

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS



By Della Smith

Give it to me in 9 seconds

The science of successful issues management

In preparing for sensitive issues or crisis situations, you need to follow the 27/9/3 rule.

Tell me your story in 27 words or nine seconds and give me your three key messages. If you can't do it, then it will be done for you. Studies conducted by Dr. Vincent Covello of the Centre for Risk Communications in New York clearly show this is often the maximum number of words or amount of time that the media will give to your point of view during a catastrophe.

Certainly, there are exceptions to the rule. But if you can deliver your quote following this guideline, chances are it will be used.

When we developed the crisis preparedness manual for Greyhound Lines of Canada in the late eighties, this was the common mantra for every driver to use if they were in an accident situation: "All of us at Greyhound are very concerned and our number one priority at all times is the safety and well being of our passengers and drivers." (Much to our surprise, even back then we had been using the 27/9/3 formula!)

This "initial hour" messaging bought time while the facts were collected and ensured spokespeople on the scene were able to respond in a way that showed the company cared.

Crisis communications has come a long way since then.

In the past, we developed messaging and strategies based exclusively on experience and good judgment. Today, we have scientifically proven methods of managing communications. Through an analysis of some 3,000 news conferences,

27•9•3

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Covello's team has documented the 77 questions media ask most often in high risk environments. This is a gold mine for anyone in the communications business or for people in the line of fire.

Doing the right thing will always stand the test of time, but being prepared and using tools to keep you on track are critical to communicating successfully during times of tragedy. It is not just about avoiding controversy or sustaining the bottom line, it is about helping your employees or the people impacted by the situation get through the tough times. Good communications during a crisis can actually improve the reputation of a company, give employees a sense of pride, and turn a disaster into an opportunity.

How many people can maintain their cool when their company is involved in an accident that has caused fatalities or a major environmental disaster? Being prepared allows for the expression of spon-

taneous heartfelt emotion, without the worry of lawsuits or a slip of the tongue that haunts most executives when all hell breaks loose.

Staying calm and focused only comes from having thought through the things that keep you up a night. One of the greatest lessons I ever learned, was from a paramedic who told me they would never run up to the home of someone who has called 911. They walk briskly and with focus, but running would instil panic. Emergency situations require a level head. Everyone looks to the person in control, the calm in the storm.

Being prepared also takes critical thinking. If you are living in the world that says, this will never happen to me or my organization, just take a look around you. From natural disasters that topple buildings, to technological theft of information, to a disgruntled customer who blogs about your product or service, is

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anyone truly immune anymore? You can have a caring, honest and trustworthy organization and still find yourself in the heat of a high profile conflict.

Using the CCO template of Compassion, Conviction and Optimism can make the difference between an understanding public and an angry public. Don't inundate them with statistics about your safety record and how this is your first accident in 10 years ... tell them you care about the people involved, that you will get to the root of the problem, and that you will work toward making sure it does not happen again.

The words you use, the people who represent you and the actions you take are paramount.

Invest in media training, develop a comprehensive plan and, most important of all, determine your philosophy. Greyhound had a line in the front of their Crisis Communications Manual that stated – “In an emergency situation you, as an individual, must think fast and act immediately. Your sole objective is to ensure the safety and well-being of our customers and staff. Never second guess your own good judgment and you will not be questioned for taking responsibility.”

If everyone in your organization knows that doing the right thing is paramount, chances are you will weather the storm and rebuild fast. ■

Della Smith, formerly of Quay Strategies Inc. is now conducting workshops and can be reached at www.qworkshops.com

Crossing media formats

Traditional news sources have made the jump to online formats whether in texts, podcasts or video clips

“The medium is the message” – in the 40 years since Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, its basic truth still holds.

Depending on the audience you're trying to reach, and the type of media you're speaking through, you're going to emphasize different points that send a different message.

All journalists want a compelling story, but print media traditionally offers fewer opportunities for visual elements than, say, television. While photos help, make sure you provide compelling quotes, memorable phrases that summarize your message and stick in people's memory.

“The journalist is seeking facts and figures, and a broad perspective on a story,” said Valerie Wan of National Public Relations. “They provide in-depth coverage of news items and significantly influence decision-makers.”

With broadcast media such as radio and television, you'll want your words to not only be right but sound right, too.

“When I worked in radio we talked about finding ‘good talkers,’” said Anita Webster, a former broadcaster who now has her own PR business in Vancouver. An ideal interview, she says, is someone who's “animated, interested in their topic, not prone to read stuff on air, not droney.”

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Appearance is everything on television where the visuals are key to telling the story.

“The cliché ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ applies to television news. Television reporters are seeking experts to speak on the topic to develop the story to go with the visuals,” Wan added.

Many of the traditional media have made the jump to online formats whether in texts, podcasts or video clips. The opportunities to create blends of media to deliver your message have increased, but similar rules apply.

“Similar to print, online reporters provide in-depth coverage and look for supporting images and photos for their stories,” she said.

Regardless of the media format you're working with, make sure you've crafted a solid story, presented yourself well and come across as someone readers, listeners and viewers can trust. ■