan should:

- define response strategies that can be implemented when a crisis occurs;
- assign crisis communications resources and responsibilities;
- enable you to reach target audiences with key messages, and
- enable crisis communications managers to launch public information and media relations campaigns immediately during a crisis.

### **Crisis Communications Plan Checklist**

- Can we move immediately?
- Can we switch on a plan?
- Can resources be called out immediately, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day?
- Do we know what to say?
- Do we know who we want to reach - in order of priority?
- Do we have trained crisis communications managers to implement our plan?

### **Twelve Steps to Plan for a Crisis**

Develop a basic working draft of a plan which contains the following elements:

1. The need for, and benefits of, a plan.
2. The types of crises which your organization may face.
3. Categorize these under broad headings: accidents, financial, personnel, abuse, etc.
4. Identify crisis management team - both permanent and ad hoc members, the decision-making process, approvals, etc..
5. Establish protocols, sign-offs, responsibilities, time frames (the goal is to short-circuit the usual decision-making approvals to allow the organization to be able to react quickly enough in a crisis). Identify third-party potential supporters or credible experts who can play a role in public assurances (for example, U.S. FDA Commissioner David Kessler's role of public reassurance during the Pepsi syringe-in-a-bottle crisis was a vital component of the Corporation's credibility).
6. Coordinate responsibilities with other Departments and agencies, and corporations and how they are to be involved - define criteria for designating lead agency status.
7. The principles which apply when communicating with the media.
8. Identify and prioritize target audiences and then identify channels of communications; update media list; consider alternate communications sources: newsletters, Internet, email, fax-on-demand, 1-800 lines,
9. Develop stand-by message and tactics. Prepare templated media tools, ready-to-use: news releases, media statements, fact sheets, backgrounds which should be prepared in advance, etc.
10. A system to test the crisis management plan.
11. How the crisis management plan can be assessed post-crisis so that the organization can learn from each one.

### **Then test the plan!**

The [next lecture](#) will address the execution of the crisis communications plan.

## Part 6: Key Planning Elements

The sixth lecture in the Crisis Communications Series, outlines some key planning elements. But first, a few words about responding to crises...

Everything you do in responding to a crisis today is in a live "fish bowl". Thus the quality and speed of your response becomes meshed with the triggering event. Also, with the live nature of reporting on crises, the media move within an hour to analysis - of what the incident means, what impact it will have, etc. The media appetite for information is huge and must be "fed" regularly or it can quickly turn against you or at least to those who may be more accessible. A lot of your capability rests with the advance planning. Good crisis managers don't merely react; they anticipate.

### Support Planning for a Crisis

1. Identify a potential operations center and media center (including the identification of a nearby hotel). Line up in advance a "turn-key capability".
2. Ensure that adequate support equipment is available, and have it regularly checked.
3. Ensure that emergency power is available - in case of explosion, fire etc.
4. Prepare a call-out list including everyone designated to respond in the event of a crisis (don't forget a list of different designated technical experts). Update at least monthly.
5. Ensure that adequate back-up staff are available. If crisis lasts more than 24 hours, it's a good idea to plan for replacement staff to come in and take over.

### Media Center - Equipment and Supply Checklist

- television sets - with cable and battery-powered radios
- computers, modems, printers, fax machines
- at least 10 telephones
- an adequate number of power outlets - on different circuits
- bulletin boards, flip charts and markers
- a photocopier
- desks and chairs
- a large table at the front of the room to hold microphones (for media briefings)
- an appropriate corporate backdrop behind this table
- space in smaller rooms for television and radio production
- food and beverages (nothing lavish and no liquor)

### Portable Media center (if site is remote)

- ensure that personnel and equipment are available to move quickly to an on-site or near site location (if the main media center is too far from the remote location, you will lose the opportunity to provide the services necessary to cover the crisis, and thus miss out on any home-site advantage)
- a portable media center could range from trailers, to a local community center, to a company building to tents (the key question to ask internally is, "if we had to, could we set up a portable media center at this site within 24 hours?")
- ensure that a closed (scrambled) communications link - mobile, cellular, etc. - is available for communications between the on-site and off-site personnel for coordination

### Operations Center

Prepare a "war room" that will serve as the ops center for any emergency or crisis with several break-out rooms for meetings. Keep it away from the media center so you can avoid having the

media "see you sweat" and so that you may catch any fumbling (which we hope won't happen). Identify available sources of equipment and supplies, which include:

- video and audio recording capacity
  - satellite up-link and down-link capability
  - television, battery powered radio, cell-phones, pagers
  - computers, modems, printers, fax machines
  - an adequate number of telephones
  - multiple power outlets - on separate circuits
  - maps, bulletin board, flip charts and markers
  - a photocopier with multi-colored paper (to flag time-sensitive announcements to the media which will help avoid reporting old news)
  - video camera
  - food and beverages
- Identify necessary security services. Check with emergency services on routes, process, expectations and contacts necessary for smooth response. The [next lecture](#) will deal with executing the crisis communications plan.

## Part 7: Executing a Crisis Communications Plan

This lecture, the seventh of a nine-part series, addresses executing a crisis communications plan.

### The First Two Hours

- plan is "turned on"
- if several agencies are involved - agree on a lead agency
- collect all information and sort it into three categories: known, unknown and presumed
- your goal is to move everything into the "known" category as the facts are confirmed
- define the nature of the crisis: what is the issue? (incompetence? greed? waste? mismanagement?)
- the communications director should assess how the media will play the story
- establish what it will take to de-escalate the crisis (the goal)
- determine the key actions necessary to accomplish the goal
- brief key spokesperson and prepare media tools

### Media Response

- be quick - ensure that a brief statement is released as quickly as possible.
- the statement should cover: the known facts, and what is being done to mitigate the situation
- acknowledge responsibility as quickly as possible
- monitor all media to ensure accuracy
- avoid speculation
- decide on time for first media briefing
- express concern and caring
- keep communicating
- focus all media calls to one spokesperson
- stay ahead of events
- listen and respond
- remain calm

Let's now take a look at the nature of media coverage in a crisis.

### **What the Media Do in a Crisis**

- find out about the crisis very quickly Ü often before you do
- monitor each other/emergency communications channels
- divert extra resources and personnel to cover an emergency
- allot extra time and space for coverage - including live broadcasts
- instantly turn a "local" event into a national issue
- go where they want, unless clear boundaries are set up
- probe for details, share information, use sophisticated equipment
- use their own knowledge, experience and data bases
- report what they know - quickly, constantly and endlessly
- lay blame, perpetuate myths, report rumors
- advance the news agenda into speculation, next steps, implications, issues
- go to where they have access for responses, expert opinions, etc.
- get suspicious when confronted with silence or information vacuums
- try to get visuals and use whatever means at their disposal to do so

To balance that perspective, let's look at:

### **What the Media Can Do for You**

- assist in pre-crisis education
- warn or re-reinforce a warning
- get information to the public
- reassure the public
- repudiate rumors
- help the response by providing evacuation information, how to access funds/insurance, etc.
- generate outside help from volunteers and others

## **Part 8: Key Roles and Responsibilities of the Media Guide in a Crisis**

In this eighth lecture, we concentrate on the key roles and responsibilities of the media guide in a crisis as well as provide pointers on crisis media relations.

**The Media Guide** - the person assigned to stay in constant media contact. The guide is a facilitator rather than a spokesperson. Roles and Responsibilities:

1. Monitor the media for errors.
2. Note the name and media outlet of each journalist.
3. Take requests for information and comments.
4. Provide the media with logistical support.
5. Ask the reporters what kinds of information they are receiving.
6. Identify where visuals can be obtained - suggest locations where media personnel can videotape or photograph.
7. If an inaccessible (to media) site is involved have it videotaped and provide these visuals to the media and those working in the operations room.
8. Organize and conduct a guided media tour - clarify and maintain ground rules.
9. Arrange and organize a media pool if safety, space and logistics are critical. Establish the numbers allowed and define a number of categories - one print, one radio, one television, one photographer, one camera operator, etc., and let the media fill the designated

categories among themselves. Those chosen for the pool are then escorted on condition they share all gathered information with those left behind.

10. Clearly number and post all news releases at the media center. Put each new one on different colored paper, time stamp it so that newly arrived reporters don't report old information.
11. Never release information without allowing reporters to ask questions - at least for clarification - otherwise your message will be lost, or worse still, misinterpreted and inaccurately reported. If you cannot answer a question, say so and explain why. The media guide does not give interviews; content questions or comments should be saved for the spokesperson. The media guide deals solely with the process.
12. Record all briefings, conferences and interviews.
13. Arrange for statements to be made by others (as approved by the crisis management team) such as: key officers, technical experts and on-site managers who may be called to attend media briefings or news conferences.
14. Release pre-approved background material to support those making statements.
15. Keep a log with the time of all events, requests and decisions. Once the crisis is over, the log becomes an invaluable debriefing tool.
16. Distribute identification passes to incoming media personnel.
17. Double check all information before releasing it. In the heat of a crisis, information is incomplete, contradictory and changes constantly.
18. Collect - Evaluate - Recommend - Decide - Release: collect information; evaluate it for potential release; recommend what information can or should be released; decide when and how the information should be released; and then release the information to the media.

#### **Pointers to Ponder When Dealing with the Media in a Crisis**

1. Remember that you're not talking to the media, you're talking to the public.
2. Keep in mind that the media want to be assisted, not controlled - collecting and managing the release of information, providing logistical support and ensuring that media needs are met make it easier for the media to do their job. They will appreciate your efforts, and remember their experiences when preparing reports involving your organization during and after the crisis.
3. Ensure that information is shared internally and with families of victims before you announce it to the media.
4. Consider holding joint news conferences with other organizations.
5. Hold frequent news conferences. It is particularly important to hold one during the first 24 hours when media attention is most concentrated but information may only trickle in. Also, even if very little information is available early on, the conference gives broadcast media sound bites and visuals, and quotes to the written press. An early conference shows that you are organized - not only in your media relations, but also in your response. It also establishes a routine with the media, and keeps them physically at one location - the media center.
6. Provide visuals not only for the media but to support your message.
7. Release the public and media enquiry telephone and fax numbers.
8. Ensure that staff are in place to answer and monitor these calls.
9. Control news conference sites so that you can screen out unaccredited journalists
10. Remember: information is control. If you do not provide information, the media will simply go to other sources and you will lose control of what reporters are saying about you. Adopt a "front door" strategic approach. In effect, you should be saying to the media: "come in the front door and we can provide you with information that is timely and factual."
11. Withhold names of injured or deceased until next-of-kin have been properly notified.

12. Acknowledge responsibility, but avoid prematurely laying blame at anyone's doorstep. "An investigation will determine that."
13. Avoid conjecture and speculation.
14. Never offer a personal opinion.
15. Tell the truth always.
16. Have a media kit on stand-by; ready to be distributed at a moment's notice.
17. Do not give exclusive interviews at the height of the crisis. It creates a "stampede" mentality and resentment against favoritism. Give all reporters the same information at the same time.
18. Be visible during the crisis, so that reporters don't feel that you're hiding something.
19. Stay calm . One heated sound bite will demonstrate to the public that not everything is under control (especially you!).
20. "Give to get" - each party gives something to the other and gets something of value in return: remember it's a two-way street.

## Part 9: How to Handle Communications During a Crisis

Welcome to the final lecture in the Crisis Communications Series. We close with an overview of some specific media interview techniques that we have found most useful in training executives, managers and technical professionals on how to handle communications during a crisis.

### The Crisis Interview - Planning

If a television researcher or producer is onto a really "big" story that is potentially embarrassing or damaging, then you need to get all your ducks in a row". Find out:

- everything you can about the focus;
- everything you can about the other people being interviewed (this is very delicate but dig as much as you can);
- specific issues or allegations that are being made;
- who will do the interview (and then find out a little more about the reporter: his or her style, background, etc., and let the potential interviewee see any tape of the reporter in action), and
- what visuals the crew are looking for (and decide what you're prepared to let them shoot) - if your subject is rather stiff, then you can combine the setting or backdrop with a "tour of the site" kind of interview; or suggest that the interview be conducted in a setting that has "visual logic" to it - if the CEO of an airline - then shoot it in the cabin; if a manufacturing plant then on the floor of the plant, etc. (the visuals tend to cancel out some of the awkward moments).

### Remember, you are well within your rights to:

- limit the length of the interview - anything more than an hour is an invitation for a sound bite that will come back to haunt you - 45 minutes should be ample time;
- hold off on saying yes or no to the interview until as close to their deadline as possible if you aren't getting a lot of cooperation from the producer - don't say yes too soon, and
- refuse to do an interview - there are certain circumstances in which it might be better not to do the interview: your organization is guilty, you don't have a convincing or reasonable explanation, you are in the middle of a lawsuit that prevents you from saying anything of substance, or you have no extenuating circumstances or offers to mitigate the situation - for customers, victims families, etc. As well, if the story that is being put together is so patently false, wrongheaded, without foundation, or from a scurrilous sensationalist tabloid program, then you may be actually be seen to confirm their accusations or add to their credibility by doing an interview (however be ready for ambush interviews as a result).

## **Final Preparation**

- Prepare your key proactive messages (approximately four), theme, reactive messages (the key responses to the anticipated nasty questions), and two or three prepared sound bites which are attractive to use.
- Role-play three or four times to hone the messages and get video feedback on the content and your delivery style.
- Do several minutes of relaxation and breathing exercises to calm down and get "centered".
- Meet the reporter off-camera first for a brief get-to-know each other session (5 to 10 minutes). Don't get into the interview at this meeting, but explore with the reporter the approach and the order of the interview.

## **Once the Interview Begins**

- Try to keep the interview conversational in tone.
- If handed a document that you haven't seen before or are not familiar with, politely ask for a few minutes to review it before responding. Then read it very carefully - without the camera running.
- When you're ready, put the document down and then tell the journalist what the message was in that document, as well as what its intention was; but don't get caught in an awkward word-by-word analysis of it.
- Use the basic three-stage bridging technique: acknowledge - "That's a fair comment..." or refute - "Not at all"; bridge - "Let's look at what's behind all this..", then, drive your message - "we have tried the old approach and it didn't work; we need to transform the entire system".
- Keep your answers to a maximum 30 seconds; don't over talk it.
- Use the "McLoughlin Wedge(tm)" - state your message; support it; illustrate it. (Yes I did shut it down (message) Here is why I did it (facts/rationale which support the message) and let me give you an example of how bad it was (example).
- If you mess up an answer, pause and then say, "let me take that again" (in a casual tone). Then start the answer cleanly again.
- Repeat your core messages several times. Make sure that you have encapsulated and used your sound bites.
- Keep strong eye contact with the reporter. Never mind looking at the camera or around the room.
- Keep your cool. If you must be critical, remember the George Bush line used when he was attacked by Dan Rather, "Dan, I have respect for you, but not for what you're doing here tonight." In other words, don't attack the reporter, just express disappointment in the behavior.

## **The Crisis Ambush Interview**

- If you have turned down the media for an interview don't be surprised if, on your way to your car, building, home, airport, etc., a reporter turns up unannounced with or without an obvious camera crew in tow.
- If this happens, don't flee and don't panic. Stay calm, cool very low-key. Remember the camera and/or tape recorder is already rolling even if you can't see it. Focus on your tone and your core message. Give the reporter a few answers which form your basic positioning then slowly begin to move toward your destination. Tell the reporter why you are not able to go into further detail: legal reasons...negotiations...etc.
- Buy yourself time to think. Put your head down or slightly to the side during the question (if you look at the reporter while she is asking a question, human instinct will take over and you will be forced into attempting an instant response, well before you're ready). When the question has been asked, pause for a second or two then look up, right at the reporter, and

answer. Your answer should be a maximum of 20 seconds long, after which you should return your gaze to the ground

- Repeat the essence of your message without sounding like a robot. Don't blame the reporter for repeating a question, and don't feel pressured to make your answers creative as a result of a repeat question. Remember the reporter is looking for a sound bite and you have to keep hitting your messages again and again anyway.
- An ambush interview will ultimately be remembered more for how your body language and tone came across, rather than for what you actually said. Even if caught by surprise, you can control these elements, although training on how to handle an ambush interview really well is essential.
- Never put your hand on the camera lens or threaten a journalist in any way.
- With the media, "heat" usually cancels out "light". Your goal is to shed light on the issue, not to add heat

Of course there is so much more to cover. If you're interested in improving your communications, during crises or every day, continue looking us up here for more lectures, articles and other tidbits. Or, send us an [email message](#) with your question, comment or challenge and we'll get back to you ASAP!