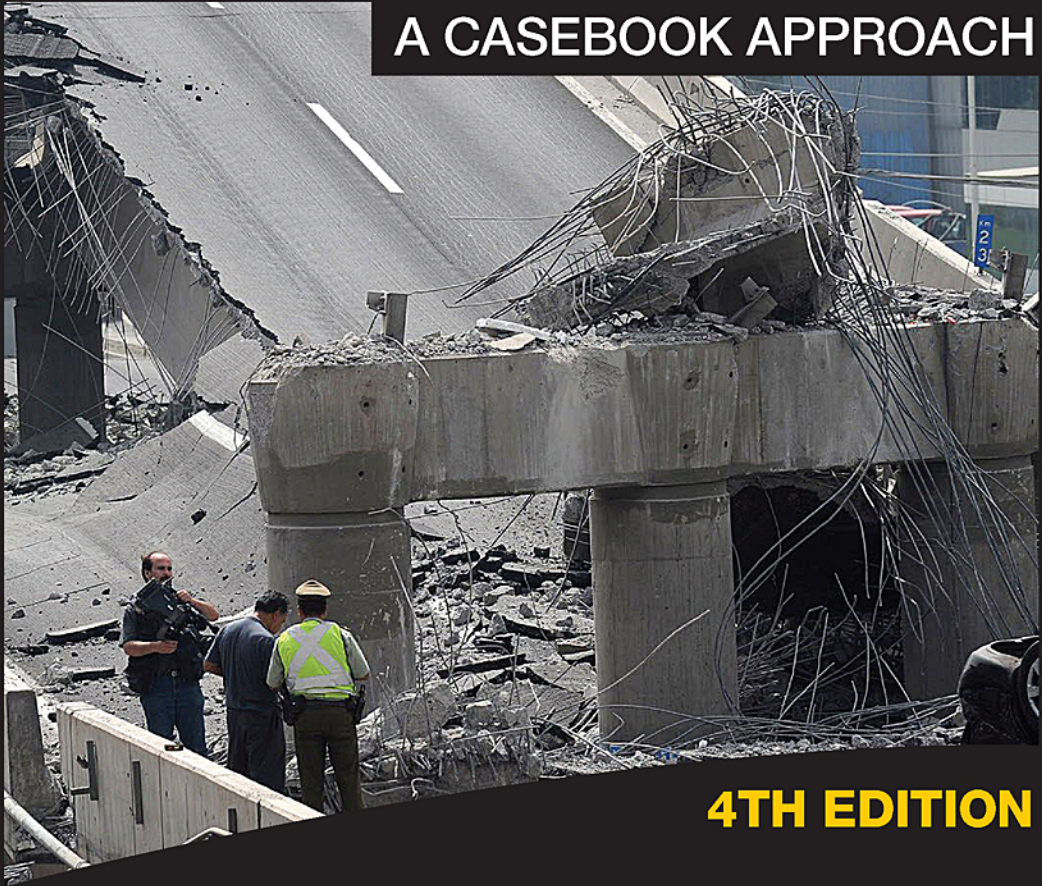




CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

A CASEBOOK APPROACH



4TH EDITION

KATHLEEN FEARN-BANKS



Crisis Communications Today

People who pick up a book on crisis communications are aware of social media. Perhaps they do not use them or use them only socially. Perhaps, they don't know how to use them or don't know if they should use them. However, they are aware that social media exist and are major communications tools in the second decade of the 21st century.

Between the date this book goes to press and the date it is in book stores there will undoubtedly be new networks and usages of social media. Many experienced crisis communicators are exploring, developing, and learning how best to use social media. Chapter 5, "Social Media and Crisis Communications" of this textbook addresses how organizations and companies have used Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, blogs, and other social media to cope with crises. The chapter includes advice on using social media and cites some crises caused by the use of social media.

Crisis communications demands that one uses the best crafted message delivered by the most effective method to the precise public (audience). This has not changed. What has changed is the fact that social media make it possible for faster communication than traditional methods and to a very precise, often chosen, public. Whereas we used to have a "golden hour" to disseminate crucial information about a crisis, now we have a "golden few minutes" before publics expect information. The message still needs to be carefully written—mistakes on social media can live forever—but social media encourage rapid and frequent two-way communication between an organization and its segmented publics, without a gatekeeper. Social media can build positive relationships with these publics.

So what the new technology has done is present new methods of communicating faster, possibly better and possibly not. It has not eliminated the need for traditional methods. And it has not changed the facts of human behavior—ethical and professional standards, the basic tenets of crisis communications.

What is a Crisis and What is Crisis Communications?

A *crisis* is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization. A crisis can be a strike, terrorism, a fire, a boycott, product tampering, product failure, or numerous other events (see the list in Chapter 15, p. 308). The size of the organization is irrelevant. It can be a multinational corporation, a one-person business, or even an individual.

Public relations (PR) professionals often say, “I have a crisis every day.” This is an exaggeration, of course. The term *crisis* denotes something more serious than a “problem.” Public relations people deal with problems—solving them or avoiding them. By definition, however, a crisis interrupts the normal flow of business, so a crisis cannot be a normal part of this flow.

On the other hand, a crisis is not necessarily so catastrophic that the life of the organization is destroyed. Exxon suffered the crisis of crises after its oil spill in 1989. It still suffers from a bad image, but it continues to thrive in business. (See the Exxon case in Chapter 7.)

This book advises you to plan for the worst that can happen, whether it be a crisis or a problem, and it brings us to another expression: “Be prepared.” This book shows you how to prepare yourself and your organization to cope with crises that may occur. It deals with preparations made far in advance, as well as with strategies and tactics to be used during a crisis. It examines the experiences of public relations professionals in crises, describing what they did, what they wished they had done, and what hampered their progress. You can learn from their successes and failures.

In a crisis, in contrast to a problem, emotions are on edge, brains are not fully functioning, and events are occurring so rapidly that drafting a plan during a crisis is unthinkable. Simply following one is difficult.

Crisis management is a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny.

Crisis communications is the dialog between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialog details strategies and tactics designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization.

Effective crisis management includes crisis communications that not only can alleviate or eliminate the crisis but also can sometimes bring the organization a more positive reputation than it had before the crisis.

Public relations deals with publics. *Publics* are the specific audiences targeted by programs. People frequently use the term “general public,” but public relations professionals are usually more specific in their targeting. Examples of corporate publics include the following: employees; customers; stockholders; community members; board members; unions; and retirees.

Proactive public relations programs can be used to build relationships with certain publics. They can prevent crises; they can also make these publics supportive when there is a crisis. Trust is at the heart of each type of public relations.

These programs might be the following:

- *Media relations*: Building a positive relationship with the news media so they know you are reliable, professional, accurate, and ethical. Tactics for the news media would include not only news releases but also pitch letters, backgrounders, media advisories, media tours, news conferences, and others.
- *Community relations*: Building a positive relationship with community leaders, organizations, families, individuals. Tactics may include advisory boards, open houses, speakers’ bureaus, public service announcements, CSR (corporate social responsibility) activities, exhibits, scholarships.
- *Employee/internal relations*: Building a bond with employees even if there are only one or two, making employees feel a part of the organization. These would be volunteers in nonprofit organizations. Tactics would be the use of an intranet, newsletters, and other house organs, closed circuit television, e-mail and other social media, contests, awards, gifts.
- *Consumer relations*: Building a mutual bond between the company and its customers. A returns policy, tours, sales advantages, brochures, posters/flyers, open houses, educational material, and a complaint system are possibilities.

There can also be programs for government relations, labor relations, international relations, investor relations, and others. An organization depends on these publics for survival because they have some stake in the organization.

Public relations is concerned with reputation. It exists to avoid a negative image and to create or enhance a positive reputation. It is largely the fear of a negative image that causes organizations to develop public relations departments, hire public relations agencies, or both. Too often, an organization does not consider utilizing public relations until it is in a crisis. Then it wants a speedy recovery.

Research shows that companies with ongoing two-way communications often avoid crises or endure crises of shorter duration or of lesser magnitude (see Chapter 2, “Crisis Communications Theory”). Research also shows that companies with a crisis management and/or crisis communications plan come out of a crisis with a more positive image than companies without such a plan.

Whether an organization is a large multinational company or a small business, a *crisis communications plan* is needed. A crisis communications plan is preferably a part of a company-wide *crisis management plan* that includes sections on evacuation, work sites, equipment, and so on. If a company does not have a crisis management plan, a crisis communications plan is still advisable—even urgent.

The media to which you have tried unsuccessfully to pitch ideas for news stories, the media that toss “perfect” news releases in the trash, the media that never return phone calls—those media will call on you in a crisis. They will probably not telephone in advance. They will show up on your premises “in your face.” The media, seeing themselves as advocates for the people, can be the principal adversaries in a crisis.

This is a time when public relations takes front and center—in a very crucial way. This is not to say that public relations will operate independently—that might be a greater disaster. It is a time, however, when the CEO (chief executive) may listen to the PR pro whose name he can never remember.

Sometimes, even in a crisis, the head of the company or organization does not listen because business schools often teach CEOs to make their own decisions. There are many documented cases of disasters during which CEOs acted independently. The Exxon crisis is an example. Exxon’s CEO, Lawrence Rawl, did not respond as the media and environmentalists would have preferred. He did not accept responsibility as rapidly as critics felt he should have. He did not fly to Valdez to express concern. All the moves the public relations experts would advise, Rawl ignored. Rawl is not alone among corporate heads in his response, but the number of bad responses is declining as organizations learn the effects of public opinion.

In a crisis, when everyone else is in a state of panic, public relations practitioners must offer a calming presence: “This is not as bad as it seems,” or “This could be worse. We cannot turn crises into catastrophes. This is what we do . . .”

The Five Stages of a Crisis

A crisis has five stages:

1. Detection
2. Prevention/preparation

3. Containment
4. Recovery
5. Learning.

Detection

The detection phase may begin with noting warning signs, or what Barton (1993) referred to as *prodromes* or the *prodromal stage*. Some crises have no noticeable prodromes, but many do.

When an organization in the same business as yours suffers a crisis, it is a warning to your organization. The 1982 Tylenol tampering case was a prodrome to other manufacturers of over-the-counter drugs. Most companies heeded that warning and now use tamper-proof containers. Imagine how many crises were avoided by noticing that what happened to Tylenol could happen to other companies.

On the other hand, Johnson & Johnson itself had little warning before it was hit with this crisis. No one had ever before poisoned an over-the-counter painkiller; it was not a crisis Johnson & Johnson had anticipated. The only warning the company had was a phone call from a journalist from the *Chicago Tribune*, taken by a Johnson & Johnson public relations staff member. The journalist asked questions about the company's holdings, the spelling of names, and so forth. The employee reported the call to supervisors, who called the newspaper and found out that there were deaths attributed to Tylenol (see Chapter 7, "Johnson & Johnson and the Tylenol Murders").

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was a prodrome to other companies as well as Exxon itself. Oil companies now know better how to prevent spills, how to clean up spills, and how to react to the public after spills.

There are other less obvious prodromes. Employee discontent over any issue is a sign of a brewing crisis. Perhaps there is an increase in complaints about work hours, work conditions, or unreasonable supervisors. Any one of these and many more issues can be an early sign of a work stoppage. The same prodromes can be early signs of workplace violence.

An organization should watch for prodromes and make attempts to stop a crisis at this stage, before it develops into a full-blown crisis. To detect these early signs, organizations form employee committees that function like lighthouse keepers watching for vessels at sea, watchdogs, or whistle-blowers. These whistle-blowers report warning signs to organization officials who can implement plans to avoid the impending crisis or at least have time to prepare to address the media or other publics.

Crisis detection also refers to a system within the organization in which key personnel are immediately notified of a crisis. An organization has a considerable advantage if it knows about a crisis before its publics

do, especially before the news media get the tip. This gives the organization time to draft a statement, make preparations for a news conference, notify the crisis team, and call in spokespersons. As mentioned earlier, the phone call from a *Chicago Tribune* journalist gave Johnson & Johnson some lead time before the public knew about the Tylenol murders.

Crisis Prevention

Ongoing public relations programs and regular two-way communications build relationships with key publics and thereby prevent crises, lessen the blows of crises, or limit the duration of crises.

The establishment of a corporate culture conducive to the positive and open interaction of members also minimizes crises, as does including crisis management in the strategic planning process (see Chapter 2, “Crisis Communications Theory”).

There are other specific tactics and actions that an organization may adopt to prevent crises. These tactics must be communicated to appropriate publics. A company must not only do what is right. *It also must tell its publics that it is taking appropriate action.* This may appear to be bragging, but if the company does not reveal ethical and professional business practices, publics will never know. Crisis prevention tactics include the following:

1. Fostering the continued development of organizational policies that allow for updates and changes based on variances of publics and mission.
2. Reducing the use of hazardous material and processes.
3. Initiating safety training and providing rewards for employees with stellar safety records.
4. Allowing the free flow of information from employees to management with no punishment of employees who deliver bad news.
5. Following up on past crises or problems.
6. Attending community meetings.
7. Developing a community board with key outside members who are public opinion leaders.
8. Circulating a newsletter to frequent consumers.
9. Offering scholarships to employees and their children as well as to other children in the community.
10. Hosting community or employee picnics.
11. Sponsoring community activities, such as Little League teams and charities.

In communications, diligence can sometimes prevent crises. A public relations executive in the Midwest tells of a telephone call from a West

Coast journalist at 5 p.m., just as she was leaving for the weekend. She could easily have refused the call, but she decided to take it. The reporter was preparing to write a story for a big-city newspaper about the failure of a product manufactured by the PR executive's company. The story was one that could have sparked a full-scale crisis. The PR person took the time to locate information that proved the information to be baseless. The reporter was satisfied and the crisis that could have been was averted.

If all members of the management staff are trained to be media savvy, numerous crises can be prevented. Using the story above, the PR executive could have consulted a respected expert on the issue to refute the charges and nip them in the bud. Public relations personnel and key organizational leaders should always be aware of who these experts are and of how to reach them in emergencies. Prompt responses to media inquiries are also a plus.

Crisis Preparation

Crisis preparation is necessary for dealing with crises that cannot be prevented. Pepsi had no way of anticipating the scare in which hypodermic syringes were found in cans of Diet Pepsi. The presence of these syringes in the cans cried "AIDS," and fear of the illness and death far surpassed brand loyalty.

The crisis communications plan is the primary tool of preparedness (see Chapter 15, "The Crisis Communications Plan"). This plan tells each key person on the crisis team what his or her role is, whom to notify, how to reach people, what to say, and so on. The crisis communications plan provides a functioning collective brain for all persons involved in a crisis, persons who may not operate at normal capacity due to the shock or emotions of the crisis event.

Containment

Containment refers to the effort to limit the duration of the crisis or to keep it from spreading to other areas affecting the organization.

Pepsi used an advertisement to end its crisis. After several hoaxes had been exposed without the discovery of one documented case of a syringe in a can after the original incident, the company decided the crisis was over and told the world so. And it was.

Foodmaker, parent company of the Jack-in-the-Box fast-food chain, was charged by PR critics with delaying the resolution of the E. coli crisis that killed several children and one adult in 1993 because the company did not take responsibility for the tainted meat soon enough. However, as long as people, especially children, were sick and dying, there was no way Foodmaker could curtail the crisis. It was contained to the Pacific

Northwest and did not affect all outlets of the chain, and Jack-in-the-Box communicated to consumers that other food products in the restaurants were not contaminated.

Recovery

Recovery involves efforts to return the company to business as usual. Organizations want to leave the crisis behind and restore normalcy as soon as possible. Recovery may also mean restoring the confidence of key publics, which means communicating a return to normal business.

Snapps, a fast-food restaurant in Fort Pierce, Florida, suffered from a rumor that one of its managers had AIDS and had infected hamburgers. To implement recovery, health department officials participated in a news conference telling the public that all managers had been tested, that none had the AIDS virus, and that the virus could not be transmitted through hamburgers (see Chapter 6, “Rumors and Cybercrises”).

Exxon attempted to recover from the *Valdez* oil spill by making efforts to persuade tourists that Alaska was still a beautiful place to visit. It is particularly interesting that Exxon looked beyond its own recovery to the way its crisis had affected the tourism industry.

Learning

The learning phase is a process of examining the crisis and determining what was lost, what was gained, and how the organization performed in the crisis. It is an evaluative procedure designed to make the crisis a prodrome for the future.

One might think that this is like closing the barn door after the cows have escaped. Any farmer will tell you that once the cows are back in the barn, they will escape again unless you close the door this time. The fact that a company has suffered one crisis is no indication that it will not happen again. Johnson & Johnson, after its second tampering crisis, learned its lesson by selling over-the-counter medications in tamper-proof containers. Other companies followed suit. Public relations personnel set about the task of telling the public about the new safety containers.

Another example of the learning phase is illustrated by the case of the U.S. airlines that were plagued with hijackings during the 1960s and 1970s. The airlines set up metal detectors at airports for persons boarding planes. The procedure was extended to cover employees after an irate employee boarded a plane with a gun, shot a supervisor, and caused a fatal crash. The airlines' public relations personnel informed passengers of the new safety procedures.

The learning phase brings about change that helps prevent future crises.

Public Opinion

In a crisis, the public perceives truth to be whatever public opinion says. An organization in crisis must prove to its publics, and often to the general public, that the prevailing negative opinion is not factual. In contrast to a U.S. court of law where a person is innocent until proven guilty, in the court of public opinion, a person or organization is guilty until proven innocent.

Public opinion is difficult to define, but it is based on individuals' attitudes toward specific issues. These attitudes are based on age, educational level, religion, country, state, city, neighborhood, family background and traditions, social class, and racial background. All of these help to form each individual's attitudes, and a predominance of similar attitudes makes up public opinion.

On any given issue, people are in favor, against, neutral, or so disinterested that they could not care less. Most people, unfortunately, fall into the last category. Public relations aims to reinforce positive attitudes, change negative attitudes, and provide information in a way that causes the unopinionated and neutral to form the opinion most conducive to the organization's function.

An organization has no choice in accepting a crisis. A crisis is forced on it, and the organization must cope with it. Organizations can ignore a crisis and hope it will go away. Occasionally, it does. More often, it does not. A crisis ignored is an organization failing.

The essential role of crisis communications is to affect the public opinion process and to be instrumental in establishing and communicating proof that the prevailing "truth" is not factual or not wholly factual. Then explanations of how much is true must follow. If the organization is actually at fault, owning up to it is usually the best policy. The public is forgiving if measures are taken to prevent recurrence.

The news media are prime tools for changing public opinion. The media can reach the masses in a short period of time because most Americans utilize some form of the news media, primarily television. Radio is popular during prime traffic hours. Public relations experts are trained in knowing how to reach the media, when and how to call a news conference, when and how to conduct one-on-one interviews, and when and how to disseminate written material.

Crisis communications, like public relations, is not merely the distribution of news releases. Nor is it only media relations. Frequently, community relations, consumer relations, employee relations, investor relations, government relations, and many other kinds of public relations are involved.

Mini-Case: White Star Line's *Titanic* Sinks

To illustrate terms, let's examine a well-known crisis: the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912.

Titanic was one of several ships of the White Star Line, which had a primary rival, the Cunard Line. The Cunard Line had two famously fast ships—the *Lusitania* and the *Mauritania*. White Star decided not to compete with Cunard on speed but to surpass it, as far as public opinion was concerned, in size, elegance, sumptuousness, and safety.

The White Star Line planned to launch three ships—the *Olympic*, the *Titanic*, and the *Gigantic*, in that order. In the area of media relations, advance publicity praised the immensely luxurious ships. Postcards went out claiming the *Titanic* was “the largest moving object in the world.” A promotional brochure claimed the *Olympic* and the *Titanic* were “designed to be unsinkable” (Ziakas, 1999, p. 109). The trade journal *The Shipbuilder* bragged about the *Titanic*'s opulence—its grand staircase, its elevators, its Turkish baths, and, of course, its “unsinkable” construction.

Titanic personnel were chosen to appeal to a celebrated and wealthy clientele, the targeted public. Captain E. J. Smith, called the “millionaire's captain,” was the highest-paid captain on the seas and a celebrity in his own right. The musicians were the tops in their field and could play a wide range of music. White Star felt it had thought of everything and had attained the highest form of customer relations.

Crisis management plans and crisis communications plans were believed to be unnecessary. After all, if the ship couldn't sink, what could happen? There were medical facilities on board should any passengers suffer a heart attack or some other unforeseen illness. The ship had state-of-the-art communications equipment; if help was needed, personnel could radio other ships.

We've learned that it was always possible, though unlikely, that the ship would sink. A long gash in the hull was the worst case scenario, and that is exactly what happened. So, the non-planners were short-sighted. What about fires? Certainly the ship could burn. An adequate number of lifeboats would still be needed. In fact, a fire out of control on a ship could have been a worse disaster.

A crisis management plan would have detailed what would be done in the event of fire and other tragedies—how evacuation would take place, how practice drills would be conducted for the crew and possibly for passengers, who would lower the lifeboats, who would ensure that passengers were guided safely to the closest lifeboats and ships, who would contact persons ashore by radio, when crew members would save themselves, and so on. A crisis management plan would also have included making sure effective insurance policies were in place. In today's

crises, one must be sure that payrolls can be met; special insurances may be necessary to cover computers.

The crisis management plan would have included the crisis communications plan. The crisis communications plan would have included notification of the home office, where personnel acting as public relations professionals would, in turn, notify the press, White Star Line executives and employees, and passengers' relatives. These were also key publics. (The term *public relations* was not used at the time, although that management function has always been important to the success of any company or organization.)

The crisis communications plan would have also included details about who would be the spokesperson once the passengers were brought to safety. If Captain Smith had survived, he would have been the best spokesperson. As it was, Smith went down with the ship. However, the managing director of White Star, J. Bruce Ismay, was aboard, survived, and was rescued from a lifeboat sent from the *Carpathia*. Many felt he should have given his place on the lifeboat to a passenger. However, because he survived, he should have been the spokesperson. Instead, he hid in the luxurious quarters of the *Carpathia*'s physician until the ship docked in New York, hoping to avoid the other survivors who huddled on floors and under tables.

There were two persons connected to White Star who participated in the media communications. Harold Bride, a radio operator on the *Titanic* who worked for Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, was among the passengers picked up by the *Carpathia*. He wrote a first-person account of the tragedy that he sent to the *New York Times* by wire from the rescue ship. Phillip A. S. Franklin, who had been hired to head White Star's New York office, called together a kind of crisis communications team. This came after David Sarnoff, also a Marconi employee, heard the signal from the *Olympic* that the *Titanic* had run into an iceberg and was sinking fast; Sarnoff gave his story to the Associated Press. Franklin attempted to stop the Associated Press from running the story, saying that even though the ship had run into an iceberg, he had "absolute confidence in the *Titanic*. . . . We are not worried about the ship but we are sorry for the inconvenience of the passengers" (Ziakis, 1999, p. 116).

The morning before the sinking, the *New York Times* ran a story announcing that the "The New Giantess *Titanic*" would soon arrive in New York. The story was a PR person's dream, a proactive story aimed primarily at a public of potential passengers and at educating and informing the general public, thereby assuring that when asked, "What is the biggest, most elegant ship afloat?" anyone would say, "The *Titanic*." The *Times* story described the ship's impressive size, luxury, and illustrious passengers aboard its maiden voyage.

On April 15, White Star was in a reactive mode, as is almost always the case in a crisis. Presented with information from the Bride and Sarnoff stories, the *New York Times* ran a story with this headline:

**NEW-LINER *TITANIC* HITS AN ICEBERG;
SINKING BY THE BOW AT MIDNIGHT;
WOMEN PUT OFF IN LIFEBOATS;
LAST WIRELESS AT 12:27 A.M. BLURRED**

A later *New York Times* headline read as follows:

**TITANIC SINKS FOUR HOURS AFTER HITTING ICEBERG
866 RESCUED BY *CARPATHIA*, PROBABLY 1250 PERISH
ISMAY SAFE, MRS. ASTOR MAYBE, NOTED NAMES MISSING**

Other newspapers' April 15 headlines indicated that the editors were much less aware of accurate details of the story. The *New York Sun's* headline was "All Saved From *Titanic* After Collision." The *Washington Post* apparently chose to believe the spokesperson for White Star, Franklin. The *Post's* headline was the following:

***TITANIC'S* 1470 PASSENGERS ARE NOW BEING
TRANSFERRED IN LIFEBOATS TO CUNARD LINE
Twenty Boat Loads Have Already
Been Transferred to the *Catania*,
of the Cunard Line. . . . No Loss of
Life is Feared. . . . Officials Confident
Throughout Long Period of Suspense . . . Halifax
Hears That *Titanic* is on Her Way to That Port.**

(Note that newspapers made estimates of the numbers of passengers rescued and deceased in early coverage. Also, the *Washington Post* thought the rescue ship was *Catania*, not *Carpathia*.)

The *Manchester Guardian*, on April 16, wrote about the miscommunications of White Star. Newspapers love to write about corporate mistakes; it's the stuff of which interesting articles are made. Under the headline "The Day's Strange Reports in America," the story was a timeline of every arrogant message from White Star's Franklin and from other reports. One message from the Government Marine Agency in Halifax said that the *Titanic* was sinking, whereas a message from Franklin said that "all passengers are saved, and the *Virginian* is towing the *Titanic* towards Halifax" (Ziakas, 1999, p. 117).

Franklin finally received a telegram confirming that the ship had sunk, and he later described his reactions:

... it was such a terrible shock that it took us a few minutes to get ourselves together. Then at once I telephoned, myself; two of our directors, Mr. Steele and Mr. Morgan, Jr. and at the same time went downstairs to the reporters. I got off the first line and a half where it said: "The *Titanic* sank at two o'clock a.m." and there was not a reporter left in the room—they were so anxious to get out and telephone the news.

(Ziakas, 1999, p. 117)

At Pier 54 in New York harbor, the surviving passengers came ashore and were regarded as celebrities from that point on. An embarrassed and tearful Franklin went aboard *Carpathia* to meet with Ismay, who was in a state of mental and physical collapse. Ismay and Franklin drafted White Star's official reaction to the disaster and came ashore long after the passengers had left. Ismay and Franklin also were present at a stressful media availability event and later issued a formal statement (shown in Figure 1.1).

In the presence and under the shadow of a catastrophe so overwhelming my feelings are too deep for expression in words. I can only say that the White Star Line, its offices and employees will do everything humanly possible to alleviate the suffering and sorrow of the survivors and of the relatives and friends of those who perished.

The *Titanic* was the last word in shipbuilding. Every regulation prescribed by the British Board of Trade had been strictly complied with, the master, officers, and the crew were the most experienced and skillful in the British service.

I am informed that a committee of the United States had been appointed to investigate the circumstances of the accident. I heartily welcome the most complete and exhaustive inquiry, and any aid that I or my associates or our builders or navigators can render is at the service of the public and the governments of both the United States and Great Britain. Under the circumstances I must respectfully defer making any further statement at this time.

Figure 1.1 Formal statement made by J. Bruce Ismay, managing director of White Star, following the sinking of the *Titanic*. Ismay was aboard the doomed ship and issued this statement after consultation with Phillip A. S. Franklin, who headed White Star's New York office (Ziakas, 1999, p. 120).

The surviving passengers issued their own statement, which read in part:

We, the undersigned surviving passengers from the steamship *Titanic*, in order to forestall any sensational or exaggerated statements, deem it our duty to give the press a statement of facts that have come to our knowledge and that we believe to be true. . . . We feel it is our duty to call the attention of the public to what we consider the inadequate supply of live-saving appliances provided for on modern passenger steamships, and recommend that immediate steps be taken to compel passenger steamers to carry sufficient boats to accommodate the maximum number of people carried on board.
(Ziakas, 1999, pp. 120–121)

The survivors were viewed as heroes, as was Captain Smith, who went down with the ship. Ismay was cleared of any wrongdoing by both British and U.S. inquiries, but his reputation never recovered. In motion pictures about the *Titanic*, Ismay was portrayed as a villain. The denotation of *Titanic* was “huge, colossal,” whereas its connotation was “doom.” White Star Line became synonymous with bad management. It suffered financial problems during the European Depression and, in the 1930s, merged with Cunard, with Cunard holding 62% of the shares. Both flags were flown on the ships until 1957, when the White Star flag was withdrawn. White Star liquidated its ships, and Cunard bought the remaining shares. By 1958, White Star no longer existed. Cunard went on to produce the *Queen Mary*, the *Queen Elizabeth*, and the *Queen Elizabeth II*. The *Queen Elizabeth II* still makes transatlantic crossings.

Prodromes for the *Titanic* tragedy were ships that had sunk previously. White Star thought it had made, in the construction of the ship, all the necessary adjustments in response to warning signs. The company concentrated on the positives rather than the negatives. It did not examine the worst case scenario: “What if this doesn’t work?” That question was apparently never asked or heeded.

Prevention and preparation would have included making sure there were enough lifeboats and developing crisis management and crisis communications plans. Containment would have meant recognizing the danger as soon as the iceberg was sighted and putting into effect the crisis management and crisis communications plans. However, much arrogance (“This ship is unsinkable”) existed. Although there were a limited number of lifeboats, many went unfilled because of poor crisis management. There was apparently time—if there had been a plan to be carried out—to save many more passengers.

Total recovery was not likely in this crisis. The reputation of White Star remained damaged after nearly a century had passed. If the company

had done anything right in the pre-launching, the sinking, or the post-sinking, there might have been a possibility of the recovery of their reputation.

In some cases, a company in crisis can seem to be a victim of crises, but this was not true in the sinking of the *Titanic*. The company was guilty of its own negligence and arrogance.

Crisis Communications Theory

Academic researchers study the methods and procedures of professional communicators and develop theories of what is and what is not effective. Professionals rarely study theory but many have “tried and true” methods of practice that are, in effect, theory. Often, these practices of professionals are the same theories that academicians have studied and named.

A *theory* is used to explain what will work, what decisions should be made and how, what actions are likely to result and how, and how things relate. It is a prediction based on what has happened before. Theory-based practice is preferable because, in most aspects of life, we learn from our previous experiences and the experiences of others. Theorists have examined the actions of numerous practitioners and culled their findings into succinct theories.

Theories exist in various fields. Crisis communicators can benefit from many theories in the social sciences. The relatively new fields of crisis communications and public relations are developing their own theories, but theories applied to crisis communications are often theories in communications (including persuasion and rhetoric), sociology, and psychology.

Theories also tend to change, so it is necessary to regularly test them. Variables and relationships and conditions change, and results are sometimes vastly different in subsequent tests. Also, theories build on previous theories. Often, in using a theory, the researcher recognizes a missing element that does not necessarily find fault with the original theory but is deemed worthy of a new or more multifaceted theory.

Some theories are described in this chapter. They are followed by the predominant public relations/crisis communication theory called the *excellence theory*, proposed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984.

Apologia Theory

When an organization has been accused of a misdeed, its reaction to its publics is often called *apologia*. It is, as one would assume, an effort to

defend reputation and protect image. But it is not necessarily an apology. The organization's effort may deny, explain, or apologize for the action through communication discourse.

If a soft drink manufacturer, for example, is accused of using inferior ingredients in its products, the apologia might contradict the charges by explaining what ingredients were actually used. The aim is to counteract a negative or damaging charge. Publics—the news media, consumers, employees, and key opinion leaders—may express disappointment with the company and expect some explanation, if not a full apology.

The organization may insist that the charges are false and totally deny them. Or the organization may communicate to its public(s) that it did not “intend” to commit the misdeed. This is called *redefinition*. Publics tend to forgive if the organization's policies are above reproach and somehow, somehow, something unforeseen happened. One individual, whose employment may subsequently be terminated, might be blamed. However, the public's forgiveness is not guaranteed. If the organization can show how it has taken steps to prevent the occurrence or the recurrence of the misdeed, all *may* be forgiven.

Apologia strategy may also include informing publics that the organization might *seem to have* committed a misdeed but actually has not. This is called *dissociation*. Facts explaining should follow. In the example above, if the soft drink's color has changed slightly, the manufacturer might explain that the ingredients have not changed but the food coloring is different; all ingredients are still pure and perfect. The organization, if faced with a large number of complaints, might also explain that it is returning to the former food coloring. That would be using dissociation and explanation.

A third strategy might be the actual apology: “We are guilty. We are sorry. Please forgive us.” This is called *conciliation*.

Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, and Palestine territories wanted Pope Benedict to make a conciliation in 2006 when he cited a medieval text that characterized some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as “evil and inhuman,” particularly “his command to spread by the word the faith.” The pope said he was “deeply sorry,” but the complainers from the Muslim countries felt the apology was insincere and made merely to protect his public image. The pontiff said the comments were those he cited from an old source, not his opinion (Associated Press, 2009).

A man in Washington State was frustrated because his wife was missing. He called 911, and an employee of the county sheriff told him his missing wife didn't “meet the criteria for a search” and that he should “check the jails and hospitals.” The man threatened to get the news media involved and did. As the public's concern grew, after two days a tracking was done using cell phone technology. The woman's car had gone over

an embankment where no one from the street could see it in foliage; she was trapped in the car but alive. The sheriff, representing her department, apologized “for not doing a better job of explaining the process” to the man. This was redefinition. The sheriff did not admit that her department and employee had any culpability in the man’s crisis or that “the criteria” would change. She said the process should have been explained better (Castro, 2007).

Image Restoration Theory

This theory builds on the apologia theory. In this theory, the organization determines what is threatening reputation or image and also determines which publics must be addressed and persuaded in order to maintain and restore positive image.

Organizations sometimes take the attitude “Don’t bring me bad news!” They may refuse to read or watch negative news coverage in specific publications or they may close their eyes to consumers or other publics. In refusing to know what some people think of them, they cannot possibly know how to respond. Organizations should seek to read bad news just as much as they keep positive news clippings and read them carefully.

When it comes to publics, the organization must know which publics have negative impressions and what the extent of their knowledge is. Does the public know all the facts, some of the facts, half-truths, lies? One must know where these publics stand before they can be targeted for communication. In most public relations campaigns, the first step is research. The same holds true for crisis communications.

On the other hand, one must determine if the publics know anything at all that might damage reputation. Sometimes it is better to remain silent on the issue. At other times it is best to tell your own bad news. This is a judgment call but a crucial judgment call determined by carefully researching one’s publics continually.

An example of image restoration took place when Wal-Mart realized in 2009 that it was getting bad press. Apparently many people felt that the huge company had a serious case of corporate greed, that it would do anything to earn money.

To build its customers’ trust, executives decided the company should have an open information policy, one in which customers would know the origins of the products sold in the stores. The policy was part of a sustainability agenda that also included requiring suppliers in China, the U.S., and the United Kingdom to comply with environmental laws. It also included having stronger audits, offering awards to energy-efficient suppliers, and urging the suppliers to come up with quality merchandise with no returns due to defects.

Decision Theory

Decision theory is concerned with counseling management and other leaders to make the most effective decision. Decision theory may be applied to all areas of management, but it is useful in public relations management and crisis communication. The theory is especially applicable to issues management and the effort to prevent a crisis.

Decisions are made under various conditions. The outcome may be certain, vague, ambiguous, or risky. The theory suggests that the decision maker should consider the possible benefit of each alternative; this is called *maximizing*. How useful is one alternative compared to others?

The best decision possible garners the greatest benefit, the greatest utility for the organization. Often, decision theorists note that decision makers do not opt for the greatest benefit but settle for the decision that will satisfy minimum requirements, usually because they do not have adequate data with which to formulate decisions. This practice is called *satisficing*.

Obviously, when trying to build long-standing relationships it is better to maximize than to satisfice. When satisficing, a public or publics may not be happy with the decision, or the decision may be temporary, a Band-Aid solution to a cancer in the organization.

Diffusion Theory

Also called *diffusion of innovations theory*, this theory examines how new procedures, practices, and objects are adopted and accepted by companies and individuals.

Diffusion theory has a five-step process: awareness (the body is exposed to the idea), interest (the body develops interest in the idea), evaluation (pros and cons are determined and considered), trial (the idea is implemented, perhaps temporarily to determine its effectiveness), and adoption or failure to adopt (acceptance or rejection of the idea, change, or innovation).

Whether something is adopted or not depends on three variables:

1. *The Past*. What has happened previously? What are past problems and needs? Basically, you must know where you are before you make decisions to make changes, to go forward.
2. *The Decision Makers*. What are the characteristics of the decision-making body that make it open to or closed to change? Are there close-minded persons with great influence over others? How do experience, age, education, and other socioeconomic variables impact the decision-making process? Is the body made up of all leaders and no followers?

3. *The Innovation/Change*. Does the innovation show more obvious advantages and few disadvantages over present practice or procedure? Does the innovation call for drastic change or can it be easily assimilated into current practice?

The *change agents*, often communicators or public relations professionals, try to move the body forward toward adoption. They often use the mass media during the awareness and interest stages. During evaluation and trial, personal contacts are valuable.

An example of *diffusion theory* in crisis communications might be a theater with an aging clientele suffering from poor single ticket sales and declining subscriptions. The plays have, for years, been the classics. Theater management wants to offer more contemporary plays to attract a younger audience, but they also want to keep the faithful clientele. Communicators might make announcements through the news media of this effort showing reasons in the *awareness stage*. In the *interest stage*, they might have focus groups of persons from Generation X and seniors.

In the *evaluation stage*, the focus groups are studied, and comments are offered by members of the executive and community boards. In the *trial stage*, one contemporary cutting-edge play is produced with careful publicity, interaction, and communications with leaders of both groups attending to help them understand. Follow-up interviews are conducted. The same effort is made to get the younger group to understand and appreciate a chosen classic.

The *adoption stage* results if most efforts succeed; during the following season, perhaps two contemporary plays may be offered.

Excellence Theory

Most recent public relations research builds on the *excellence theory* developed by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) and later expanded by J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992). The excellence theory is based on types of public relations practices called “models.” The four models defined by J. Grunig and Hunt provide a way of classifying the types of public relations that individuals and organizations may practice.

In a spectrum of excellence of public relations programs, Model 1 would be the least desirable. Model 4 would be the most desirable, or could be said to be the “most excellent.” Models 2 and 3 fall between these two extremes.

Model 1—Press Agency/Publicity Model

In this model, public relations practitioners are interested in making their organizations or products known. They may or may not use truthful

statements. Falsehoods, half-truths, and incomplete facts are all permissible. The practitioners' abiding slogan, "All publicity is good publicity," indicates a one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics. Little or no research is required. There is no feedback.

J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) revealed that this model was used by 15% of public relations practitioners. Later, J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992) found the earlier data to be inaccurate and reported that most public relations practitioners, unfortunately, still fall into this category.

As practitioners become more knowledgeable and as the profession of public relations grows in respect, the number of practitioners using this model is expected to decrease.

Model 2—Public Information Model

This model is characterized by the desire to report information journalistically. It is different from Model 1 in that truth is essential. Most public relations practice in government agencies today falls into this category. Companies that simply distribute news releases are examples of this model. The practitioner is often called a flack.

This model also involves a one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics. Little or no research is required. There may be some type of evaluation, such as readership surveys or the counting of news clips. Model 2 is most common in corporations.

Model 3—Two-Way Asymmetric Model

In this model, also called the *scientific persuasion model*, the public relations practitioner uses social science theory and research, such as surveys and polls, to help persuade publics to accept the organization's point of view. There is some feedback, but the organization does not change as a result of communications management. In asymmetric public relations programs of this type, the organization rules. It always knows best. Its attitude is that publics should adhere to the organization's viewpoints. An example of asymmetric action is a letter informing a public of a new policy or a recorded telephone message with no technology available for returning messages.

Model 4—Two-Way Symmetric Model

The public relations practitioner in this model, also called the *mutual understanding model*, is an intermediary between the organization and its publics. The practitioner tries to achieve a dialogue, not a monologue as in the other models. Either management or the publics may make changes in behavior as a result of the communications program.

Research and social science theory are used not to persuade but to communicate. Effective public relations programs based on this model are said to be “excellent” programs.

Symmetrical public relations programs negotiate, compromise, bargain, listen, and engage in dialogue. The organization knows what the publics want and need; the publics, in turn, understand the organization’s needs and desires. An example is talking to consumers by telephone or at a public meeting in which the consumers can talk back and changes result.

In crises, organizations are frequently forced, by circumstances, to practice symmetrical communications with adversarial publics. Although most organizations practice Models 1 and 2, research by J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992) revealed that PR practitioners would prefer to practice Model 4 if they had the expertise to do so and if their organizations were receptive to that practice.

The preceding classifications are not precise. For example, an organization may practice Model 2 and Model 4. If the organization practices Model 2 more than Model 4, it is considered a Model 2 public relations operation.

The new social media networks are a boon to the possibilities of two-way symmetrical practice. An organization can, if it desires, listen to its publics and make changes in its programs on the basis of those communications. It can also use them to explain its policies to these publics. After listeria-tainted meat had killed several people, the Canadian company concerned—Maple Leaf Foods—responded to a consumer on the corporate blog, explaining the precaution the company had instituted to ensure that this would not occur again. When it responded to that one irate blogger, other consumers read it.

If a company uses social media to count kudos from its publics and not to carefully consider change for mutual benefit, the social media interchange is Model 3.

Grunig and Repper on the Excellence Theory

J. Grunig and Repper (1992) identified theories on strategic management, publics, and issues as having two primary propositions. Both are conducive to a study of crisis communications programs:

1. Public relations is most likely to be excellent (contribute to organizational effectiveness) when it is an integral part of an organization’s strategic management process and when public relations is managed strategically.
2. Public relations is managed strategically when it identifies stakeholders (separates active publics from stakeholder categories) and resolves issues created by the interaction of organization and publics

through symmetrical communications programs early in the development of issues.

These propositions mean that excellent public relations programs, as well as excellent crisis communications programs, have the following characteristics:

1. The public relations head is an important part of the top management of the organization.
2. Programs are designed to build relationships with all key stakeholders of an organization or company.
3. Public relations, through research, identifies who the organization's key stakeholders are and ranks them in order of importance. They may be customers, the media, employees, competitors, unions, special interest groups, vendors, suppliers, environmental groups, consumer advocates, and critics, to name a few.
4. An ongoing public relations plan is developed for each key stakeholder. This necessarily goes beyond media relations into a Model 4 program (two-way symmetrical program). These programs can sometimes prevent crises. At other times, they can help lessen the severity of crises.
5. In segmentation, public relations breaks down large publics into smaller subpublics with which it can communicate more effectively about issues or problems. These publics are usually, but not always, active rather than passive. Active publics seek out information and are more likely than passive publics to act on an issue. For example, if an organization wants to gear a program to all public schoolchildren, it might direct its program to the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers, organizations consisting of members who are educators and who can reach all public schoolchildren. Organizations that do not segment their stakeholders might send a news release to metropolitan newspapers, hoping that teachers will read the resulting article and communicate its contents to the children in their classes.
6. Issues management is part of a two-way symmetrical program that is best handled by the public relations department. (Although issues management is, in many cases, handled by public affairs or corporate communications departments, which are separate and apart from public relations departments that handle only media relations, Grunig and Repper's theory does not advise this separation.) A public makes an issue when it perceives that a problem is brewing or already exists. In issues management, the public relations department anticipates the issues that are potential crises and ranks them in order of possible damage to the organization. Then strategies and tactics are developed

and implemented to lessen the likelihood of crises. The crucial element here is early identification of potential crises, like treating a sniffle before it becomes the flu. The treatment might involve making allies with potential adversaries or meeting with community activists to explain a procedure that might be construed as damaging to consumers. Consequently, the odds are enhanced that an issue can benefit the organization rather than hamper it.

Marra and the Excellence Theory

Marra (1992), in an attempt to build on and validate a model of excellent crisis public relations, suggested that organizations develop a theoretically based crisis public relations model that would allow practitioners to identify which variables could be adjusted to make a crisis communication plan (CCP) work and which variables, if not adjusted, would cause it to fail. Marra argued that this knowledge could allow public relations practitioners to know before a crisis what will or will not work. He identified strategies and techniques common to excellent responses to crises with the following hypotheses:

1. An organization having strong and well-developed relationships with its key publics prior to a crisis will suffer less financial, emotional, or perceptual damage than an organization with weak and poorly developed relationships with its key publics prior to a crisis. Key publics would not only be the media but also employees, customers, community members, and so forth.
2. Organizations with weak precrisis relationships are those with asymmetrical practices; that is, they are Model 1, 2, or 3 organizations. Therefore, an organization that uses two-way symmetrical crisis communications procedures will suffer less financial, emotional, or perceptual damage than the Model 1, 2, or 3 organization or the organization that uses silence as a crisis response.
3. An organization that establishes and puts into effect continuing risk communications activities and prepares crisis communications plans prior to crises will have stronger relationships with key publics, use two-way symmetrical crisis public relations practices, and as a result suffer less financial, emotional, and perceptual damage than the organization that does not.
4. An organization with communication ideologies that encourage, support, and champion crisis management preparations, crisis communications plans and actions, and two-way symmetrical communications practices will suffer less financial, emotional, and perceptual damage than the organization that does not.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS VOCABULARY

Strategy—An approach on how one handles a problem.

Stakeholders—People who are linked to an organization or who have an interest in an organization and are affected by the decisions made by that organization. Examples of company stakeholders are employees, stockholders, communities, and government officials.

Strategic publics—Stakeholders who are crucial to an organization. The organization cannot function without them. Examples are boards of directors, investors, and unions.

Strategically managed public relations—Communications programs designed to build relationships with strategic publics, the crucial stakeholders of an organization.

Segmentation—The division of a market, population, or a large public into groups whose members are bound by mutual interests, concerns, and characteristics.

Risk communications—An ongoing program of informing and educating various publics (usually external publics) about issues that can affect, negatively or positively, an organization's success. The program builds solid relationships between an organization and its key publics, the publics on which an organization's survival depends. These relationships must be established prior to a crisis. It is too late after a crisis erupts.

Organizational ideology—An organization's philosophy, its working climate, its corporate culture. Each person's experience with the organization—no matter how small or large—puts him or her in contact with that organization's ideology, or corporate culture. The elements of that culture (such as norms of dress, formal rules, informal codes of conduct, taboos, jokes, language, etc.) make up an invisible, internalized whip that cracks and tells people what they can do, what they cannot do, what they can say, and what they cannot say in their dealings with the organization. It is inescapable that the culture determines to some degree how people within the organization behave. Popular examples of organizational ideology include "Look busy whether you are or not" and "The boss is always right." Johnson & Johnson relied on its organizational ideology in 1982 when, without a crisis management or communications plan, it followed its credo after several people died from poisoned Tylenol capsules.

Communications ideology—The organization's philosophy and attitudes of behavior in communicating with publics. Again, Johnson & Johnson's public relations program during the tampering case is an example. The company's basic rule in coping with the media, and thereby with the consuming public, was "open and honest information." It is difficult for a public relations department of a major corporation to have a communications ideology different from the organizational ideology. A productive public relations operation necessarily suffers from an unproductive organizational ideology and vice versa. (This is further examined in Chapter 7, "Exxon and the Valdez Oil Spill.")

Figure 2.1 To comprehend crisis communication theory, certain terms must first be understood.

Fearn-Banks and the Excellence Theory

Two additional characteristics are suggested (Fearn-Banks, 1996):

1. An organization that anticipates, through crisis inventory (see Chapter 15), the precise type of crisis will suffer less financial, emotional, and perceptual damage than the organization that does not.
2. An organization that maintains the reputation of having an overall “open and honest” policy with stakeholders and the news media will suffer less financial, emotional, and perceptual damage than the organization that does not. (This is a specific area covered broadly in Marra’s fourth characteristic.)

Summary

Various theories suggest attributes and characteristics of programs that are likely either to prevent crises or enable organizations to recover from crises more swiftly than organizations without those characteristics. Strong among all the theories is the necessity for planning ahead. Also prominent is maintaining strong relationships with publics (including the news media).

Persons with public relations savvy are likely to say, “This is obvious. People who are prepared should withstand a crisis better.” Nevertheless, the likelihood of a crisis is not seen as obvious by many organizational heads. Most companies still do not plan for crises and take the attitude that “it hasn’t happened, so it probably won’t happen.” However, it does happen, more often than not. After an organization without a plan or a program has suffered a crisis, it then sees the need for crisis planning and proactive public relations programs.

Communications to Prevent Crises

Warning signs, called *prodromes*, are crucial because prevention is the best cure for a crisis. Strong community relations programs that get positive coverage in the media and endear your company to its publics will help this effort. Actually, ongoing proactive public relations programs of any kind are insurance policies against crises.

A strong people-centered corporate culture, rather than a profit-centered one, is also an effective crisis prevention tool. Corporate culture is the way an organization does business, its unwritten but firmly established values. The corporate culture must be established in such a way that honest, open communication is a basic value. Problems such as the CEO not speaking to the head of public relations and ignoring complaints from consumers are signals of an impending crisis that can be devastating. Employees who are stressed from overburdened workloads can ignite a crisis as well.

When on a fact-finding mission among internal publics to determine likely prodromes, listen attentively to others. You need to listen to what is said and to note how it is said, under what circumstances, and who said it. Watch facial expressions; they may be indicative of a story beyond the information you actually gather. Employees may fear reprisals from superiors or want to avoid “ratting” or whistle-blowing. There are numerous reasons for omissions, half-truths, and lies. A diligent researcher will see clues and hints of a need for further investigation.

An example of this was exhibited when a specific brand of automobile was found to be dangerously defective. It was discovered, after numerous cars had rolled off the assembly line and been sold, that the workers on the line knew about the defect. They were afraid to pull their supervisors’ coattails, afraid of the workplace culture of “Kill the messenger of any news that causes a slowdown.”

The News Media

Before a crisis, or at the onset of a crisis, you must anticipate what the news media need and want. Looking at the big picture, the media want

to sell newspapers and win ratings wars. The media give the public what it wants to know rather than what it needs to know. There is a fine line between news and entertainment, and crises make for entertaining news. The public is perceived to enjoy watching, reading about, uncovering, and lambasting organizations, companies, and individuals who might have done harm to people or, even worse, to animals.

Never say, “No comment!” to the public; refusing to comment appears to be an admission of hiding information or even guilt. If you do not respond, the public does not hear your side of the story and will conclude, “Company X refused to comment and, therefore, it must have done something terrible.” If there is some legal reason for not revealing certain information, explain this as much as possible and promise to reveal the information at a specific time. Do all you can to make that information available at the time you specified.

Do not assume that the crisis story will go away. The media can do their stories without you. They can build a case against your organization, portrayed as “the bad guy,” by talking with disgruntled employees, volunteers, and customers, and, even more often, by seeking out disgruntled former employees, former volunteers, and former customers. The media can also use computer files and call up long-forgotten problems and mistakes and, in a few seconds, regurgitate them and place them before the eyes and ears of the public. The people thus hear the negative story.

In a TV interview, Carl Bernstein (1994), who with Bob Woodward investigated the Watergate crisis for the *Washington Post*, said, “There are always people, if you work hard enough, who will want to tell the truth.” In other words, do not wage a war with an enemy who buys ink by the barrel, paper by the ton, and controls the airwaves.

Internal Publics

Companies and organizations are wise to develop programs designed to achieve the following objectives with internal publics, particularly with employees:

1. Employees must learn what positive performance is and how it will benefit the organization and the employee. Employees need job descriptions and perhaps instructions on how their jobs should be done. In some public relations departments, employees admit that they write news releases on a “monkey see, monkey do” system—they use previous news releases and make new ones fit the same format, a kind of formula writing. This may work occasionally, but each news release should have its own unique elements and style. If an employee needs a formula to write a news release, it may be time

for writing classes. Demonstrations, practice, and special training or a reference manual may also be helpful.

2. Employees also need to know the consequences of a job well done and of a job poorly done, including consequences to the company and to the individual employee. It is important for all employees to feel as if they are part of the company. It's a feeling of "we," not "they."
3. Employees must learn what the job priorities are. Employees and management could have various opinions of which jobs or tasks are priorities. It is important for both employees and management to be on the same page. Either side may adjust to the other, but it is important that management and employees agree on priorities. This, again, requires effective communication.
4. Positive performance must be rewarded. Employees perform well when their work is recognized and rewarded. Conversely, they perform poorly when their work is not rewarded. Although managers say the paycheck is enough, they are the very managers likely to suffer crises arising from internal conflict. Research shows that positive reinforcement results in continued effective performance. Rewards may include money, trophies, certificates, an afternoon off, a free lunch, compliments, announcements on a bulletin board, a temporary parking place of honor, and other forms of employee recognition. Even a minor recognition in the form of a letter, memo, or e-mail message can be effective and encouraging when it is provided on a regular, perhaps daily, basis. Such a message might say, for example, "You worked very hard to get that report completed on time and I appreciate your hard work."
5. Conversely, poor employee performance should be punished. If an employee not doing his or her job well is never reprimanded, the good workers become discouraged. Proper communications with poor performers include formal or informal documents and face-to-face conversations, but they should never include public humiliation.
6. Punishment for good work must be avoided. Many times in companies, an employee who does work well is given more work to do. An employee who makes useful suggestions winds up having to carry out the suggestions. An employee who comes in early or stays late is despised by other workers. These are examples of punishing employees for exceptional work. First, communication is necessary to reward the good performance; second, an effort should be made to provide the training, mentoring, and advising necessary to bring the other employees up to the standard set by the exceptional worker.
7. Help employees cope with personal problems. Whether management likes it or not, employees will have personal problems that may interfere with their work. Management should learn to recognize the

symptoms of a personal crisis. A personal crisis may exist when an employee does the following: spends an unusual amount of time on the telephone, makes an unusual number of errors, is unproductive, abuses equipment, arrives late or leaves early, stares blankly into space, yells and is otherwise irritable, or spends excessive time in the restroom.

Because personal crises can turn into company crises, it is imperative to help employees cope with the issues affecting their performance. Allowing employees time off for personal business (with or without make-ups) is one way to handle these situations; providing on-site psychologists and advisers is another. Some companies even have on-site physicians and dentists available to employees to save time away from the job.

Large companies have employee relations departments to cope with issues surrounding employee problems and employee benefits. Many companies provide outstanding benefits that are a real plus in earning employee loyalty. They may also provide stock options and extensive vacation time. J. P. Morgan grants a free lunch. Fel-Pro pays \$3,000 a year to send employees' children to college. Johnson & Johnson has a benefit whereby employees who have worked there for at least 5 years get an extra week's paid vacation when they get married. Johnson & Johnson also has a child-care center and on-site fitness center.

Customers/Consumers

Generally, a business has five primary objectives designed to build sales and gain loyal customers. These objectives are the following:

1. *Keep the old customers.* Longtime contented customers bring other customers. Programs such as the frequent-flyer programs and exclusive discounts are examples of programs designed to reward consumers for loyalty to a company, brand, or product. Other communications, such as newsletters and individual letters, are also frequently used. Assuring loyal customers of the constant effort to have quality products and services as well as competitive prices is important.
2. *Attract new customers.* Good prices, excellent quality, and word-of-mouth referrals from loyal consumers help to attract new customers. Interpersonal contact with sales staff and other employees is also effective in this area. Open houses and other special events bring the company to the attention of potential customers. Publicity about the company's outreach programs also attracts new customers.
3. *Market new services and products.* Customers and consumers want to see that a company or organization is constantly making efforts

- to better itself in every area. They want to know what the new products and services are, why they are better than the older ones, and that prices are reasonable.
4. *Handle complaints swiftly.* A customer who complains and is subsequently satisfied will return and bring other customers. One who does not complain or is not satisfied after a complaint will switch loyalty to a competitor. If four people complain, one can usually assume that there are 24 others who were dissatisfied and did not speak out. Complaints in some organizations are handled by a middle person who mediates between the complainant and the company. He or she may simply say, “We’re sorry and will make amends.” Or a letter might be written explaining the company’s actions. The overall message to the customer is: “We want you to be happy. We want your business.”
 5. *Educate customers.* Companies develop programs to educate customers about products and services. A store with a new line of cotton garments might inform customers—through ads, publicity, newsletters, and web pages—of the advantages of cotton, how to recognize well-made garments, and so on.
 6. *Organize outreach programs.* In the area of community relations, companies and organizations adopt outreach programs in an effort to build loyalty among persons in the community surrounding its place of business. This may include making donations to nonprofits, schools, and the like. Or it may mean actually getting involved: A drug store may offer colon cancer screening. The police department might mentor fatherless teens. McDonald’s runs the Ronald McDonald Houses providing temporary houses for families while their sick children are treated at nearby hospitals. The Internal Revenue Service includes photos of missing children on its income tax forms. In outreach programs, it is important to publicize your efforts—if your purpose is to build positive relationships with the community. Some organizations feel that publicizing their good deeds is bragging. If you do not publicize, only those people who have benefitted will know about your actions.

The Nordstrom Consumer Policy

The Nordstrom chain is known for its “customer is first” policy, a prototype and model for other retail stores. A Nordstrom store manager said, “Employees are instructed to make a decision that favors the customer before the company. They are never criticized for doing too much for a customer, [but] they are criticized for doing too little” (Spector & McCarthy, 2000, p. 88).

The company works on the principle that if it takes care of customers' needs and concern first, the dollars will come. The corporate organizational chart shows customers at the top of an inverted pyramid and the co-chairs at the bottom. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Nordstrom customer relations is its returns policy: If a customer is dissatisfied with a Nordstrom purchase for any reason, the store takes it back with no questions asked. Bruce Nordstrom advised his salespeople:

If a customer were to come into the store with a pair of 5-year-old shoes and complain that the shoes were worn out and she wants her money back, you have the right to use your best judgment to give my money away. As a matter of fact, I order you to give my money away.

(Spector & McCarthy, 2000, p. 98)

Although the returns policy invites consumer abuse, Nordstrom believes that 98% of its customers are honest and should not be punished for the dishonesty of a few. This policy has forced other retail stores to adopt a more liberal returns policy to compete with Nordstrom.

Employees, customers, and even other publics (boards of directors, advisory boards) may be included in regular communications through social media, such as Facebook groups.

Communications When the Crisis Strikes

When there is a crisis, there must be communication with the news media, social media publics, internal publics, external publics, and lawyers. All these communications should begin as soon as possible in the “golden hour,” the first hour following notification that a crisis has occurred.

The International Telecommunications Union and other sources provided data for the World Internet Usage Statistics as of December 31, 2009. Their Internet Big Picture revealed 76.2% of North Americans had Internet usage. Australia had a 60.8 percentage; Europe, 53.0; the Middle East, 28.8; Latin America, 31.9; Asia, 20.1; and Africa, 8.7. All continents showed considerable growth (World Internet usage statistics, n.d.).

Nevertheless, that does not mean social media and websites are more important tools of communication than the traditional news media. As much as Internet use has increased, we still cannot ignore that television is in 98% of homes in the U.S. Some were lost when television went digital in 2009, but television is basically in all U.S. homes. The percentage is high in other countries, too (Media trend track, 2009). Another consideration is that television viewers get crisis information without seeking it. A family can be watching their favorite sitcom when breaking news interrupts. If people read newspapers—and there are still millions who do—they see news stories they were not necessarily seeking. Conversely, with online media, you don’t get any information unless you actively seek it yourself.

News can sometimes be circulated faster by social media than by traditional news media (see Chapter 5, “Social Media and Crisis Communications”). Reporters must spend time getting to a crisis site and then transmit a story while bloggers already at the site, with little or no expertise in reporting, can get information transmitted immediately. It may be accurate; it may be misinformation. The trained reporter, hopefully, will find more complete information than the blogger or the Facebook friend. He or she will know what questions to ask and what answers to seek.

Still, without doubt, both social media and traditional media must be targets of communications as swiftly as possible. Ideally, the two should

be contacted simultaneously and immediately because if accurate data is not disseminated, inaccurate data is. If the crisis is online, then online communications is probably best (see Domino's Pizza, Chapter 12, page 258). If your communications staff is too small to permit simultaneous communication, then a decision must be made as to which is more urgent for your business.

Communicating with the News Media

There are three possible results of a crisis: (a) The organization is put out of business, ruined, possibly sued, and key executives are possibly charged with crimes; (b) the organization continues to exist, but it has lost some image and respect in its publics' eyes, and perhaps a great deal of financial position; (c) the organization, in a hard-fought battle, has won a war of public opinion and is seen as favorably as before or perhaps more favorably.

Some types of organization suffer crises, loss of reputations, and great financial loss but never seem to go out of business no matter what they do. Governments are usually in that category, and they often lose lead officials after a crisis—the captain must go down but not the ship. Hospitals are also in this category—no matter what misdeeds they do, they usually stay in business.

Information about a crisis reaches publics through the media more than through any other means. An organization may have to work very hard to get the media's attention during normal times; its public relations personnel may struggle even to get a news release used. However, during times of crisis, it will be the media who will be seeking out PR personnel or other company representatives.

It is true, unfortunately, that bad news sells. This has always been true. Even Shakespeare wrote about it in *Julius Caesar*: "The evil men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones." A negative story is deemed more newsworthy than a positive one; the media consider your positive news "puffery."

It is the PR practitioner's dream that every news publication and every electronic news outlet will run prominent stories saying, "Company A is the greatest. Its products and services are the greatest, and it has the best PR people imaginable."

Plan a system in advance whereby you are notified of erupting crises. You want to be among the first, if not the first, to know. This can be done by instructing company telephone operators to reach you 24 hours a day, leaving a voice-mail greeting on your personal line during non-business hours, and cultivating friendly relations with key personnel in the media, the fire department, and the police department—people who can notify you in the event of a crisis affecting your organization.

Stages of a Crisis in the News Media

News media coverage of a crisis usually falls into four stages. The crisis communicators should realize these stages and be prepared to provide correct information and make explanations at each stage.

Stage 1 is breaking news. It is the immediate shocking or dramatic impact. Detailed information is usually not available; misinformation is often broadcast and printed. For example, in the Fort Hood shooting incident in November, 2009, the first news stories said the gunman had been killed; he had not. Reporters are covering the shock of it all.

Stage 1 ends when causes and explanation are presented. News stories then center on those explanations. This can mean one day on TV news and newspaper pages, not to mention social media conversations, or it can mean several days. The Exxon oil spill (see Chapter 7) stayed in Stage 1 for a long period of time because reporters were stuck in Alaska with nothing else to cover except the dead sea life.

Natural disasters also have prolonged Stage 1 news coverage. The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti suffered Stage 1 for a couple of weeks. As long as survivors were being pulled out of the rubble and as long as relief was delayed, the stories continued. Fortunately for Haitians, as people all over the world watched and read about the disasters, they felt inclined to make donations.

Stage 2 begins when concrete details are becoming available. In the Haitian tragedy, an accounting of the fatalities and the funds being raised was a sign of Stage 2. In the Columbine school shooting in Littleton, Colorado (see Chapter 13), Stage 2 began when descriptions of the personalities of the shooters and stories of survival became available.

Stage 3 often involves analysis of the crisis and its aftermath. How are victims coping? What is being done to remedy the situation? More is said about how and why. In the Columbine crisis, Stage 3 stories were about how the gunmen planned the attacks and memorials for the victims.

Stage 4 is an evaluation and critique of the crisis. Were warning signs heeded? In most natural disasters and frequently in other crises, stories are done about how the company, city, or country was warned that the crisis would occur. Katrina, the Asian tsunami, and the Haitian earthquake had warning signs. At Columbine, the youthful gunmen displayed signs of maladjustment. This stage also signals a return to normalcy and a consideration of what lessons have been learned.

Stage 4 usually includes anniversary stories—at first yearly, and then perhaps every 10 years, 20, 30, etc. The 9/11/2001 tragedy is revisited every year in September. The attack on Pearl Harbor is still revisited each year but to a greater degree in 10-year increments. The 2000 Alaska Airlines crash over the Pacific Ocean was revisited in January, 2010 in Seattle newspapers, the headquarters of the airline. The news media keep tickler files to remind them to revisit crises.

Sometimes a crisis grows out of another crisis, and that goes through stages also. After the 9/11 tragedy, concern erupted about what was happening to the enormous donations made to survivors, and this became another crisis.

What the News Media Want to Know

- What happened?
- Were there any deaths or injuries?
- What is the extent of the damage?
- Is there a danger of future injuries or damage?
- Why did it happen?
- Who or what is responsible?
- What is being done about it?
- When will it be over?
- Has it happened before?
- Were there any warning signs of the problem?

If your organization has erred, it is usually best to reveal the mistake at once, apologize, and make amends. The story may end right away as long as the crisis itself is not continuing. Cover-ups make a crisis persist. Whether your company has erred or not, do all you can to get control of the situation as much as possible and as soon as possible. When you release your own bad news, you decrease the likelihood of rumor, supposition, half-truths, and misinformation.

If the disaster or crisis has already resulted in injury or death, or if it poses a threat to the safety or well-being of groups or individuals, contact the media immediately and indicate that you are looking into the situation, that you “just found out 5 minutes ago.” This way, the media representative will realize both the crucial aspect of the problem and that your company cares about people and understands the media’s needs. This action may buy you an ally as well.

If the situation is not urgent (be certain of this), it is advisable to look into the situation, to make attempts to fully understand what took place, and to have answers prepared for the media’s questions.

If reporters contact you first and you are unaware of the crisis, do not rattle on without knowing details. Ask if you can call back in a few minutes, saying frankly, “I need to find out what’s going on.” Get the facts and then call the reporter back at the appointed time to communicate them.

Remember that the media and the public are entitled to have the facts about a crisis. The idea is to help the media cover the story accurately and with minimum criticism of the organization or company. The overall goal is to keep or get the public’s trust through the media. The media need you for information for interesting stories. Your organization needs

the media to communicate with the public en masse. By keeping this symbiotic relationship in mind, the public relations professional will be in a more proactive position during a crisis and feel more in control of the organization's bad news.

The spirit of cooperation must be established. In a crisis, there are three types of response to a media request:

1. We know and here's all the information.
2. We don't know everything at this time. Here's what we know. We'll find out more and let you know.
3. We have no idea, but we'll find out and tell you.

Give the media access to the material they need: background information, statistics, photographs, and spokespersons.

Apology

Know the difference between an apology and an excuse. An excuse passes blame to others; an apology does not. Do not say, "We didn't realize . . ." when you should have realized. An apology is a sincere admission that you are sorry for whatever happened. When people, especially children, were sick and dying from the E. coli that had tainted Jack-in-the-Box hamburgers, an excuse was not what the consumer public wanted to hear. Saying the meat-packer was responsible for the E. coli infections was not an apology. If your company had sold such a product, you would owe the public an apology: "We are sorry. We will do everything we can to make amends. We take responsibility for medical treatments" (see "Apologia Theory" in Chapter 2, "Crisis Communications Theory" and also Chapter 14, "Individuals in Crises.")

Spokespersons

Identify one primary spokesperson for your company. Designating one primary spokesperson reduces the possibility of conflicting statements, organization values, or explanations being released to the media. Speaking with one voice is more crucial in a crisis than during normal operations.

The CEO is considered by most public relations professionals to be the spokesperson of choice during a crisis, especially if people have been injured, if there is danger of physical harm, or if there are millions of dollars in damages. The CEO usually has the most credibility with publics and the media. He or she is seen as a true representative of the company, as a person who can make decisions, and speak for the company. If the company has a heart, it is the CEO's; at least, that's the public's perception.

Alternative spokespersons should be selected in the event the primary spokesperson is not available during a crisis. Supportive spokespersons, people who can speak authoritatively on technical subjects, are frequently of value, too. For example, if patrons of a restaurant get food poisoning, a physician might serve as a supportive spokesperson responsible for telling the public about symptoms and treatments.

External Experts as Spokespersons

When there is an opportunity to let impartial experts speak about your company's diligence, sense of responsibility, or innocence in a crisis, permit them to be spokespersons. In the Snapps restaurant case (see Chapter 6), medical officials spoke at news conferences telling the public that AIDS could not be spread to food by an HIV-positive food handler

News Conferences

If a news conference is warranted and can be arranged swiftly, arrange one. Be certain to have a prepared statement read and distributed to the media. This assists you in setting the tone for the rest of the session.

Spokespersons, whether the CEO, other top executives, experts, or public relations professionals, should have major talking points. Also called *key messages* and *speaking points*, these talking points are one-or two-sentence summaries used to remind you of messages you want to be sure to get across to the public. They might provide details about the crisis or positive information about the company, such as the company's safety record, safety procedures, evacuation procedures, and other information that says, "We are very concerned; we care."

Be mindful during a crisis, however, that it is not the time to bring up unrelated community service projects, no matter how many you have. When lives are in jeopardy, no one wants to hear about how much money you give annually to scholarships.

Spokespersons should rehearse their statements and talking points enough to be comfortable with the information, to be comfortable in front of TV cameras, and so prepared that he or she need only glance occasionally at notes. Preferably, before a crisis, practice sessions should be held in which employees ask the most difficult, rude, pointed questions of the spokespersons to simulate an actual crisis news conference.

Do not prolong the crisis by calling an unnecessary news conference or by engaging in other activities that can keep the crisis in the news. During a crisis, you want to get off the news pages and broadcasts.

10 Do's for Media Interviews

When dealing with the media or when being interviewed by the media, whether in a one-on-one situation or at a news conference, note the following 10 do's for media interviews:

1. Do listen to the whole question before answering.
2. Do use everyday language, not the jargon of your business or profession. Even if the reporters use the jargon, use the common vernacular unless the interview is with a professional publication.
3. Do maintain an attitude showing you are calm, courteous, responsive, direct, positive, truthful, concerned, and, if necessary, repentant and apologetic.
4. Do understand the reporter's job. Respect deadlines and return phone calls promptly.
5. Do be accessible and pleasant.
6. Do try to treat the reporter as a partner, an ally in maintaining or restoring the company's good image.
7. Do tell the truth, the whole truth. Misleading or omitted facts are also forms of lying. (Some seasoned public relations practitioners disagree with this position and even insist that no organization in a crisis is ever totally open and honest with the media or anyone else from the outside. This is an arguable point in a moot debate. Even these skeptics would agree that it is important to appear open and honest.)
8. Do look the reporter in the eye. In your response, address each reporter by name if possible.
9. Do use your crisis communications plan.
10. Do keep employees informed of the crisis. They may be volunteer spokespersons.

10 Do Not's for Media Interviews

At the same time, there are do not's when dealing with the media:

1. Do not be a wimp! Being concerned and empathetic does not mean that you must shake in your boots.
2. Do not guess or speculate. Either you know or you don't.
3. Do not get overly upset about being quoted out of context. Unless a complete transcript of your interview is printed, you are almost always quoted out of context to a degree. If the quote is completely wrong or libelous, that is another matter. Asking an editor for a retraction or correction is permissible if a reporter has been undoubtedly biased. A friendly letter delivered immediately and followed by

a phone call is generally most effective. “Demanding” a retraction should usually be a lawyer’s job, as is a charge of libel. Proving libel is difficult and costly.

4. Do not play favorites with the media. Always favoring one newspaper or one television station is bad business. It can haunt you later.
5. Do not pull advertising from a newspaper because reporters are not cooperative. The purpose of advertising is not to help the newspaper anyway.
6. Do not consider your news release “golden.” It will be changed except in small-staffed newspapers. If it is written well with real news, you have done the best you can do.
7. Do not stick to a story if it has changed, just to be consistent. The media realize that things change. Johnson & Johnson experienced this during the Tylenol crisis (see Chapter 7). It had initially announced there was no cyanide in its plant but later discovered that there was. Johnson & Johnson’s public relations staff told the media the truth. No publication made a big deal over it.
8. Do not be trapped into predicting the future.
9. Do not wear sunglasses or chew gum.
10. Do not smoke—unless you are in a place such as Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where the economy is based on cigarette sales and smoking is a way of life.

Truth is Essential: The Dissemination of Error

When there is no time for research, when the news media tell you the news, or when the spokesperson must speak to the news media before there are any real answers, what should you do? In these cases, make it clear you have no definitive information. Do not reveal assumptions. Tell the truths that are certain, saying repeatedly, “I just learned about this, so I don’t have all the answers.” If you know, for example, that your company practices safety precautions, say so: “This company is very concerned about employee safety. There are hard and fast rules. There are rewards for safety records. If anything happened, it was not because of a lack of concern for safety. But we are very sorry that it happened.” An early, earnest response can sometimes set the tone for how the public will perceive the company in a crisis. In these days when news is disseminated instantly, it is more important than ever to make sure the information is accurate. This is a concern of communicators and news media.

An illustration of what happens when miscommunications are spread is the Sago Mine tragedy in January 2006. Twelve men died in the mine blast; another was rescued barely alive.

The tragedy was compounded because the families and friends of the miners, after waiting and hoping that the toxic fumes detected were not

where the men were believed to be, were told that 12 men had survived and only 1 had died. Then, 3 hours later they found that the good news was wrong and the bad news was right, that 12 had died. Understandably, they were devastated.

The miscommunications occurred like the children's game of "Telephone." A worker in the mine communicated by two-way radio that 12 were deceased but as the message traveled like a chain to various points through the mine to the ground above, the details were reversed. An official called 911 in anticipation of the rescue and asked for medical crews. This was the phone conversation:

911 operator: What am I telling them (the medical crews)?

Mine official: 12 and bringing them out.

911 operator: And they're alive?

Mine official: As far as I know.

"As far as I know" is not confirmation. However, people—and there were apparently many people—on the scene were so eager to get good news that they clung to what they wanted to hear and delivered the good news to the people waiting at the church. It also went to the gathered news media who assumed it came from someone in authority. Newspapers and television news broadcasts went with the story as heard.

It was never revealed where the mistake occurred, and it was obviously a mistake—not a lie and not a cruel trick as some people thought immediately. Management of the mine should have had a way of being certain before giving information. They possibly did, but the head of the mine, interviewed on television news (CNN), seemed to have been misled himself.

The news media know with whom to check for official word, so their participation in informing the world is less forgivable. It is likely that each news outlet was afraid his or her operation would be the only one not carrying the great story of survival. Heads would roll! Without doubt, some reporters worried about whether it was fact, but the story had wings and was traveling all over the world.

Hopefully, news outlets saw their error and will have set up systems whereby this will not happen again. Considering social media, cell phones, Blackberries, and various other technologies, the dissemination of errors can be swift and disastrous.

Trick Questions

Although news reporters must make sure their information is accurate, communications professionals representing companies in crisis must be careful of their response to reporters. A media critic once said, "Being

interviewed is like playing Russian roulette. You never know which question will kill you.” Sometimes reporters stray from the typical “who, what, where, when, and why” questions. Metzler (1994) identified several types of questions that reporters have been known to ask. Metzler’s questions as well as a few others follow.

Speculative questions begin with “if.” These can be embarrassing and dangerous. For example, a reporter may ask, “If the earthquake had happened during business hours, how many people would have been killed or injured?”

Leading questions imply that the reporter already has the answer; you are merely to verify it. For example, “You do agree that the company could have avoided this tragedy, right?”

Loaded questions are designed to elicit an emotional response. Some television reporters thrive on these because responses to them make for more exciting videos. A sample might be, “Isn’t it true that you knew there was asbestos in the ceiling and failed to do anything about it?” In the case of a loaded question, rephrase it and answer your own question. You could say, “Do you mean, ‘Were we aware there was asbestos?’ No, we were not.”

Naïve questions indicate that the reporter has not done any homework and does not know what to ask. “Tell me, what does your company do?” is an example. Reporters who ask such questions are dangerous because they desperately need a story. Make sure they get the story you want them to have. Give them media materials such as press kits, “backgrounders,” biographies, and news releases.

False questions intentionally contain inaccurate details. If the question is “You fired half of your over-50 staff, right?” the public relations professional, knowing the statistic is wrong, could counter with, “No, only 40%,” not realizing the reporter was aiming for that information all along.

Know-it-all questions begin with “We have the story. I just need a few wrap-up facts.” The reporter may want you merely to confirm an already formed viewpoint. He or she may not have a story at all but wants you to release only “the dirt.”

Silence, or an absence of questioning, is used by reporters who want you to spill your guts, to talk on and on. Many people tend to babble because there is silence. Remember, silence is the reporter’s problem, not yours. Use this opportunity to reinforce positive statements or continue to be silent.

Accusatory questions are designed to force you to blame others. Never fall for this. Maintain your innocence if that is true, but do not cast blame on others. The court of public opinion does not react kindly to this.

Multiple-part questions can be confusing to you as well as to the public. Ask which part you should answer first. Then answer each part as a

separate question. Also, you can say, “I’ll take the first part first.” Then restate it yourself the way you want to answer it. Do the same for each subsequent part.

Jargonistic questions are those in which technical words or professional jargon are used. In response, use everyday language. Jargon builds a barrier between you and your publics and erodes their trust.

Chummy questions are those in which the reporter, pretending to be your buddy, may ask, “Say, pal, off the record, what do you think . . .?” The PR practitioner should remember that nothing is off the record and should be careful about supposed friendships.

Labeling questions aim to make issues negative or simplistic by seeming to ask for clarity, as in “Would you call the company’s work schedule ‘stressful?’” You should not accept the reporter’s labels unless they are fair and accurate.

Good-bye questions are posed at the end of an interview and may even come after the camera or tape recorder is turned off. The reporter shakes hands and says, “By the way . . .” Watch out for what follows. The interview is not necessarily over. Remember—in all media questioning—to be positive, concerned, empathetic, and apologetic, if necessary.

Reporters

The preceding discussion of trick questions may seem to be a warning that reporters are sinister creatures whose life goal is to harass public relations practitioners. This is usually not the case.

There are jerks in every profession, including the news media. If you stay in public relations long enough, you will come in contact with them. Know who the jerks and enemies are. Sometimes you can work around them by dealing with other reporters. Other times, you can follow the advice of former President John F. Kennedy: “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.”

There are also those journalists who apparently make themselves feel better by labeling public relations people “flacks.” There is no reason to take this to heart. Reporters do not hate you or your profession. In fact, many of them will seek public relations jobs.

Newspaper and broadcast journalists, in record numbers, are becoming public relations practitioners. Newspapers are failing. Most on-the-air personnel in television cannot expect to have jobs in their middle age. Everyone is downsizing. Public relations is the fastest growing communications profession, largely because of crises and the forecast of crises to come.

Reporters are frequently not knowledgeable about, or interested in, the issues they cover. A story may have been assigned to them. Their task is to bring back an interesting story, a story that will get them a

promotion, a raise, an extended contract, an Emmy, or a Peabody. They want their stories prominently displayed in the newspaper or at the top of the broadcast. They want to get this award-winning story back before the deadline. All would rather that you assist them than be an obstacle to them. Obstacles make awards and raises difficult to obtain.

After reporters have filed stories, they are frequently finished with them. They do not write the newspaper headlines that you hate—that's the job of editors you rarely, if ever, see. Sometimes, if the story continues, other reporters will be assigned.

If you are breaking the news of a crisis or a development in a crisis and you know of reporters who are known to be fair and accurate, you can sometimes give them your story. This does not mean that if you dislike the reporter assigned, you can call another. This works only when no other reporters are involved, and you cannot be charged with playing favorites.

Choosing the news outlet for bad news is not an unheard-of or new tactic. When death was imminent, physicians attending to King George V injected lethal doses of drugs into his veins to hasten his death. They wanted him to die in time to make the deadlines of *The Times*, a morning newspaper in London, considered more responsible than what were, in 1936, considered the "inferior news organs of the afternoon."

In dealing with reporters, one must consider the pressures they are going through, especially when covering an emotional story.

Communicating with Lawyers

Lawyers frequently advise clients in crisis to: (a) be silent, say nothing, circle the wagons; (b) say as little as possible but reveal what information you have as quickly as possible; (c) deny blame and guilt; (d) shift blame to others or share it with others; and (e) remember that anything you say can be used against you in a court of law.

A public relations counsel suggests that a client be open and honest. "No comment" is perceived by the public as an admission of guilt. Anything you do not say can be used against you in the court of public opinion.

Both professions must be heard and considered. There are times when lawyers are right; spokespersons can speak too much. There are times when speaking up pays dividends in both courts of law and the court of public opinion.

Courts of law proclaim that a person is innocent until proven guilty, whereas the court of public opinion often declares a person guilty until proven innocent. When your company loses in the court of public opinion, it also loses its reputation, good name, and positive image—the very qualities that make for its success.

The public believes that an innocent person can answer a police officer's questions without having a lawyer present. After all, what does the person have to hide? The public also believes that this innocent person can go on the stand and plead his or her innocence, showing emotion in the process. However, lawyers frequently advise clients to refrain from all these actions and reactions. Some lawyers think public relations is publicity, getting somebody's name in the newspaper. Others know what public relations really is, but they choose to ignore it.

Sometimes lawyers may be cautious at a time when public relations professionals feel that open communication with publics is crucial to the positive conclusion of a crisis. The lawyer's job, after all, is to protect the company, organization, or individual. Sometimes public relations counsels may not anticipate threats to their own clients.

Lawyers know that any persons with knowledge of the organization in trouble can be called into court for depositions against the client. Sometimes communication with publics can put the organization in a perilous situation.

A case of law versus public relations occurred in 1985, when a Delta Airlines plane crashed. After the crash, high-ranking Delta employees showed great concern for survivors and families of victims. They sent flowers. They visited. They attended funerals. The company's public relations effort was so impressive that many lawsuits were avoided as a result. Nevertheless, some lawsuits were filed. In court, the lawyers for Delta were said to be vicious. They accused one plaintiff of being a cocaine addict and of having a child who was not her husband's. They implied that another victim, a homosexual, might have died soon of AIDS.irate news stories resulted in the company being called a "monster." At least one newspaper wrote prominently of the airline's "Jekyll-Hyde" behavior.

Delta was upset over the negative publicity, but its lawyers insisted that they had to introduce relevant information, acquired legitimately, to fight money-hungry personal injury lawyers (Thompson & Hess, 1986). A solution to such a dilemma is a bond of mutual understanding, a marriage of the two fields, a careful balance.

The legal profession is much older than the recognized field of public relations (although, in effect, public relations has been practiced for centuries). As a profession, public relations is moving toward a day when professionals will have to pass a kind of "bar exam." The Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) credentialing offered by the Public Relations Society of America is a step toward this certification.

Lawyers are becoming more adept at public relations. The American Bar Association provides media training for its primary officers. It realizes that a defendant can win a battle in a court of law and lose it in the court of public opinion. In recent crises, lawyers have apparently learned

the value of communicating. Rarely does a corporate spokesperson in a crisis refuse to address the news media. Usually, the company in crisis goes further and even puts information about the crisis on its website and in blogs and other social media.

In 1991, for instance, a crisis team consisting of public relations and legal representation for Snapps restaurant in Florida made a decision not to prosecute or sue a teenager who had helped spread a rumor that caused a drastic loss of business (see Chapter 6). The members of the team decided that although they might win a victory in court, it would be a case of winning the battle and losing the war. The teenager had apologized publicly and admitted she was truly sorry that her actions had caused the crisis; she had simply been trying to warn her friends whom she believed might be in danger. The public might have boycotted the restaurant had further action been taken against her. It would have been a matter of the powerful restaurant ruining the life of a well-meaning child who made a mistake in judgment.

Conversely, a defendant can lose in court and win in the battle of public opinion. Sometimes the latter offers a brighter future. This was the case when Mayor Marion Barry of Washington, DC, was convicted of a drug charge, served time in prison, and then returned to the nation's capital to resume his political career. Although few voters doubted that Barry was a drug user, there was resounding public resentment of the way he was supposedly "setup" for the arrest. Anger at those believed to be responsible for the "setup" translated into support in the court of public opinion for Barry, who was reelected as mayor in 1994.

More and more, lawyers are influencing public opinion outside the courtroom. We have seen the results of this when a lawyer representing a prisoner convicted of a serious crime persuades *60 Minutes* or *20/20* to tell a story of the innocence of the client. The lawyer may have exhausted all legal channels or the client may have been unable to afford the legal battle. An effective letter to the television news magazine may change everything.

The public is often not aware of how the news magazine series got the story; true public relations professionals (or lawyers performing public relations acts) are more concerned with their client's needs than with promoting their own visibility. Thus, a televised account of a "poor, innocent" man imprisoned for years for a crime he did not commit is a public relations tool that appeals to the court of public opinion. In many cases, on the basis of the convincing television profile, viewers appeal to courts for new trials, or judges grant new trials in anticipation of public reaction. Sometimes the prisoner is subsequently freed.

The necessity of merging law and public relations leads to an even greater need for precrisis planning by representatives in both fields. Effective precrisis planning sets up scenarios for each type of crisis likely

to affect the organization. Different strategies and tactics are outlined for each kind of crisis. Examples are reflected in such statements as these: “If there is a loss of life, we will . . .”; “If there is no loss of life, we will . . .”; “If the media is unaware of the story, we will . . .”; “If the media is pressing, we will . . .”

A balance between public relations and law should, as much as possible, be determined before the crisis. A balance often cannot be accomplished effectively after the manufacturing plant has exploded. The PR professional should communicate with the organization’s lawyer before communicating with external publics, even if it’s not a matter of getting permission.

Lawyers who have not adapted to public relations procedures should be advised that some key stakeholders can be dealt with personally, whereas some key stakeholders will get negative impressions from the news media and social media.

Refusing to talk to reporters will not make the story go away. Reporters will get a story—and it may not be the story the company wants told. The board of directors of the United Way of America was not aware of this when, in 1991, its CEO, William Aramony, was accused of excessive spending. No one on the board would talk to the media. The story started as a brief section in a long, basically flattering article about Aramony in one newspaper. Editors of other newspapers read the article, focused only on the negative aspects, and soon public perceptions of misuse were nationwide.

The news media is a conduit to the public. The public rarely has any real evidence, at least not as much as juries in courtrooms do. Even though the public is well aware that reporters err, people still tend to believe what they see and read in the media. They make decisions based on sound bites and articles selected and written by reporters.

The court of law and the court of public opinion will remain crucial in deciding the fate of individuals, groups, organizations, and corporations. Both the public relations professional and the lawyer must learn to put clients in the best light in both courts to gain the best possible outcome to a crisis.

Communicating with Internal Publics

Internal publics include all classifications of employees—labor, management, hourly workers, interns—as well as retirees and stockholders. In a non-profit organization, volunteers are also an internal public. Internal publics are crucial in a crisis because they are the most believable spokespersons. Because internal publics may not be hired or paid to speak for the company, the news media seek them out for comment.

In many businesses, such as retail stores, employees are a link between the company and the consumer public. They are the principal representatives of the company and have the power to make a potential customer a loyal customer or to make a loyal customer a former customer.

Communication with internal publics before, during, and after a crisis is vital. For each internal public, you must choose the correct message and the correct medium.

Once a crisis has occurred, employees and other internal publics must be advised of what has happened early in the notification process. Whenever possible, internal publics should not learn of the crisis from the news media and they should know about it before external publics do. If the crisis occurs after office hours, all managers notified are aware of others they should inform. Those notified by those managers have others to contact, and so on. The telephone tree must be in place before a crisis. As a crisis develops, the employee public, called a *functional public*, should be kept apprised of what is occurring at every step. Common methods for keeping employees informed include meetings, closed-circuit television programs, e-mail, the public address system, and bulletin boards.

Many companies can utilize their intranet, internal networks designed to improve productivity and the circulation of proprietary information. The intranet is better than the Internet in the case of crises because it allows the company or organization to communicate only with its own people, whereas anyone can access the Internet.

Crisis communications researcher W. Timothy Coombs (1999) advises that “the beauty of the intranet is the speed of accessing information” (p. 85). The crisis team can access information directly with keystrokes on a computer instead of going through telephone calls or through other means. Information may be stored on the intranet, updated regularly, and any employee can access it. Coombs also warns that all information cannot be collected by using the intranet. Some interpersonal communications may be necessary, but the relevant data can be stored there after it is gathered.

During a crisis, internal publics generally want to know what they can or should do. During the Snapps restaurant rumor crisis (see Chapter 6), managers volunteered to take AIDS tests to prove that no manager could have spread the AIDS virus through food products. If it is important for employees to make some effort to continue the business, convey that to employees and tell them why. If there are crisis tasks employees need to take on, they should be preadvised and pretrained. If the nature of the crisis eliminates jobs—either temporarily or permanently—employees need to be carefully told what options are available and what the future is likely to hold.

As in normal operating mode, it is crucial that employees feel a sense of “we-ness” during a crisis, that they are part of the battle. Many companies order employees to remain silent about company issues relating to the crisis; they are especially told not to talk to the news media. They are told to let the appointed spokesperson do all the speaking. Often this is an advisable move; too many people can make for a confusing story. However, some companies and organizations do not fear the situation will get out of hand and encourage their employees to talk to the media, confident that employees like their jobs and their company.

Communicating with External Publics

External publics include consumers/customers, community members, government officials, labor unions, dealers, suppliers, trade associations, competitors, and other outside people related in some way to an organization. As in all types of communications, it is important to strategically plan the correct message and the appropriate medium for communicating with each external public, both before and during a crisis.

Organizations tend to form alliances with key external groups that will make members of these groups feel like they are part of the company. The airlines have been very successful with the frequent-flyer programs, so much so that other businesses are trying “frequent” programs too. Boards of directors and community advisory boards are also popular efforts at bridging the gaps between companies and organizations and the business world and the community, respectively.

Organizations should communicate with loyal consumers more directly than through the news media to inform them of the crisis and progress toward normalcy. Various methods must be evaluated—social media networks are popular methods, also letters, newsletters, notices on websites, telephone calls, and so on. You want customers to remain loyal throughout the crisis and continue to patronize the organization. So tell them all the five Ws of the crisis—who, what, when, where, and why.

Like consumers, community members will want to know what happened, what the cause was, what is being done, when the crisis will be over, and so forth. Community members can be reached through key community leaders on advisory boards. Flyers can be circulated in communities and posters can be put up in public places and on bulletin boards.

Labor representatives and government officials should be among the first notified. Key messages should be conveyed to them because these people, depending on the nature of the crisis, may be called on by the news media to comment.

Communicating Directly with the Masses

With new communications technology, it is possible to get information out to the masses. The Internet makes it possible to communicate with vast numbers of people through Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, blogs, websites, and any new methods that have been developed since this edition was written. This is mind-boggling when people living today recall when the manual typewriter was the most modern writing tool. There was a job title called typist. Newspaper printing meant setting each letter in type on brass dies individually on a Linotype machine. Newspaper boys delivered and persuaded people to buy the newspapers. Radio was the best broadcasting tool, not television, not satellites. When computers were born, they were giant machines that occupied a huge room. Now, in a flash, one person can send a message read by thousands, even millions of people.

This is progress, but few people have considered how this swift dissemination of information should mean new policies of accuracy. Historically, research tells us that people believe the written word more than the spoken word. This is because the articles in newspapers go through layers of editors before they are published. Most books (except self-published books) go through fact checkers before they are published. So people are inclined to think of data on the Internet as factual when it's not necessarily so. Some information has gone through editors but other information has come straight from the writer, who may be biased or wrong. Readers and researchers must discern what is true and credible.

Because information on the Internet remains primarily textual, some people may be inclined to think of it as factual. However, research findings from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School's Center for the Digital Future suggest that experienced information-seekers rank media and government sites as more reliable than those published by individuals.

The growing demand for news has made the Internet a valuable source of supplemental information. The traditional news media are still the primary sources of news for the unwired American, but as many as two-thirds of Internet users have accessed some of their news online and about one-third do so three or more times a week. In addition, the tragedies of September 11, 2001 made it clear that news-seekers want more immediacy than newspapers, commercial television, cable television, and radio can offer.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the 24-hour news services reported to more than 100 million people. According to Nielsen Media Research, nearly 50% of all television households watched CNN's coverage. The commercial stations also had high ratings that day. However, according to researchers Paul N. Rappoport and James Alleman

(2003), the demand for more coverage and instantaneous updates led large numbers of people to the Internet. They say there is anecdotal evidence that the Internet, that day, became overwhelmed and left users without access or reasonable connections, but when it did catch up, it was an effective means of supplementary news.

Between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. Eastern time, MSNBC.com experienced a 50% increase in traffic; CNN.com, a 450% increase. The sites were ill prepared for such surges as more than 30 million people sought online news. Many sites urged people to go to television and some had a written statement saying, “Many online services are not available, because of high demand.” Internet sources have and probably will become more capable of handling the task.

Nevertheless, researchers conclude that the public has accepted online news sites as sources of credible news, although most Americans obtain their news from television—local, network, and cable.

Among the values of Internet news sources, according to Rappoport and Alleman, are the following: (a) information sources may be tailored to meet the specific objectives of the user; (b) the user may get the news at any time, no more “News at 11”; (c) news may be linked to other sources; (d) in-depth analyses may be available, even more in-depth than newspapers because the medium is not restricted by column inches or minutes of airtime.

Organizational and corporate websites provide background information and, in a crisis, what the organization believes is the truth. This gives the information-seeker the organization’s side of the story. A website is normally a one-way means of communications, but the Internet can easily link one to other points of view.

Blogs

Blogs, or weblogs, are a type of website that consists of commentary from the author (or authors) with comments from various readers. The writing style is usually more casual and often more personal than traditional organizational or corporate communication. Blogs are one form of personal publishing and have several distinctive characteristics:

- Reverse chronological journaling (format).
- Regular, date-stamped entries (timeliness).
- Links to related news articles, documents, blog entries with each entry (attribution).
- Archived entries (old content remains accessible).
- Links to related blogs (blogrolling).
- RSS or XML feed (ease of syndication).
- Passion (voice).

A website is rather standard as an organizational communications tool, and blogging is growing in usefulness and importance. Because blogs can easily facilitate dialog between information-giver and information-seeker, they may be more believable than a traditional website. Blogs are good for public relations purposes, to provide accurate information for persons seeking information about your organization.

Blogs are akin to buzz. Whatever subjects or issues are occupying the minds of the public can be brought to the attention of many on a blog. Political blogs are popular, but all kinds of blogs are developing—from commercial business to education to basic gossip. In addition, the person wishing to post his or her opinion about an issue will find the blog more accessible than other forms of electronic expression.

Companies and organizations are being urged to develop blogs to garner web-based commentary about their products or services from consumers. The numbers of blogs are growing constantly and they can be accessed by search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, Technorati.com, or GlobeofBlogs.com. Technorati is one of the oldest blog search engines whereas GlobeofBlogs classifies blogs by subject. Information published in blogspace is disseminated faster than more traditional forms of communications through a technology called RSS (Real Simple Syndication). Textual blogs have given birth to video blogs and audio blogs, often known as podcasts.

In some cases, companies may need to have a blog format to show their publics that they are savvy about current technology. Companies and organizations may also find a blog to be the preferred publishing medium when an issue is constantly changing and it is urgent to get the latest information out as soon as possible.

Blog expert Kathy Gill asks, “What does the audience expect when they visit the website?” If the public is technically savvy, it will expect information in a blog format. Gill also notes that the voice of a blog is “personal” and cautions that “personal” is difficult for some organizations that require various levels of approval and sign-off. They tend to distrust having an unmoderated voice speak for them. In blogspace and in a crisis, there is often no time for multilayered decisions.

Blogging software makes the process of creating and updating a professional-looking web page relatively easy and less expensive when compared to a webmaster setting up a site. Some companies offer free hosting for blogging services. These blogs can be linked to other data on the Internet, other blogs, a corporate website, news articles, photo images, and audio files. The blogosphere is the word for the blog network with blogs interconnected to other blogs on the Internet.

There are five basic types of blogs:

1. *The corporate/organizational blog* provides commentary about a specific company or organization. Key executives usually are the bloggers, and their goal is to tell their own story, to correct misinformation of others. It is considered unethical for a corporate executive or employee to respond to a blog without revealing who he or she is and the connection to the organization. Will PR professionals ghost-write blogs? Probably. However, if the information seems like puffery, the readers will soon distrust it.
2. *Subject blogs* are comments relating to various subjects or issues written by experts on these subjects. Smudde (2005) says these blogs are like white papers or keynote addresses “as if to impart sage wisdom.”
3. *Industry blogs* are centered on the status quo of a particular industry or field and otherwise are similar to subject blogs.
4. *Publication blogs* come from media sources such as newspapers, magazines, and other publications. Editors and reporters are the bloggers and sometimes readers. They are usually a way of keeping up to date on a continuing news story.
5. *Personal blogs* express opinions of individuals on any matter they choose to discuss, often politics, issues in the news, or products, especially high-technology ones. Smudde says personal blogs are the most potent type because subjects covered can be beneficial and helpful or hurtful to an organization’s reputation.

The Harvard Business School’s online tool “Working Knowledge” suggests the following reasons (in italics) for a company having its own blogs:

1. *You can influence the public conversation about your company.* Journalists can locate accurate information, the information you want them to have. You can correct misinformation and provide new information.
2. *You can enhance brand visibility and credibility.* This can give the company a human voice. Debbie Weil of BlogWrite for CEOs advises that companies not let their PR departments write blogs. This is true if the blogs are puffery, but not true if the PR writers can present the facts. Some PR firms are already offering expertise in “blog relations.”
3. *You can achieve customer intimacy* because customers can speak directly to you, whether positive or negative comments. This is a kind of electronic, immediate, suggestion box.

Newspapers have begun to have blogs to supplement their publications. Different from an online edition of the paper, the blogs are updates on specific issues, continuing stories that may change several times before the next issue of the newspaper. Years ago, metropolitan daily newspapers used to do many editions throughout the day to always have the latest news; however, shrinking budgets and shrinking readership have ended that level of production.

Crisis communications researcher Amiso George (2005) at Texas Christian University writes of a newspaper's blog:

The *Nevada Appeal*, Carson City, Nevada, newspaper developed its first web log before breaking news on its website www.NevadaAppeal.com to keep the public updated on the Waterfall Fires of 2004. From the onset of the fires on July 14 until containment on July 20, the newspaper provided frequently updated information on the fires. The paper's editor, Barry Smith, said that the initial coverage of the story followed traditional news coverage format, until he realized quickly that merely updating the news was no longer enough . . . The paper updated the web log 50–60 times a day for the duration of the fire. Smith noted that the web log generated “terrific response” from people outside the Carson City and Reno, Nevada areas as people were interested in getting details of the fire and checking up on loved ones.

The *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans set up a blog for its readers. During the Katrina disaster in September, 2005, the presses did not run for a few days. Instead, reporters and editors published only online and used blogging software to “report” the news. As in New York after September 11, 2001, local bloggers provided their own news of what was happening to New Orleans. Survivors told very poignant, graphic stories without having a reporter as an intermediary. It was a kind of participatory journalism; everyone can be a reporter in the blogosphere. (See also “Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans,” in Chapter 10.)

Rumors and Cybercrises

As we make progress in technology, we also advance the possibilities of rumor. The Internet is a great source of information and news, but it is an even greater source of misinformation and rumor. Opinion, guesses, assumptions as well as rumor present tragic consequences to people who are victimized because Internet users often believe everything they read is true. This was not the case with print media and it is even further from the truth on the Internet. Internet data just looks like factual information.

What Internet blogs, sites, and social media have done is provide faster, easier ways to circulate rumors and thereby cause crises for organizations and individuals.

A premature fact rumor (see “Types of Rumor,” page 72) circulated on theater blogs in late 2009 written by anonymous “insiders” who posted claims that producers of the Broadway musical “Ragtime” had told the cast to prepare for closing the show. The show was not doing well at the box office, but producers had not given the actors notice. In fact, producer Kevin McCollum said, “The advertising was continuing, the investors had not pulled out or indicated they would.”

McCollum did not suspect a conspiracy, a “malicious rumor.” He expected it was a real estate move. When a show is not hot, speculation erupts about which theater will be available for the next show. However, when the speculation goes online, it also encourages possible patrons to forget about trying to see the show. Who wants tickets they cannot use even if they can get refunds?

Considering the increasing number of theatergoers who look to the blogs for reviews and information, this was a blow. “Compounding this is the fact that the methods of sharing and delivering hearsay have never been so frictionless,” said McCollum. “There are far more outlets for rumors today and it’s much easier to write a story about bad news than good news.”

The show closed in early 2010. How much damage was done by the rumors is not known.

Of course, the new technology can also be used to fight rumor. This happened in 2007, when rumors circulated by word of mouth that tourist spots in California were closing due to wildfires. The California Travel and Tourism Commission (CTTC), helped by Edelman Public Relations, in addition to news conferences, monitored and participated in social media conversations to dispel the rumors. They also posted video footage of the recovery of burned tourist sites on its website.

Word-of-Mouth Rumors, E-mail Rumors, Rogue Websites, and Blogs

An unfounded rumor can be the most damaging attack an organization or company can experience. A rumor can put a company out of business; it can greatly affect the bottom line. In a mild form, it can be a nuisance that requires time and thought to determine whether to fight it and how to fight it. And because time is money, this too affects the bottom line.

There are three unique problems when coping with rumor:

1. You usually have no idea how the rumor started—was it an irate customer, a competitor, a person with nothing better to do or someone’s conversation that was merely misunderstood?
2. You usually have no idea how widespread the rumor is or how long it has been circulating.
3. You have to determine carefully whether it is best to ignore the rumor or fight it—will fighting the rumor spread it more than leaving it alone?

Communications research often seeks to determine where people get their information, what sources are most trusted. Generally, more people get their news from television than from newspapers. Newspaper articles are more believable than advertising, but most people do not read newspapers. In recent years, we have discovered that the source of information most trusted by the American public is “other people.” *The New York Times* can print a fact. *PBS Newshour* may broadcast the same fact. However, “Bubba, my cousin’s next-door neighbor,” can say something contrary and Bubba will be more believed. Internet sources are a combination of Bubbas and *The New York Times*, and to many people, they look the same. This attitude fuels rumor and makes rumor all the more dangerous.

The Nature of Rumors

Crises can, and often do, begin with rumors. In fact, a crisis can actually be a negative rumor. “Deep-sixing” rumors is an important task in crisis control and crisis communications.

A rumor is information passed by word of mouth and electronic communications with no verification of fact and no credible source. Rumors can be positive or negative. They can be absolutely false or partly false, or they can be undeniably true or premature facts. “There’s a ring of truth in every rumor”—because people know and believe that expression, they tend to believe there is truth in rumors that are patently false and even ridiculous.

A rumor can begin as in the children’s game “Gossip” (or “Telephone”), in which Child 1 whispers something to Child 2, who repeats it to Child 3, and so on. By the time the message reaches Child 10, it is usually unrelated to the original message. This is rumor spread innocently, but rumor can also be spread maliciously and intentionally.

The victim of malicious rumor rarely knows how the rumor started or who has heard it. This makes it difficult to curtail its spreading, which happens quickly and often with disastrous consequences.

How Rumors Start

One of the difficulties in establishing the source of a rumor is the realization that each person who passes it on may change it and thus be a contributing part of its source. The sources usually cited for rumors are rarely the actual sources. The rumors themselves may cite a specific person or institution that sounds credible, but the source is not readily available for verification. For example, the teller of a rumor might say, “I read it in last week’s paper!” “What paper?” we ask. Not many people will go back and look for an article in last week’s newspaper, especially considering that “last week” is also a vague term. Or the rumor teller may insist, “My aunt in Chicago was there when it happened!” This sounds convincing. But who will call the aunt and get specific details? Is there really an aunt at all?

Rumors are often started innocently. This was the case when talk show host Johnny Carson on his late-night show told a joke about a shortage of bathroom tissue. People heard about the shortage but not that it was a joke. There was a run on bathroom tissue in grocery stores. Soon the shelves were empty; the stock was depleted. This rumor was merely annoying to grocery stores and customers who remained tissueless.

However, some rumors started innocently can cause real damage. For instance, consider the Cable News Network (CNN) story about the Individual Retirement Account (IRA) that cited McDonald’s as an example of corporations contributing to employee IRAs. In Great Britain, that story circulated as a rumor that said that McDonald’s supported the Irish Republican Army—also called the IRA. Members of Parliament received numerous letters attacking McDonald’s for financing attacks on British soldiers and civilians.

The following sections discuss two case studies of how companies coped with word-of-mouth rumors.

Mini-Case: Procter & Gamble and the Satanism Rumor

Procter & Gamble's original logo dates back to 1850; it depicted the man in the moon and 13 stars (representing the 13 original colonies) around the moon. The logo identified Crest toothpaste, Tide detergent, Pampers diapers—all the P&G products. Then in 1979, there was a rumor that the company had been purchased by the Unification Church headed by the Rev. Sun Moon (followers of the church are called “Moonies”). At first, calls came in to the Consumer Services Department's toll-free number. The company denied the rumor to consumers on the phone and also called news organizations in certain areas. Soon, the rumor changed to claim that P&G was involved in devil-worshipping, that the design of the man in the moon and 13 stars representing the original American colonies was a symbol of Satanism.

The Moonie rumor faded away and the Satanism rumor grew. A P&G executive, according to the rumor, went on a TV show and admitted a pact with the devil to gain success for the company. (The same rumor circulated about McDonald's and other companies.) Also, fliers were circulated, usually misspelling the company's name, claiming that 10% of the company's earnings went to the Church of Satan and advocating a boycott of P&G. Some church heads believed the rumors and advised their congregations to stop buying products from P&G.

The rumor went further and suggested that there was a 666 sign, the sign of the beast from the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Some saw 6's in the curls of the man in the moon when held up to a mirror. P&G was afraid to fight the rumor publicly because it would tell more people about it than already had heard about it. P&G sought the cooperation of religious leaders Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham who spoke up for the company and sent out letters to 48,000 churches.

Rumors subsided but sometimes recur. Some people were prosecuted, and that helped the public realize the rumors were false. Usually, charges were dropped after apologies.

The company started to phase out the logo in the mid-1980s, except on company letterheads and publications. It wasn't worth the trouble, and it had already cost \$100,000 to fight the rumors associated with it.

Case: Snapps Restaurant and the AIDS Rumor

Rarely does a company call a news conference to fight a rumor. There are several reasons for this. Companies would ideally prefer to reach only

the people who have heard the rumor—and not one person more. This is a difficult-to-impossible task. Nevertheless, many times, the rumor is limited to a specific location. With a news conference, however, the media wind up spreading the rumor to people who have never heard it. Also, some companies reason that if the rumor is not spread by the media, it is not likely to reach the crucial public by the media either. The people who spread and believe the rumor may not read newspapers or watch television news.

The Snapps fast-food chain departed from both of these tenets in 1991, when it held a history-making news conference to fight a rumor about one of its restaurants. In Fort Pierce, Florida, Snapps confronted a rumor that one of its managers had AIDS and had contaminated hamburger meat. The Ohio-based chain had opened its first Florida restaurant in Fort Pierce in 1990. About an hour's drive north of Palm Beach, Fort Pierce is a middle-class city of 40,000 residents.

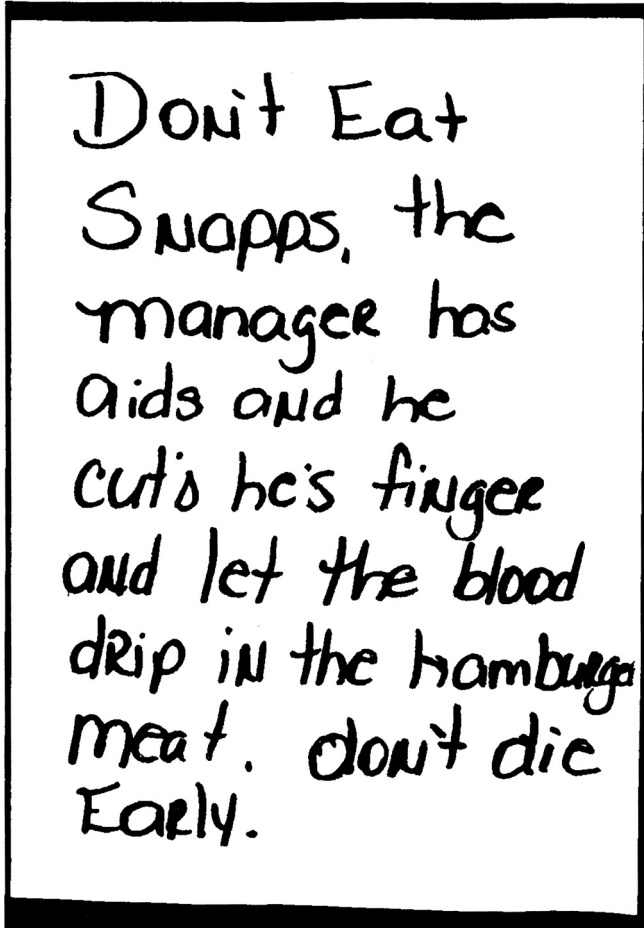
The location of Fort Pierce was important: Nearby Jensen Beach, Florida, was where Kimberly Bergalis allegedly contracted the AIDS virus from her dentist. Because Bergalis was the first person known to have contracted AIDS from a health-care professional, the incident was widely publicized. Furthermore, because of their proximity to the case, the people of Fort Pierce were probably more concerned with this case than many other people. The incident also aroused other questions about how the virus might be spread.

The rumor spread by way of a crudely handwritten flyer (see Figure 6.1). The flyer was circulated primarily among students in two public high schools, thereby targeting a large chunk of Snapps's clientele. The Fort Pierce Snapps restaurant saw its business drop by 50%. The Snapps corporate office in Columbus, Ohio, sent Regional Vice President Donald G. Gilbert to remedy the crisis.

Gilbert formed a damage-control task force that included a lawyer, a private investigator, and Richard M. Gruenwald, a public relations consultant for Dick Gruenwald Associates of nearby Palm Beach Gardens. The team worked closely with Rod Cardiff, a physician and director of the St. Lucie County Health Unit. Gilbert, the Snapps home office, and Fort Pierce Snapps owners Jack and Jeff Roschman monitored and approved actions of the task force.

The team's first task was to find the source of the rumor. The private investigator felt certain that a student in one of the schools had written the flyer. Police procedure called for a complaint to be filed before the police could enter the case. The investigator and the lawyer were able to collect enough information to file the complaint.

The next step was to have the restaurant's managers tested for AIDS. This decision had legal implications. By law, the managers would have to volunteer to be tested; the company could not force them to do so.



Donit Eat
Snapps, the
manager has
aids and he
cut's he's finger
and let the blood
drip in the hamburgers
meat. don't die
Early.

Figure 6.1 The handwritten flyer circulated at Fort Pierce high schools that helped spread the rumor that a manager at a popular restaurant was infected with the AIDS virus and that persons who dined at the restaurant might become contaminated. All managers were voluntarily tested and none tested positive for the virus. The health department cooperated with the restaurant's public relations efforts and, during a news conference, explained that the disease could not be spread in that manner. Reprinted by permission of Snapps Restaurant.

All seven managers volunteered, including one who had recently been transferred from the Fort Pierce restaurant to one in another city. The law also required that the test results be sent to the people who took the tests, not to the employer. The procedure took a week. The results indicated that all seven managers, as expected, tested negative for the AIDS virus.

Meanwhile, the Fort Pierce restaurant continued to lose business. Layoffs were threatened if business did not improve. “This was a double-edged sword,” said Gilbert. “We had to be sure of our facts, have everything in place for the complaint filing and act quickly, as business was continuing to go downhill.” Gruenwald, the public relations counsel, and his associate, John Futch, suggested a press conference. “We all agreed that a press conference would bring everything out in the open,” said Gruenwald. “The problem was there. Why hide it?”

Snapps made public relations history when it became the first fast-food chain to address an AIDS rumor by going on the offensive and holding a news conference (see Figure 6.2). “We were most impressed with the way that management accepted our recommendations,” said Gruenwald. To add credibility to the occasion, the press conference was held in the St. Lucie Health Unit’s office, and the unit’s director spoke on behalf of the franchise. At the conference, an announcement was made that the chain was offering a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons who started the rumor. The news conference was attended by company executives as well as the county health director, who announced that all Snapps managers had tested negative for the virus. He further stated that AIDS could not be transmitted through food and that it was safe to eat at Snapps.

Two West Palm Beach television stations led their 6 p.m. newscasts with the Snapps news conference story, including interviews with customers. Employees talked about how their jobs were affected. Associated Press and Knight-Ridder News Service picked up the story and it was used in newspapers all over Florida as well as in many newspapers out of state.

“The press was most cooperative and news coverage was excellent,” Gilbert said. Gruenwald, looking back, said his philosophy was that “if you cooperate with the media, they—for the most part—will cooperate with you.”

Other newspapers picked up the *Miami Herald* story; its lead emphasized the unusual public relations tactic: “In a highly unusual move, an Ohio-based fast-food restaurant went public yesterday to confront a rumor that one of its managers had AIDS and had contaminated hamburger meat.” The article went on to comment on the restaurant’s denial, the offered reward, and the fact that AIDS could not be transmitted through food. It also pointed out that other fast-food restaurants had been plagued by AIDS rumors, but Snapps was the first to fight the rumor through a news conference (see Figure 6.2).

The private investigator discovered that a 16-year-old female high school student had written and distributed the flyer, apparently after a class discussion on AIDS. “The girl admitted to writing the flyer,” said Gilbert, “but we determined that the student’s action came after the

STORE'S BUSINESS CUT 50 PERCENT BY AIDS RUMOR

By PHIL LONG
HERALD STAFF WRITER

PORT PIERCE—In a highly unusual move, an Ohio-based fast food restaurant went public Wednesday to confront a rumor that one of its managers had AIDS and had contaminated hamburger meat.

"The rumor is totally false," said Don Gilbert, regional vice president at Snapps, a company with 44 stores, mostly in Ohio.

"All of our managers have been tested and none has AIDS," he said.

But in a little over a month since the rumor started, business in Florida's only Snapps store has dropped almost 50 percent, Gilbert said. Five of the store's 40 positions remain unfilled, and employee hours have been cut. Layoffs are possible, he said.

The firm is promising a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person who photocopied or circulated a crude, hand-drawn flier that accuses the manager of having AIDS and contaminating hamburger meat with his blood.

In what may have been the first press conference of its kind involving a national food chain, Gilbert met reporters in the lobby of the health department. He was flanked by the county's health director, Snapps employees, a company attorney and a police detective.

Snapps managers have been tested and they don't have any trace of the virus, said Dr. Rod Cardiff, director of the St. Lucie Public Health Unit.

"There is nothing unsafe about Snapps," he said. "AIDS is not transmitted through food. There is no danger with going to Snapps and eating there."

Fort Pierce police Lt Irving Hamrick, who suspects that a teenager is responsible because the fliers have been circulated at the county's two public high schools, said his department is investigating.

Prosecutor Linda Craft said the person responsible for the flier could face up to a year in jail on the misdemeanor charge of criminal defamation, it is illegal to publish anything that causes "hatred, contempt, ridicule or obloquy," to an individual, Craft said.

"They are not only affecting my job, but the jobs of many other people employed by Snapps," said Anita Farley, a Snapps worker who has been with the restaurant since it opened in July.

AIDS rumors are not new. McDonald's and Burger King have faced them before. Neither have gone quite so public . . .



Figure 6.2 An excerpt of a news story about the Snapps crisis appearing in the *Miami Herald*, May 9, 1991. Note the reporter recognized that the news conference was not a common method of fighting such rumors. Reprinted by permission of the *Miami Herald*.

AIDS rumor had been circulating in the community and she didn't start the rumor."

"The student, through her parents and attorney, agreed to issue an apology," said Gilbert. "We used the apology in a press release and a full-page ad in the local newspaper."

The minor, who said she wrote the flyer because she was concerned about her friends and wanted to do them a favor, wrote the following apology:

I apologize to the community in helping to spread a rumor about Snapps, a local fast food restaurant. As a young person who has taken a course concerning AIDS and having great concern for the people in the community, I took it upon myself to prepare a flyer concerning Snapps without knowing whether the information I received as a rumor was true. I now realize that I was wrong and I apologize to Snapps, its managers and employees. It was not my intent to harm their business and I am sorry that Snapps' business has suffered as a result of the rumor. I have since returned to eat at Snapps and I encourage others to do so as well.

Sincerely,

C. J., a minor

Because the student was a minor, her identity was never made public. State Attorney Bruce Colton said a rumor could violate state laws that made libel a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail. Prosecutor Linda Craft said the person responsible for the flyer could face up to a year in jail on the misdemeanor charge of criminal defamation (Knight-Ridder, 1991).

Gruenwald advised the company not to press charges against the girl. "It was never felt that the girl acted maliciously," he said. "Also, she did not start the rumor. It had been circulating before she wrote the flyer. If we had filed charges, we could win the battle, but not the war of public opinion. The public apology would bring her sympathy and perhaps a boycott to the restaurant. Then, the case might drag out, thus hurting the chances for a return to normalcy."

The media carried the story of the apology with headlines as follows:

Palm Beach Post—"Student Apologizes for Restaurant Rumor" (Reeder, 1991).

Stuart News (Stuart, Florida)—"Student Apologizes for AIDS Rumor About Eatery" (Cheek, 1991).

Miami Herald—"Student Apologizes for Spreading Rumor About Restaurant" (Long, 1991b).

As in most crises cases, recovery stories are not featured as prominently, nor are they as long, as the original stories.

Snapps management continued an aggressive effort to win back customers. Its advertising agency, Haunty & Welter of Columbus, Ohio, launched a strong radio and newspaper, and later, television campaign with a free hamburger weekend on June 1 and 2, 1991. "This was a tremendous success," said Gruenwald. "The girl who wrote the flyer, who we called 'C.J.,' attended the event." More than 15,000 free hamburgers were served. The event was promoted in a news release and resulting stories using C.J.'s apology (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4).

"If we had to do it all over, we would have followed the same crisis management and damage control program. In retrospect, this was an excellent example of crisis teamwork, everyone working together for the common good," concluded Gruenwald.

Gruenwald said the source of the rumor was never found. The restaurant changed names and managed to stay in business, although it never fully recovered its popularity.

Types of Rumor

There are six various types of rumor. The *intentional rumor* is started to achieve a purpose. The financial community thrives on intentional rumor. There are rumors to make stocks rise and rumors to make them decline. People might start rumors to help their own businesses. For example, a young, aggressive manager of a new restaurant getting off to a slow start in a campus community started a rumor at the college that a famous rock star was related to the owner and that the rock star might drop in that night. Needless to say, business boomed that evening, with patrons hoping to see the celebrity who never showed up. When patrons asked if the rock star would show up, the manager responded, "You never know." He offered each patron who asked a free drink. No one left angry. The manager said the ploy was a marketing technique to get people into the restaurant for the first time. He felt the food, the ambiance, and the service would get them back in the future.

The *premature-fact rumor* is an early version of what will eventually become the truth. In the workplace, for example, employees might hear and pass on rumors about layoffs that eventually turn out to be fact. Denying this type of rumor can be more damaging than being silent.

The *malicious rumor* is often started to damage competitors' businesses. For example, someone says, "The stew in the restaurant across the street is made up of last week's leftovers." This rumor may or may not be true. It may be true of half of the restaurants in town. Yet when told to the right people at the right time, the rumor spreads and causes a decline in patronage.

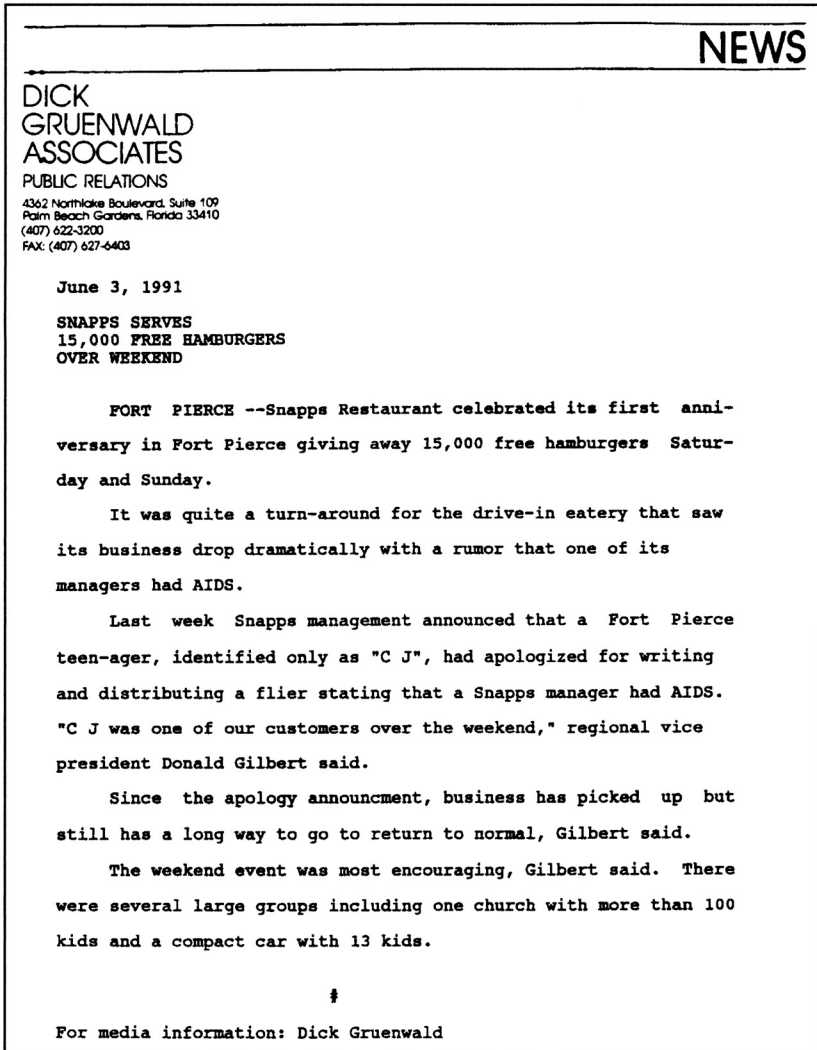


Figure 6.3 One of several news releases distributed by the public relations firm hired by an Ohio-based restaurant to manage the crisis in Fort Pierce. Reprinted by permission of Snapps Restaurant.

The *outrageous rumor* is so unbelievable that people react by saying, "It has to be true! Who would create such a story?" The Snapple Beverage Company was the target in 1993 of an outrageous rumor that claimed the "k" on its product labels, which stood for "kosher," actually stood for Ku Klux Klan.

EATERY PLAGUED BY RUMOR FIGHTS BACK

STUART NEWS

FORT PIERCE—A Fort Pierce eatery gave away 15,000 hamburgers last weekend, battling recent rumors that an employee at Snapps restaurant tainted food with the AIDS virus.

Among the many people eating at the restaurant at 25th Street and Orange Avenue was a teenager known only as “C.J.” The Fort Pierce Westwood High School student apologized recently for distributing a flier warning fellow students not to eat at Snapps.

Snapps Regional Vice President Donald Gilbert said the weekend promotion was a dramatic turnaround for the eatery, which saw business plummet because of the untrue rumor.

County health officials said food cannot be tainted by the AIDS virus. All the Snapps managers tested negative for the fatal virus.

Figure 6.4 A news story in the nearby *Stuart News*, June 5 1991, about the restaurant's crisis recovery process. Copyright ©1991 *Stuart News*. Reprinted by permission.

The *nearly true rumor* is so named because it is partly true. People hear it, attach credibility to a part of the story, and then draw a conclusion that the entire rumor must be true. This could have been the case when in the early 1990s a rumor circulated nationally that Reebok, during apartheid, was manufacturing and selling its products in South Africa. This was a crisis for Reebok because the company featured African American athletes in its commercials and marketed to African American consumers. It was true that Reebok once had manufacturing plants in South Africa, but the plants had been closed in 1986.

The *birthday rumor* is one that continues to emerge over and over again. It is as regular as birthdays.

The six primary categories of rumors can overlap. The outrageous rumor may also be malicious. The premature-fact rumor may be intentional, and so forth. One rumor that fits both the nearly true and the birthday categories is the ancient rumor that Chinese restaurants cook dogs. It is true that in China dogs are a delicacy, but that does not mean that owners of Chinese restaurants in the United States are out hunting your pets. This rumor can be traced to the 1850s in the United States and even earlier in Great Britain. The same rumor has now been told of Vietnamese cuisine in Texas, Mexican cuisine in Southern California, and Native American cuisine in Wisconsin.

How Rumors Spread

Rumors can spread throughout the United States, turn stomachs, perpetuate negative images, and cost millions of dollars in lost revenue. Corporations have to fight in the press, in the courts, and, in the case of Procter & Gamble, in the churches to stop the rumors.

A rumor spreads because people believe it is news and because the “news” has some emotional relationship to their lives. The rumor somehow seems plausible. Often the rumor refers to something causing distress or fear, and the rumor tellers who spread it are hoping to relieve their fear or distress by giving a reasonable explanation or denial.

Dr. Allan J. Kimmel (2004), of Fitchburg State College, in Massachusetts, studied 229 college students. The students passed on rumors about AIDS because they were personally relevant and upsetting. “The more frightened people were by a rumor, the more likely they were to repeat it,” Kimmel said. “In repeating something that makes you nervous, you may learn some contrary fact that will calm you. On the other hand, it can escalate your fears if the person you tell believes it” (p. 51).

Rumors are also spread because people distrust the “establishment”—organizations, governments, and big corporations—or because the rumor tellers want to be thought of as people “in the know.” Information is power. Telling rumors may give people who feel they lack power a sense that they are powerful. Therefore, people who have trouble making a success of their lives and careers are most likely to believe and spread rumors.

Detecting a Rumor and Preventing its Spread

Step-by-step instructions on what to do in the case of rumors are difficult, if not impossible, to provide. Variables such as potential damage, geographic location, type of organization affected, the nature of the rumor, and what crucial publics are affected require each organization’s response to be tailored to the situation.

However, some general suggestions can be given for avoiding a crisis brought on by rumors as well as for fighting rumors that are already circulating. Be mindful, nevertheless, that this is not an exact science. Some of the suggestions are conflicting because there are various schools of thought on how to handle the problem.

The following suggestions are general steps organizations may take to minimize the chances of a crisis caused by rumor:

1. Because the victim of a rumor is often the last to hear it, establish a rumor center or rumor hotline to report any rumors circulating. Employees and customers/consumers would report a negative rumor

as soon as it is heard. Periodic focus groups of 10 to 12 people—employees, consumers, retailers, distributors, other related publics—might be held. Historically, hotlines have been special telephones. Telephones, though still often useful and immediate, are joined in their usefulness by social media, blogging, e-mail, text messaging, and the use of Blackberries. If necessary, a system of anonymous reporting might make a person more inclined to make a report.

2. Periodically train representatives of the organization or company in rumor control. These should be the people who would process and initiate the investigation of rumors; in a large company they might be hired for this purpose, or rumor control might be part of the job description for carefully chosen employees or organizational volunteers. These persons should be rumor-sensitive and well aware of the company's position with all publics. They should keep records of details of rumors and inform and advise management of tactics and responses to make. Communications here might be secret until communications action plans are made.
3. Conduct rumor workshops prior to the circulation of rumors to advise personnel on what actions should be taken in the event of a damaging rumor. Develop a rumor communications plan not unlike a crisis communications plan. Consider what rumors might be most damaging to your organization or company. Study rumors that have caused problems for companies similar to your own. Important to the plan is anticipating the role of the news media and online media. Is this the type of story that will be appealing? Will TV news use it in a sensational way? Anticipate trick questions such as "Isn't it true where there's smoke there's fire?" Many people might believe that a rumor is so unbelievable that it must be true. What would be the response? Can you prove the rumor is not true? If so, how?
4. Make sure the company or organization has such strong positive relationships with its key publics that the publics will at least doubt a negative rumor, if not totally disbelieve it.
5. Keep employees informed; remember that all employees and internal members are spokespersons. Employees left in the dark are fertile ground for the growth of rumors commonly spread by "the grapevine." Even if events that are bad news, such as layoffs, are a possibility in the near future, give employees real information and promise to keep them up to date. This is more advantageous than letting rumors circulate, because the rumors take on imagined and more negative characteristics than the truth. Informed employees can be a company's strongest supporters and loudest defenders. McDonald's followed this advice when a rumor circulated that there were worms in its hamburgers. It was a well-known rumor that had plagued Wendy's earlier. McDonald's personnel, on a one-to-one basis with

patrons who asked, denied the presence of worms. In addition, the employees recorded the names and phone numbers of those patrons. The strategy was intended to make customers knowledgeable about the company and, therefore, less likely to spread the rumor.

6. Evaluate the extent of a rumor. How damaging can it possibly become? Think negatively, imagining the worst case scenario. Determine the best action, if any.

Fighting the Rumor

The following suggestions are general steps organizations may take to fight a negative rumor that is already circulating:

1. When a rumor seems to be developing or circulating, disseminate to publics complete, accurate information that is contradictory to the message of the rumor. Do not mention the rumor itself. You do not want to advance its circulation. Your information should imply strongly that the rumor is untrue. This may reduce exposure to the rumor. Be advised, however, that fewer people are likely to see the positive news than the negative news.
2. After a rumor has circulated, analyze it. What is its probable origin? Why was it started? What is its possible impact? What are people saying? Are the rumor-mongers fired employees, irate customers, competitors or what? How many varieties of the same rumor are circulating? How does it circulate—word-of-mouth, e-mail, or Internet? Have the news media carried the rumor? Are people blogging about it? Does the rumor pose a threat to the success or existence of the organization? Those that do not pose a threat may be handled in a low-key manner without publicity. What are the geographical limitations of the rumor? Will it go away, either temporarily or permanently? Will it mushroom?
3. Do nothing. Sometimes denial draws more attention than silence. Some rumors do go away. When choosing this strategy, be careful that, if the rumor persists, it will not be damaging.

Gerber Products chose to hang tough and be silent in 1986 when a grocery store charged that a customer had found a fragment of glass in a baby food jar. Gerber's test lab found no traces of glass in the jar, and the store had lost the fragment supposedly found in it. The FDA tested 40,000 unopened jars of Gerber baby food and concluded that no glass existed. Gerber relied on its state-of-the-art equipment designed to filter out any foreign objects larger than four-thousandths of an inch. It also X-rayed for possible breakage in the production line. There was no proof that there was glass in the jar.

Gerber felt it had proved the rumor false. Although the rumor continued to spread all over the United States, Gerber stood tough on refusing a recall. The rumor eventually died, and Gerber recovered sales, something the company felt it could not have done had there been a recall.

4. Deny the rumor publicly and vehemently, and prove it has no basis in truth. Once the rumor is shown to be unsubstantiated, a person who passes it on might be challenged with “That is absolutely untrue. I know because . . .” However, if the rumor is already widespread and potentially serious, a news conference is in order. The purpose is to show how erroneous the rumor is. In this news conference, do not repeat the rumor itself unnecessarily.

Effective public relations is less expensive and the resulting articles usually more believable than advertisements. However, Allan J. Kimmel (2004), in his guide to understanding and combating rumor, *Rumors and Rumor Control*, warned against easy use of urging the news media to fight the battle, when saying that once the news media have the story, the organization loses control of the message and it may not be delivered to the publics in the intended way. Crucial data may be omitted or not stressed.

Remember that a simple denial is not as interesting or as juicy as the original rumor. Just “saying” it’s not so is boring. Rumor-mongers expect you to deny it. Why would you admit something so negative? Your denial must be persuasive and convincing.

5. To be convincing, get an outside expert on the subject to discredit the rumor. The expert should be a person with strong credentials who speaks with authority—a university professor, a leading physician, or some other professional.
6. Place ads in high-circulation publications. This is a powerful tool for reaching great numbers of people—if your message is convincing. If the message is not convincing, the ad may promote the rumor. Before placing an ad, be sure the rumor is totally untrue, not premature. In the latter case, ads can cause more harm than good.

Social Media Rumors

Where word-of-mouth rumors have put companies in crises for years, electronic rumors have given rumors wings. Social media and e-mail rumors can spread to thousands of people in seconds and, just like spoken rumor, they can change elements of the story with each transmission. The culture of cyberspace includes many individuals who apparently believe what they read on the Internet even when just the opposite seems to be the case. Although rules and laws will eventually be put into effect, at the beginning of the 21st century anybody can write

about almost anything on the Internet and to an even greater degree via e-mail. Some people, such as competitors, use social media and e-mail rumor with vicious intent; others use it merely to warn their friends. The transmission of e-mail rumors can be extremely damaging to businesses, organizations, and people in public life.

An e-mail rumor circulated in the late 1990s claiming that a customer ate chocolate-chip cookies from a café in a Neiman Marcus store, asked the waitress for the cookie recipe, and was told it would cost “two-fifty.” Thinking that meant \$2.50, the customer agreed, but found later that \$250 had been charged to her credit card. According to the rumor, she said the store would not correct the discrepancy because she could have copied the recipe, so she was stuck with the charge. In revenge, she decided to tell everyone she could about the recipe and thereby circulated it by e-mail to people she knew and asked them to circulate it to everyone they knew. In a short time, the recipe and story were everywhere. However, the story is false. The Neiman Marcus store mentioned does not even have a café. Yet the e-mail rumor was widely transmitted and believed.

Another widely circulated e-mail rumor asserts that Kentucky Fried Chicken changed its name to KFC because it could not use the word “chicken” since what it sells is not chicken but “genetically manipulated organisms.” The rumor further asserts that “the so-called chickens are kept alive by tubes inserted in their bodies to pump blood and nutrients throughout their structure. They have no beaks, no feathers, no feet.”

As in most e-mail rumors, the writer of the KFC e-mail cited a believable source but got the facts wrong: “Listen to their commercials, I guarantee you will not see or hear the word ‘chicken.’ I find this disturbing.” Actually the word “chicken” is used repeatedly in the commercials. The company changed its name to KFC to eliminate the word “fried” because some of their products are not fried and the company wants to appeal to a more health-conscious consumer public.

KFC officials released the following statement to the news media: “The hoax is intended to destroy the trust that you have placed in KFC to provide high-quality chicken meals at all of our restaurants. Although we hope that readers of the hoax will recognize it as obviously false, we take this or any other attack on the quality of KFC’s product seriously” (Noack, 2000).

Battling Online Rumors

In 1999, the Public Affairs Office at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston set up a web page to fight rumors. Faced with a fiscal problem and a projected deficit, several hundred jobs had already been eliminated and other jobs would be eliminated in the future.

The campus rumor mill was abuzz with gossip about which programs would be cut. The Public Affairs Office realized the rumors were sapping morale and threatening productivity. "Our biweekly employee newsletter, with its slower response time, didn't seem like the proper vehicle," said Chris Comer, UTMB's director of communications (Lucey, 1999, p. 6).

The university webmaster and art director worked together to create a website called "Rumors and Trumors." Accessed through a flying saucer button on the university's homepage, the site permitted employees to ask about the rumors they heard. The Public Affairs Office then tracked down and posted the answers. The site became a trusted and effective source for employees. Hundreds of rumors were explained or zapped, and morale was improved.

Fighting back with a proactive website is one tactic. If the company has a website and does not address a circulated rumor on it, it may make the company appear guilty. This happened in July 1996 when TWA Flight 800 went down off the coast of Long Island. The TWA website did not address the rumor circulating widely that the plane was shot down by a missile during a nearby U.S. military exercise. Alaska Airlines, on the other hand, put details of its 2000 crash online within an hour of the accident.

Janal (1998) advised three tactics for fighting all cybercrises, including e-mail rumors: pay attention, read the rumor and think about it, and put up a fight. Companies and organizations should be ever vigilant, watching for e-mail rumors. Encourage employees to notify the public relations department, or another designated department, when they notice e-mail or word-of-mouth rumors. If the complaint is legitimate, an appropriate solution to the complaint, and perhaps publicity about the correction, should be posted on the company's website, through the news media, or through some more appropriate outlet. If the rumor is unfounded and the source of the rumor is known, respond to the rumor. If the source is not known, respond to the listserv or Internet service provider (ISP) associated with the e-mail message that distributed the rumor. Fight in the news media and on websites. But do not wait for the rumor to go away. "To many people," said Janal, "silence equals assent."

At times, a decision must be made between fighting a rumor with public relations and fighting a rumor with lawyers. Public relations is the first step. If that does not work or is not feasible, call the lawyers.

Many companies establish a policy forbidding employees from making statements about the company while they are employed or after they depart. Employee comments on an attack site violate that agreement and expose the employees to punitive measures. This may work well in some environments, but it seems difficult to enforce, particularly with fired or other former employees who are frequently the culprits behind e-mail rumors.

Another tactic is to ignore the problem. Most Internet experts do not embrace this as a tactic and say it would be like a duck sitting in the water hoping the hunter's shot will miss. However, companies have been successful with it—watching and waiting and riding the problem out. If this tactic is taken, ongoing monitoring of the situation is crucial.

Kotcher (1999) advised the following:

1. Your company must respond to the e-mail rumor. If you remain silent, the only side of the story revealed is your enemy's.
2. Think strategically. Devise the best plan for the problem.
3. Speak with one voice. A clear, consistent message is mandatory.
4. Communicate your concern. Even if you are not guilty of the charges, be concerned.
5. Adopt an appropriate tone. Choose formal or informal language depending on the nature of the crisis.
6. Seize the opportunity. This is a chance not only to diffuse the crisis but also to build new alliances and reach goals.

Mini-Case: Microsoft Fights Fake E-Mailed News Release

The fake e-mailed news release began like this:

MICROSOFT BIDS TO ACQUIRE CATHOLIC CHURCH

VATICAN CITY (AP)—In a joint press conference in St. Peter's Square this morning, Microsoft Corporation and the Vatican announced that the Redmond software giant will acquire the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for an unspecified number of shares of Microsoft common stock. If the deal goes through, it will be the first time a computer software company has acquired a major world religion.

(Janal, 1998, pp. 270–273)

The fake news release went on to say that Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer would be invested in the College of Cardinals, and Gates was quoted as saying, "The combined resources of Microsoft and the Catholic Church will allow us to make religion easier and more fun for a broader range of people." The release also claimed that there would be a new software application called "Microsoft Church," that the deal would give Microsoft online rights to the Bible, and that comedian Don Novello, playing his *Saturday Night Live* character, Father Guido Sarducci, hosted the announcement that was broadcast by satellite to 700 sites worldwide.

If anything remotely like this were true, which is ludicrous, it would have been a front-page, top of the newscast story. So how could anyone believe it on an e-mail transmission? So many people believed it, or, at least, thought it might be true, that they contacted Microsoft for confirmation. The fake news release also made the news. The company had to issue a news release denying the rumor.

Mini-Case: The Killer Banana Rumor

A rumor circulated both on the Internet and via e-mail claimed that bananas from Costa Rica were infected with “necrotizing fasciitis,” or flesh-eating bacteria, and that the entire Costa Rica monkey population had been wiped out because of the bananas. It warned the public to stop eating bananas and to seek medical attention if they had eaten a banana and had come down with a fever. The bacteria, it said, could “eat” 2 to 3 centimeters of flesh per hour, making amputation likely and death possible.

The message, like most e-mail rumors involving food, said the message could be confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Rumors tend to carry an expert’s name to make the outrageous rumor seem believable. When contacted, a spokesperson for the CDC said, “This is a false report.”

APBNews.com reported on the incident, saying a trade group was trying to squelch the rumor. Tim Debus of the International Banana Association (IBA), an organization directly affected by the rumor, called it “Just another case of Internet terrorism like the recent hacker attacks on popular websites.” The National Necrotizing Foundation, which researches such diseases and offers support and education services, said it was not possible for the disease to spread in the way the hoax claimed (Noack, 2000).

Debus indicated that the IBA, concerned that the prank could disrupt the economy, made efforts to get the word out that the allegations were false.

Rogue Websites

Rogue websites are normally created by disgruntled individuals with the intention of bringing attention to an issue or several issues concerning a corporation or organization. The company attacked in the rogue site must consider whether to respond and if it responds, how. Sometimes no response seems appropriate because the site appears to be simply vicious, but the company must determine, as best it can, whether readers will actually believe the claims made. Are Internet users sophisticated enough to realize that information on any website, especially a rogue website, is not necessarily factual?

Dr. Louis K. Falk, in his research on rogue websites, classifies such sites into five categories. The five categories are the following:

1. Sites in which consumers are unhappy with the performance of the company. Examples include a rogue website that targeted Wal-Mart; it featured complaints and comments from customers and employees and claimed that “a considerable amount of content on this site is from other sites around the world.”
2. Sites in which consumers are unhappy with the policies of the company. Examples include a rogue site aimed at Pepsi that featured complaints that the company supported animal cruelty because it placed ads at bullfights.
3. Sites in which consumers or former employees have negative feelings toward the company. Examples include a disgruntled former employee of Burger King who set up a website to complain about creatures in the salad, low wages, and office politics. The information was so rambling that the discerning reader got the impression “Somebody got fired and has a vendetta against Burger King.” Burger King would probably be advised to ignore the site. Another rogue site complained that McDonald’s was not environmentally concerned because it killed animals, damaged the planet, harmed the health of consumers, and paid employees low salaries. Few customers of McDonald’s likely cared, as anyone concerned about killing animals for food doesn’t order Big Macs.
4. Sites in which consumers create humor pages, also called “spoof sites.” Examples include a site aimed at making fun of Taco Bell that clearly states its intentions. The webmaster says, at the top of the homepage, “I am not Taco Bell. I’m just a freak that likes to eat their food. If you want to write to Taco Bell, please go to tacobell.com. This page is meant to be a fun page.” The site’s criticism is so minimal, the reader may wonder if Taco Bell might have masterminded the site itself. In one central spot, the hot sauce is criticized for not being hot and the quality of the meat in Taco Bell Lunchables is questioned. But the webmaster admits that the humor comes from his or her marijuana use as well as his or her relationship with Taco Bell.
5. Sites in which an index is created for complaints of multiple businesses. An example is www.sprawl-busters.com, which battles large-scale retail stores and megastores such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target.

Another type of Internet crisis can develop when a company’s own website is invaded. This occurred when a medical products company in Michigan discovered that hackers had posted on its own website a false

news release saying the company was merging with a pharmaceutical firm. Stocks for both companies rose on the NASDAQ index after the fake posting. The medical products company indicated it would pursue the hackers and reassess its security.

The rogue sites that seem designed to destroy a company are often called attack sites or antisites. Many times, the web address is made up of the company name followed by the word sucks—as in `yourcompany.sucks.com`.

How Do Companies Prevent Rogue Websites?

Cyberexperts advise companies to purchase several domain names, including buying up the “sucks sites.” This is only a temporary remedy because the clever webmaster can merely set up a rogue site using “stinks” instead of “sucks,” making `Xcompanystinks.com`. Then there are numerous other synonyms that can be used. The irate webmaster can also purchase `Xcompanyreallysucks.com` and `Xcompanystillsucks.com`.

Site suffixes have been a problem, too. For example, “`whitehouse.gov`” is the website address of the real White House in Washington, DC, but a spoof site, “`whitehouse.org`,” was set up, and also a pornography site at “`whitehouse.com`.” It would seem that government Internet and web experts could have prevented these occurrences by anticipating the need to control both sites.

Another Internet address problem occurred when Sno-Isle Regional Library in Snohomish County, Washington, set up a website for bibliophiles to reserve books. There is a hyphen in the address. If the hyphen was not typed in the address, the computer user would get a pornography site. The address of the pornography site is not sexy and seems to have no relevance to its site. The library suspected that the pornography site webmaster wanted the library to purchase the address or merely wanted to play a trick on the library. So the library’s legal representative entered the picture.

In November 1999, the Federal Anticybersquatting Consumer Protection Act was signed into law. It allows the holder of a copyright or trademark to sue cybersquatters who have registered copyrighted domain names, and it forces them to relinquish those Internet addresses.

The most important prevention method is acquiring a federal trademark registration for the company name. The first company or the first person to register the name holds the rights. It is also advisable to register the company trademark and product name under all possible domain name variations (`.com`, `.org`, `.net`, etc.). Companies are advised to register their names with and without hyphens. For example, `1-800-dentists.com` and `1800dentists.com` are two websites owned by two different companies. Confusion is apparent.

If your company has a federal registration for its name, and if another company or webmaster has taken the name as its domain name, write to the domain name holder and tell him or her that he or she is infringing on your trademark. If he or she fails to transfer the domain name, go to Network Solutions, Inc. (NSI), the organization responsible for the administration of domain names in the United States and Canada. Present NSI with a certified copy of the federal registration and ask to place the domain on hold. Neither party will be able to conduct business at that website until the dispute is settled. If the problem continues, a suit in federal court is the next step.

Use a monitoring service. These services help companies track online problems and manage their reputations through online resources and interactions. A Phoenix-based division of WavePhore, called “eWatch,” prowls websites and assists companies with damage control when criticism hits the Internet.

What to Do After an Attack Site Is Up

If a company is the victim of an attack site, Falk suggests the following tactics:

1. Do not overreact; the problem may not be as bad as it seems.
2. Assess the problem. Consider whether the information is true or false, whether many key stakeholders have seen the site, and whether the persons making the claim are credible.
3. Analyze the attack site.
 - (a) Do not pretend you are a consumer; webmasters of rogue sites recognize misleading communications.
 - (b) Get a picture of how damaging the site is. How are you affected? Learn all you can about the attitudes of your publics and the issues most important to them.
 - (c) Contact the webmaster of the attack site by telephone, face to face, or through e-mail. This gives you someone to hold accountable and helps develop a relationship with him or her if that is helpful. It also tends to force people to observe a higher standard.
 - (d) If the issue is big enough, contact your key stakeholders. This allows you to build a personal relationship with them and educate them about the attack site.
4. Drive the discussion by allowing your employees to be interviewed on your website. Make your company the expert on information about your company. Even if there is a negative aspect, admit to it and tell what your company is doing about it.

If there is no doubt that the site is an attempt to damage the company's reputation, Kim Bayne (as cited in Janal, 1998, p. 240) suggests the following steps:

1. Make a complete mirror of the attacking websites for reference purposes.
2. Find out the webmaster's point of view. Is the webmaster a disgruntled customer, an ex-employee, a competitor, or a prankster?
3. Create rebuttal pages at the company's website to address all accusations and implications. However, don't post the rebuttal pages at the company's site until you have gauged the public's reaction, or you may unwittingly stimulate interest in the attack site.
4. Prepare written statements for your crisis communications team, and make sure all team members agree on how to route inquiries about this particular website, should it become an issue.
5. Telephone the webmaster and explain your concerns about the misinformation. Do not be accusatory, angry, or threatening. Ask him or her to remove the site. Explain that you would like the opportunity to present your company's view in an unbiased manner at the attack site. Use your communications skills first to try to resolve the problem.
6. If for any reason you are unable to communicate with the webmaster, it's time for your company to draft a nice letter spelling out the situation and asking for resolution by a specific date.
7. Still not getting results? I'd apply the "three strikes" rule here. If after the third attempt to "play nice," you still don't get results, then it's time to get your company lawyer involved (Janal, 1998, p. 240).

The mini-cases discussed in the following sections involve rogue websites.

Mini-Case: Alaska Airlines and the Good and Bad News Websites

After the 2000 crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261, Alaska Airlines was one of the first major companies to put its bad news on its own website within an hour of it happening. The story was placed on the employee site because several persons on the flight were nonrevenue passengers, primarily employees. However, Alaska had to battle fraudulent sites also.

Two fraudulent websites were created to solicit donations for the families of the passengers and crew. The webmaster of the first rogue site used the Alaska Airlines logo to masquerade his or her site as an official Alaska Airlines page. Visitors who downloaded the fake contribution form

unleashed a computer virus that allowed outsiders access to information on their computers.

Company executives were tipped off about the rogue site by an e-mail message. Needless to say, the company, still in shock over the tragedy, was doubly shocked. Company spokesperson Brian Petro said, "We just couldn't understand. It was unimaginable someone would do something like that" (Stiffler, 2000, p. A10). Alaska Airlines contacted the rogue site's Internet provider and asked that the site be removed. The ISP, Costa Rica-based Freehomepages.com, complied.

A second rogue site asked for Social Security numbers of Alaska Airlines employees under the guise of donating to coworkers. The site was also purged. It is not known how many Internet users fell prey to the fraud. Alaska Airlines also issued two news releases about the fraudulent sites. The releases warned the public that the sites were fraudulent and vicious and revealed information about the official site, www.alaskaair.com, and fund-raising efforts.

Mini-Case: Dunkin' Donuts Adopts a Rogue Website

The webmaster of a rogue site aimed at Dunkin' Donuts said he or she had "way too much time on [his] hands" and posted some thoughts about Dunkin' Donuts on a personal website. Within a few weeks, the site had "an unusual [but welcome] influx of visitors." The webmaster learned through the referrer log at Yahoo! that all of these visitors went through Yahoo! to access the site. The webmaster also learned that Dunkin' Donuts did not have its own website, so Yahoo! indexed the rogue site as a "consumer opinion" website about Dunkin' Donuts.

The site started getting "500 hits and a dozen e-mails a week," it said. Then the webmaster requested and was granted the use of the domain name "dunkindonuts.org" and moved the content previously posted on his personal website to the new official website. The site made news (Segal & Mayer, 1999, p. A01).

It must be said here that 500 hits are not necessarily 500 complaints. People stumble onto sites. Curiosity leads them to sites. Also, one person may "hit" a site more than once, so it doesn't even mean that 500 people visited the site. And the webmaster himself admits on the page that some of the hits come from people who "are from Dunkin' Donuts headquarters doing 'damage control,' 'lurking,' or eavesdropping."

Dunkin' Donuts started to respond to the comments on the rogue site. Jennifer Rosenberg, a Dunkin' Donuts spokesperson, was quoted on the top line of the rogue site as saying, "If this was where customers were going to post their comments, we thought it was important for us to go ahead and address them." Soon after, Dunkin' Donuts made arrangements to acquire the site for its own use.

Mini-Case: America Online and a “Sucks” Site

This “sucks” site charged America Online (AOL) with being “the MTV of the Internet . . . competitive on prices, but disastrously poor in service.” The site contained several pages of detailed and focused text. James M. Egelhof was identified as the rogue site’s webmaster.

An AOL webmaster wrote a letter to Cloud 9, the ISP of Egelhof’s site, saying the site violated the ISP’s rules: “Both as an Internet user and as an AOL employee, I find his web page to be offensive and disturbing. Because Mr. Egelhof has chosen to use a noninteractive medium to express his opinions, he is not providing an avenue for an AOL response to these allegations, and thus his communication can be considered harassment [a violation of the ISP’s rules].”

Another violation was of the ISP’s rule that users may not use the system to distribute and/or store illegal copies of commercial software. The AOL webmaster’s letter to Cloud 9 continued: “The use of AOL online art in this site is extensive. Please remove the graphics on these pages to avoid possible legal action. I am currently contacting our legal department to determine if they (sic) would consider Mr. Egelhof’s opinions to be libelous and to discover precedents for legal action in this medium.”

Egelhof maintained that AOL’s threats were groundless and that he had broken no law. He said he checked with his attorney about the harassment and libel threats and was told they were “garbage.” He said he was also advised “that when a large corporation uses lawsuits (or the threat of them) to try to silence critics, that there are grounds for a harassment suit against the corporation.”

At this point, there was much talk about the incident in several newsgroups, and the number of visits to the rogue site increased, Egelhof said, from 20 to 360 daily. As the talk continued, AOL Vice President Lyn Chitow posted an apology and mailed it to those who complained about the company. The main points of the apology were the following:

1. “We are not in the business of censorship and believe strongly in individual freedom of speech.”
2. “We know we are not perfect and welcome feedback about how to make it better.”
3. “The author of the [rogue] web pages was expressing his view of America Online, and I personally found it insightful and helpful as we strive to make it the best service it can be.”

Interestingly, the AOL webmaster who took Egelhof to task offered him a job, saying “We are looking for folks who know (the) web.”

Blogs

Blogs can be positive or negative. Blogs used to be personal online diaries but they have grown to become expressions of opinion on any subject. Beginning with the September 11 attacks of 2001, and continuing with all great disasters, including the Asian tsunami in late 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, bloggers (persons who write blogs) brought to the Internet numerous revealing personal stories that helped us get the big, broader picture of the tragedies. However, the basic nature of blogging can be dangerous.

Why is it dangerous?

1. A 2005 study by the Carnegie Corporation revealed that 44% of 18- to 34-year-olds get their news from online sources, including an increasing number of sites in the blogosphere. By early 2005, 32 million Internet users had accessed blogs.
2. Even though most bloggers and most Internet users who read blogs are well educated, it is difficult to differentiate a blog site set up by a news medium and one set up by an irate person or organization.
3. A blogger is not necessarily employed by a news medium or trained or experienced in the basic tenets of journalism—balanced and objective coverage. A blog is closer to a letter to the editor than a news story. Yet there is no editor to assure checks and balances as in traditional newspapers, television, and radio news. Bloggers can and do write whatever they wish, and their writing may be full of errors, flaws, and innuendo.

This means that organizations and companies must monitor blog sites in order to know what publics are saying about them, just as they monitor phone calls, letters, rumors, and complaints.

One blog crisis occurred when a Google employee posted a complaint about his salary on his Google blog. He was subsequently fired for divulging proprietary information to a vast external public. This caused companies to develop rules governing what can and cannot be said on a blog site.

Conclusion

As the Internet's many possibilities emerge, there will be more and more opportunities for attacks. Hopefully, laws will be established to protect while still providing freedom of speech and expression. The basic lesson to be learned in all forms of communication—from word-of-mouth to word-of-electronics—is "Watch, Listen, Learn."

The Crisis Communications Plan

Crisis Inventory

Before an organization can develop a crisis management plan or a crisis communications plan, it must determine which crisis or crises the organization is most likely to face. A crisis communications plan's usefulness is directly associated with how specific it is to a particular type of crisis.

The workbook for this text takes the user through a step-by-step process of developing the crisis communications plan. Although there are several items in the plan that are mutual to all types of crises, varying information is needed for each type of crisis for maximum effectiveness. For example, a restaurant chain may decide that food poisoning and fire are its most probable crises. If a food poisoning crisis occurs, the media will want, and the public relations department should have, the following items readily available and in its crisis communications plan: recipes, a list of ingredients stocked, a list of vendors used, kitchen precautions and procedures, names and contact numbers of chefs and all other personnel handling food, and a list of medical experts for consultation and as spokespersons.

If a fire occurs, the public relations department should have, in a specific crisis communications plan, information about its evacuation procedures, its policy on using nonflammable decor items (such as window coverings and tablecloths), the floor plan of the structure, and fire experts for spokespersons.

The following list enumerates common types of crises. There are, of course, numerous others. Companies and organizations are advised to consider the list carefully and add types of crises specific to their operations.

Common Types of Crises

acquisition	bankruptcy
age discrimination	boycott
alcohol abuse	bribery

chemical spill or leak	murder
computer failure	negative legislation
computer hacking	plant closing
contamination	product failure
data loss/theft	protest demonstrations
drug abuse	racial issues
drug trafficking	robbery
earthquake	sexual discrimination
embezzlement	sexual harassment
explosion	strikes
fatality	suicide
fire	takeover
flood	tax problems
hacking	terrorism
hurricane	tornado
kickbacks	toxic waste
kidnapping	transportation accident
lawsuits	transportation failure
layoffs	workplace violence
merger	

Some crises will involve more than one of the types listed, such as workplace violence and fatality, or boycott and sexual discrimination.

Perhaps the involvement of the entire company or of representatives from each department can help determine the crises the company is likely to face. Then each unit's selections could be compared and compiled into a company-wide list. When done properly, this can be an effective proactive employee relations program, a way of creating "we-ness," a way of including all of the employees in the company's decision making. Janitors, executive assistants, blue-collar and white-collar workers, midlevel executives, as well as top executives can have a say. After all, each employee stands to suffer if the company should go under after the most serious of crises. Furthermore, employees in each position classification have unique perspectives on things that can go wrong. Janitors are more aware of heating and cooling equipment, possible gas leaks, and so on. Workers on an automobile assembly line know more about the quality of cars than managers in carpeted offices.

However, if a company-wide crisis identification program is not feasible, a meeting of key employees familiar with all facets of the operation can determine the crises the company is likely to face. Such a meeting should certainly include more than public relations staff members. You do not want the company blaming the public relations staff for the failure to recognize a possible crisis.

Frequently, ascertaining probable crises can point out problems that prevent crises from occurring. This is the primary reason for company-wide involvement. The second best reason is being able to manage a crisis once it occurs.

Every company and organization can experience many types of crises. Two questions must be answered: (a) How likely is this crisis? and (b) how devastating can the crisis be? Crisis communications plans should be developed for all crises believed to be both most probable and most devastating. To do this, the public relations department, with its key executives, must take an inventory. Each possible crisis must be ranked as follows:

- 0—Impossible; that is, the crisis has basically no chance of occurring.
- 1—Nearly impossible.
- 2—Remotely possible.
- 3—Possible.
- 4—Somewhat probable; has happened to similar companies.
- 5—Highly probable; may or may not have previously occurred in the company, but warning signs are evident.

Each crisis also should be ranked according to its potential damage to the company. The rankings in this category are as follows:

- 0—No damage, not a serious consequence.
- 1—Little damage, can be handled without much difficulty, not serious enough for the media's concern.
- 2—Some damage, a slight chance that the media will be involved.
- 3—Considerable damage, but still will not be a major media issue.
- 4—Considerable damage, would definitely be a major media issue.
- 5—Devastating, front-page news, could put company out of business.

For added security, when in doubt, rank a crisis in the next highest category. For instance, Company Z determines that there are five crises it could face: workplace violence, fire, protest demonstrations, negative legislation, and tax problems. Each of these crises might be ranked as shown in Figure 15.1.

Keep in mind that a crisis you determine to be unlikely simply because it has never happened before can happen tomorrow. Both human nature and mother nature are very unpredictable, so natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes) and human failures should be expected to some degree.

After rankings for probability and damage are made, bar graphs should be made to clearly see and consider each crisis and compare it to others. (Bar graphing can be done on various computer programs or by hand.)

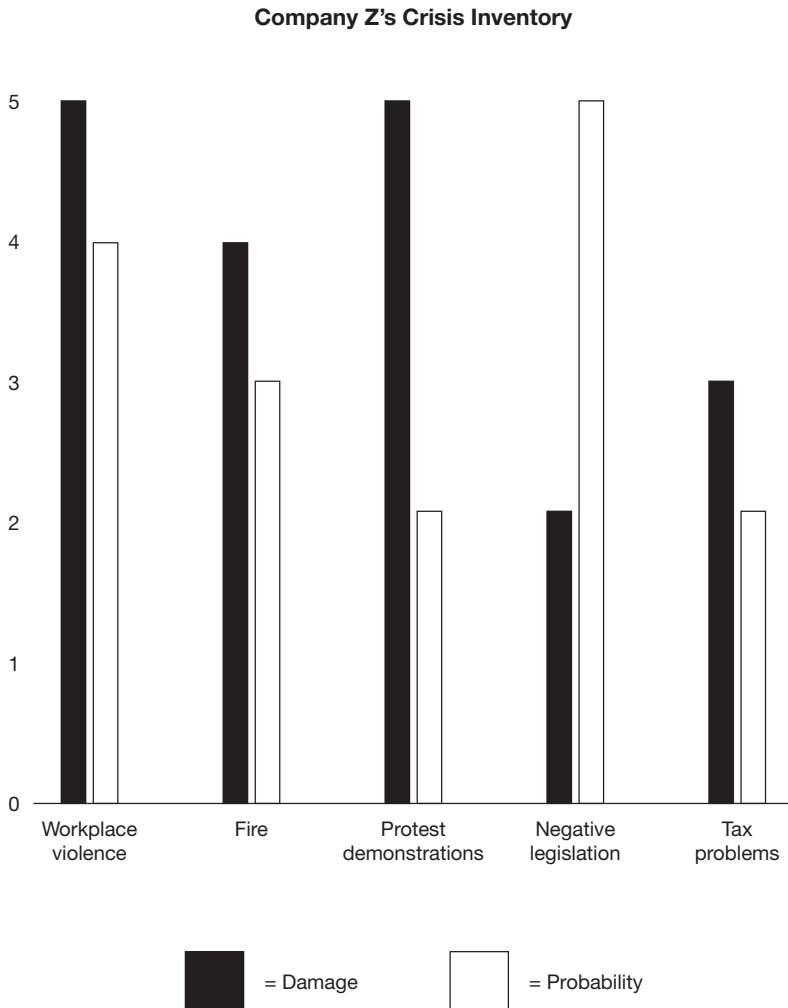


Figure 15.1 A sample bar graph showing how an organization might assess the probability of, and degrees of damage resulting from, various types of crises.

At the base of each graph, write the name of each type of crisis. Plot the height of each bar according to numbers attributed to each crisis in the probability and damage rankings. Choose different colors or shadings for probability bars and damage bars.

When Company Z plots its data on a bar graph, it resembles Figure 15.1. Considering Company Z's graph, we see that the probability and

seriousness of a crisis relating to tax problems is not as crucial as in the other crises. This does not mean that a crisis plan is not important for tax problems; it's just not as important as for other issues, and not a priority.

According to the graph, the possibility of Company Z's suffering a crisis resulting from negative legislation is likely, though not particularly critical. On the other hand, protest demonstrations are critical, although not very likely. Workplace violence and fire seem both likely and critical.

Most organizations plan for crises ranked high in both probability and damage. In this case, Company Z would probably develop crisis management and communications plans for workplace violence first, then for the other crises in descending order of importance: fire, protest demonstrations, negative legislation, and tax problems.

Sometimes organizations make crisis plans for the most devastating crises no matter how probable or improbable they may be. In this case, Company Z would develop plans for workplace violence first, followed by protest demonstrations, then fire. Naturally, a version of Murphy's Law can be expected: That crisis for which you have no plan will likely happen. However, you will find that any plan, and the process of developing that plan, will make you more prepared for crises generally.

Some organizations, having several crises classified with similar rankings in all categories, make general crisis communications plans with detailed information for all types of crises, although sometimes the detailed information is omitted.

Many companies, fearing all possibilities of crises equally, merely adopt a policy of "open and honest response" with the media and all publics, and plan to be in a total reactive mode during a crisis.

The importance of the crisis inventory is to force organizations to think about the possibilities. Sometimes the most ridiculous crisis occurs, something no one in the company could predict. Pepsi probably never dreamed that it would have a crisis about hypodermic syringes in its cans. On the other hand, Foodmaker and Jack-in-the-Box could certainly have anticipated children dying from eating hamburgers, and Exxon could have anticipated a devastating oil spill.

The ranking procedure may introduce ideas for prevention programs. You also may realize that your organization is more vulnerable than you anticipated.

Considering that the toll of stress and emotion during a crisis necessarily affects one's thought processes, a carefully developed crisis communications plan is the best substitute for a fully functioning brain. Even if you remain cool and calm under pressure, others in the company may not. The crisis communications plan alleviates this problem, too.

Developing the Crisis Communications Plan

Once likely crises have been identified, the crisis communications plan can be written. A crisis communications plan can be part of a larger crisis management plan (CMP) or it may be a stand-alone document to help public relations practitioners handle crises more effectively.

The CMP includes information such as evacuation procedures, emergency staffing of various departments of a company, and places to purchase or rent emergency equipment, tools, or vehicles—all the things a company may need in a crisis.

Public relations during a crisis focuses on communications with the company's publics during the crisis—for the most part, the same publics to which normal PR activities are directed.

The CMP is sometimes a large volume of instructions, whereas a crisis communications plan should be a more manageable, easier-to-read document. After a crisis has erupted, employees are likely to look at a large volume and say, "We don't have time to read this now," and then proceed to handle the crisis by "winging" it. The crisis communications plan should be organized in such a way that the practitioners can quickly turn to each section. Some professionals use tabs in a notebook; others use a table of contents. Keeping the crisis communications plan on a computer can be dangerous because many crises prevent access to offices (fire, earthquakes, explosives, etc.).

Many companies (such as Johnson & Johnson after the Tylenol crisis) urge employees to keep copies of the plan in various key spots—the office, at home, near the night stand, or in the car. That way, the odds are good that at least one copy will be readily available should a crisis or disaster occur.

If a crisis inventory determines, for example, that there are three likely crises, the organization should draft a crisis communications plan for each type. A plan for an earthquake must be different from a plan for a product failure. The publics may be different; the media may be different; the message must be different.

The crisis communications plan states purposes, policies, and goals, then assigns employees to various duties. It generally makes communication with publics faster and more effective and should help end the crisis more swiftly than without a plan.

When a crisis communications plan is ineffective, it is usually because the type of crisis was not anticipated or because variables arose that were not anticipated. For example, spokespersons or supplies may not be available. The crisis communications plan sometimes fails because it is outdated. Such plans should be updated regularly.

Even if unanticipated variables do arise, the crisis communications plan should be more effective than having no plan at all. Still, it must be

remembered that a crisis communications plan is not a manual guaranteeing success, with everything done “by the book,” but rather a guide that must be flexible.

An effective crisis communications plan should have the following components, arranged in an order that best suits the organization and the particular crisis or disaster:

- cover page
- introduction
- acknowledgments
- rehearsal dates
- purpose and objectives
- list of key publics
- notifying publics
- identifying the crisis communications team
- crisis directory
- identifying the media spokesperson
- list of emergency personnel and local officials
- list of key media
- spokespersons for related organizations
- crisis communications control center
- equipment and supplies
- pregathered information
- key messages
- website
- blogs and social media
- trick questions
- list of prodromes
- list of related Internet URLs
- evaluation form.

Cover Page

The cover page of a crisis communications plan is similar to the cover page of a term paper. There are as many ways of doing one as there are ways of doing crisis communications plans. It should include at least the date when the plan was written as well as revision dates.

Introduction

The head of the company or organization usually writes the introduction (or the PR practitioner ghostwrites it for the CEO with his or her approval). The purpose of this component is to persuade employees to take the crisis communications plan seriously. It stresses the necessity and

importance of the plan and it emphasizes the dire results possible when a plan is not followed.

Acknowledgments

This crisis communications plan component takes the form of an affidavit signed by all crisis personnel as well as by key executives, indicating that they have read the plan and are prepared to put it into effect. The signatures assure management that its personnel have read the plan.

Rehearsal Dates

Dates of rehearsals for all crises are recorded here. The most damaging and most likely crises should be practiced at least annually if not every 6 months. Rehearsal for any type of crisis is helpful even if an eventual crisis turns out to be somewhat different.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose statement details the organization's policies toward its publics. It might say, for example, "In a crisis, an open and honest disclosure with the media shall be stressed." The purpose is an expressed hope for a recovery and return to normalcy, to get out of the media. The objectives are responses to the question, "What do you hope to achieve with this plan?" Objectives should not be overly ambitious in difficulty or number. For example, a company may adopt the following goals:

1. To be seen in the media as a company that cares about its customers and employees.
2. To make certain that all communications are accurate.

List of Key Publics

The key publics list should include all publics, both external and internal, with which the organization must communicate during the crisis. The list varies with organizations, but may include the following as well as others:

- board members
- shareholders
- financial partners
- investors
- community leaders
- customers

- clients
- suppliers
- vendors
- neighbors of physical plant(s)
- competitors
- key management
- employees
- legal representation
- media
- union officials
- retirees
- government officials (city, state, county, federal).

Although all publics need not be notified in every crisis, the list of key publics should be comprehensive. It is easier to eliminate unneeded publics at the time of crisis than it is to think of all the crucial publics during the stress of a crisis.

Publics fall into the following categories:

- Enabling publics—those people with the power and authority to make decisions: the board of directors, shareholders, investors, and key executives. Notifying enabling publics is a priority.
- Functional publics—the people who actually make the organization work: employees, unions, suppliers, vendors, consumers, and volunteers in the case of nonprofit organizations.
- Normative publics—those people who share values with the organization in crises: trade associations, professional organizations, and competitors.
- Diffused publics—those people linked indirectly to the organization in crisis: the media, community groups, and neighbors of the physical plant.

Notifying Publics

To notify publics, a system must be devised for contacting each public, and that system should be described in the crisis communications plan. Social media networks such as Facebook groups can be used if people use computers constantly. For internal publics, many companies use a chain procedure, such as a telephone tree, in which each person is specifically designated to call others. The person who learns about the crisis first notifies the CEO, the head of public relations, and the head of the department that may be involved. The chain should be clear and error-free, even in the event that certain individuals are not reached.

An appropriate means of notification must be decided on for each public. A news release, for example, is appropriate primarily for the news media, not for other publics.

Board members are often reached by telephone or fax. E-mail or other computerized communications are also used. The media can be notified by way of telephone, wire service, fax, press conference, e-mail, or news release. Other methods used for notifying publics include telegrams, personal visits, letters, advertisements, bulletin boards, and meetings (see Figure 15.2).

Identifying the Crisis Communications Team

The crisis communications team members, along with back-ups, should be preselected. The team manager is usually, but not always, the head of public relations. He or she has specific responsibilities: communicating with top management, making decisions, drafting or approving major statements, and notifying the rest of the crisis communications team.

YOUR COMPANY

MESSAGE: There has been an explosion in the plant. There are injured employees. We do not know, at this time, the cause of the explosion or the extent of the injuries of the employees. An investigation is underway.

Methods of Communication

	TELEPHONE	EMAIL	FAX	LETTER BY MESSENGER	LETTER BY MAIL	NEWSLETTER	BULLETIN BOARD	PERSONAL VISIT	NEWS RELEASE	MEETINGS
EMPLOYEES		* J. Naas				*J. Naas	*J. Naas			
EXECUTIVES	*Nelson J.	*Nelson J.						*Nelson J. M. Yerima		*Nelson J.
CUSTOMERS					*Damien L.					
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	*Nelson J.			*Damien L.					*Gina A.	
ELECTRONIC MEDIA	*K. Stone		*K. Sone						*Gina A.	
DAILY NEWSPAPERS	*Gina A.								*Gina A.	
WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS			*Gina A.		*Damien L.					
SHARE HOLDERS		*Ann C.				*Ann C.				
COMMUNITY LEADERS			*Karen N.			*Karen N.				

*Staff member responsible for communications and followup

Figure 15.2 A sample chart showing how an organization might plan to communicate with key publics during a crisis. It includes key talking points and ways of communicating. The lists of publics and types of communication can be longer, shorter, or otherwise different depending on the organization's needs.

The assistant crisis manager assumes responsibility when the manager is unavailable (a second back-up may be beneficial, if possible). The control room coordinator sets up the room with necessary furniture, equipment, supplies, and tools. An efficient executive assistant can be appointed for this position.

Other PR personnel have the responsibilities of preparing news releases and statements, contacting the media, and reporting all actions to the crisis communications manager. These people may notify employees or volunteers through letters or by writing telegrams to the mayor and governor, by telephoning union officials and others, and so forth.

Crisis Directory

The company should prepare a crisis directory, listing all members of the crisis team, key managers in the company, and key publics or organizations, along with titles, business and home telephone numbers, cellular phone numbers, fax and e-mail addresses, as well as business, home, and vacation addresses. It is also helpful to list the phone numbers of friends, neighbors, and relatives who are frequently in contact with persons crucial to the crisis recovery.

The crisis team should be large enough to get the job done, but no larger. Having too many people involved makes it difficult to get tasks completed and decisions made. There is no time in a crisis for egos; each person must be a team player. It is also preferable that crisis team members be generally healthy and capable of working under stress. They should be reliable professionals, whether gofers, interns, or assistants.

Identifying the Media Spokesperson

The media spokesperson must be selected carefully. To the public, this person is the company or organization.

Actually, sometimes several persons are spokespersons. This is an arguable point in the public relations profession. Some argue for one spokesperson per crisis, usually the CEO. Others argue for several spokespersons, depending on area of expertise. Clearly, the decision is a matter of what suits the company and type of crisis best.

Even if the CEO is an effective spokesperson, he or she may not be particularly knowledgeable about a technical aspect of the crisis. For example, during an oil spill, the company CEO is not the only important spokesperson; also needed is a person qualified to talk about what will be necessary for the clean-up. Frequently, university professors are called on for their specific knowledge about technical aspects of a crisis and for their credibility.

Another school of thought is that CEOs have no credibility because they have too much to lose. However, if lives are lost or in danger—including the lives of animals—most professionals agree that the company head must be the chief spokesperson.

In all cases, at least one, and preferably two or three, back-up spokespersons should be preselected in case the preferred person is unavailable at the time of the crisis. Crises can occur when people are on vacation, on business trips, or sick with the flu. When the 1989 San Francisco earthquake struck, for example, the first two designated spokespersons for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company were at the World Series game at Candlestick Park. The third spokesperson on the list was called and pressed into service.

An effective crisis spokesperson must have some position in the company. It is usually not the PR head, even if the PR person is normally the company's spokesperson. The spokesperson must also be articulate, powerful enough to make decisions, accessible throughout the crisis, able to talk clearly in concise sound bites, and pleasant to the eye of a camera. Moreover, the spokesperson in a crisis must appear rational, concerned, and empathetic. He or she should be pretrained, rehearsed well in advance of the crisis, and briefed prior to the crisis response. The organization's legal adviser should be consulted before statements are made.

If the public relations department is a small or one-person operation, it may be beneficial to have capable, trustworthy volunteers to perform some tasks. Outside public relations firms that specialize in crisis planning and handling might be used. A nonprofit organization can often get PR firms to help pro bono (done or donated without charge). Many nonprofit organizations have PR practitioners on their boards of directors, anticipating the need for their assistance during a crisis.

At times, one person may be required to perform all communications roles. On the other hand, in large companies several people may perform each role.

List of Emergency Personnel and Local Officials

If the crisis is a disaster or emergency, various emergency personnel need to be contacted. A list should be made of contact numbers for police, fire officials, hospitals, the health department, utilities, and paramedics.

If the crisis affects large numbers of people or is a threat to the safety of people, government officials must be contacted. This list should include contact information for the mayor, governor, city council members, county officials, state legislators, and U.S. senators and representatives.

Sometimes union officials must be notified, and they should therefore be listed, as well as key citizens groups and community organizations.

List of Key Media

After key executives are called, the media are the next most important public to notify about the crisis. A list of media contacts—newspapers, television, radio, wire services—should be completed and listed in order of importance. If particular editors or reporters are important to telling the story to the organization’s benefit, a list of their home numbers and emergency numbers will be advantageous.

The media list should contain contact information for morning and afternoon metropolitan dailies, certain weeklies, all TV news stations, the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, all radio news stations, and trade publications.

Spokespersons for Related Organizations

If an organization suffers a severe crisis, there may be spokespersons outside the organization who may be questioned. It may be effective to make a list of who these people might be and how to contact them at any time of day. It also might be effective to meet with them so that they are familiar with your company, with how you will handle a crisis, if it occurs, and with how to reach you.

Sometimes other spokespersons have information you don’t have. This information may help you communicate more effectively. So you need to be able to reach them. Because most people have cell phones, this could be a simple task.

In the Metro Transit case in Chapter 13, involving a bus accident and shooting, the news media interviewed the public information officers for the bus company, the police department, the fire department, the hospitals, and spokespersons for county and city officials. The bus company spokesman learned from the news media that a gun was found on one of the victims, and had to scramble to get to the police to find the information. In this case, the spokespersons got together at the site of the accident and determined that they would refer the media’s questions to one particular spokesperson. If, instead, the spokespersons had exchanged cell phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or home phone numbers prior to the crisis, they would have been aware of what procedure to follow regarding the media spokesperson.

Crisis Communications Control Center

The location of the crisis communications control center must be determined in case regular office space is unavailable. After disasters and emergencies, offices are often damaged, without power, or inaccessible.

Several possible sites should be listed in the crisis communications plan, as well as the persons instrumental in gaining access to these locations.

Suppose, for example, a local church has offered its conference room. Who gave permission to use the room? Who can unlock the doors of the church and conference room? Does the permission include use of electrical outlets and furniture? Does the site have adequate space for the media to work?

Equipment and Supplies

Determine and list all of the equipment and supplies needed by the crisis team, media, and visiting publics. The list could include, but is not limited to, the following:

- chairs and desks
- bulletin boards
- flip charts and chalkboards
- computers or typewriters (perhaps manual typewriters in case power is a problem)
- computer printers
- telephones and cellular phones
- battery-powered televisions and radios
- maps of the plant or crisis area
- battery-powered flashlights and lamps
- police radios
- walkie-talkies
- company letterhead, pens, and pencils
- telephone directories
- contact lists and media directories
- press kits
- CMPs and crisis communications plans
- street and highway maps
- food and beverages
- copying machine(s)
- first-aid kits
- cameras and film
- extension cords and generator power packs.

Pregathered Information

Prepare and gather various documents that may possibly be needed during a crisis. Keep identical sets of documents in various locales to ensure availability. The types of documents that can be gathered in advance include safety records and procedures, annual reports, photos, company backgrounders, executive biographies, company maps, branch office locations, quality control procedures, product manufacturing procedures,

and company fact sheets (including such data as numbers of employees, products manufactured, and markets served).

Skeletal news releases can be prepared as long as the PR practitioner anticipates the type of crisis and can make a statement on behalf of the company. As shown in Figure 15.3, a news release can be written in advance with blank spaces left for data to be filled in (such as the magnitude of the crisis and relevant dates and names).

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date _____

Contact: _____
(name/phone number)

_____ (name of celebrity) DIES

(SEATTLE) _____ (full name and title) _____ died
today of _____ (cause of death) at _____ (time
of death) _____ at Swedish Hospital Medical Center in Seattle.
He/She was _____ (age).

Further details will be released by _____ (name of person to
make announcement—family member or professional contact) at a news
conference scheduled for _____ (time of news
conference), at Swedish Hospital, Glaser Auditorium, 747 Summit Ave.

#

Figure 15.3 A sample fill-in-the-blanks news release

Key Messages

Under the stress of a crisis, it is easy to forget, or at least fail to state properly, the main points you want to convey to publics or to a specific public. Even when there is no crisis, experienced spokespersons prepare in advance the primary information they want emphasized in what are called key messages or speaking points.

The act of preparing key messages will help you organize your thoughts and will provide consistent information to publics. Each message must be accurate, brief, easy to use in a quote, and memorable. The spokesperson must be easily able to work the key message into responses to questions. Such messages also help reporters—who are looking for great quotes—to do their jobs.

Effective key messages help avoid misquoting, enable the spokesperson to tell his or her side of the story, and give the spokesperson a way to answer trick questions comfortably. Most of all, they establish credibility for the organization in crisis.

Website

Placing news on the organization's website and pre-appointing webmasters to keep updated information on the site will reduce both the number of phone calls from publics and the amount of time put into crisis recovery. The news put on the site should be brief or detailed depending on the nature of the crisis. In the event of an airplane crash, for example, the airline's website would, at first, merely acknowledge the crash. After families of victims are notified, the names of victims would be listed. Regular notices of progress in the investigation would also be posted.

The concern of the company should be expressed and prominently displayed. A statement from the highest executive in the company is expected by the public. The website is an ideal venue for keeping safety rules, security precautions, and health policies posted. Restaurants might keep information posted on training new employees about cooking burgers at the proper temperature, using gloves when handling food, and policies that discourage employees with colds and other infectious diseases from working with food products.

The website is also a bulletin board for informing publics of the organization's community relations projects and other activities that give back to the public. The website can afford your organization the opportunity to be a Model 4, two-way symmetric company (see Chapter 2). It can encourage feedback, comments, and questions from publics and provide publics with responses and explanations. Finally, the website can reveal how the company is making changes as a result of public comment.

Blogs and Social Media

Monitoring blogs and social media channels is crucial. Sometimes the monitoring can be a prodrome (warning sign) and help prevent a crisis. The crisis communications plan should have a list of all blogs and social media networks relevant to the business and relevant to the types of crises. This can be an excellent way of achieving Model 4, two-way symmetrical communications with publics (see Excellence Theory in Chapter 2, “Crisis Communication Theory,” pages 20–24).

It is advisable, if social media are used proactively in marketing and public relations campaigning, that they would also be used in the crisis communications plan. Facebook friends and other contacts with whom the organization has built a relationship will spread the news to a wider group of people. For Twitter, prepare key messages in advance when communicators have time to work with the 140 characters. Make this list of key messages separate from the key messages going to the traditional news media but with the same sentiment.

Do not drop traditional news media in order to spend time with social media unless the crisis relates only to online issues and online publics. Crises originating on social media should indeed be battled on social media and sometimes on traditional media. Similarly, crises not related to social media networks might also be fought through social media as well as traditional media.

For example, in 1993, the Pepsi Cola company experienced a crisis brought on by consumers who placed hypodermic syringes in cans and charged they found them there when they purchased them. The fear supposedly was that the syringes would cause HIV/AIDS, but actually the greedy consumers were hoping to get payoffs from Pepsi. Pepsi ended the crisis when it showed on television newscasts the following: (1) surveillance camera b-roll of a grocery store patron placing a syringe in a can; and (2) the canning process that showed how virtually impossible it would be for the syringes to have been placed in the cans at the plant. Today, in addition to television news, the visual pictures could have been shown via YouTube.

An e-blast might be sent to publics who subscribe to the organization’s e-mail list. However, e-blasts are being used less than in previous years as communicators employ other methods.

Trick Questions

When a crisis occurs, what questions can you predict the news media will ask a spokesperson? Check Chapter 4 for types of trick questions. Reporters may not ask certain questions intentionally to trick the spokesperson, but the end result—if a question is not answered carefully—can make the spokesperson and his or her organization look bad.

A spokesperson for a restaurant, for example, might be asked the following trick questions:

1. Off the record, didn't you know this might happen?
2. If the fire happened during the lunch hour, how many people might have been killed?
3. Don't you buy your ground beef from the meatpacker who sold bad meat to the other restaurant?
4. As at most popular restaurants, the work here is very fast-paced and stressful, right?

List of Prodromes

Prodromes are the warning signs that a crisis may occur. List these in the crisis communications plan. If any of the prodromes have actually happened, log into the plan what the company did in response and when. This helps the spokesperson answer the media question, "Did you have any warning that this might happen?"

As an example of a prodrome, consider the normally good employee who is unusually tardy and seems stressed out and irritable. Management notices the problem and gets help for the employee. Or take another example, several near-accidents in the organization's parking lot. Management takes notice, determines that the parking lot has confusing directional signs, and has the signs redone.

Heeding prodromes carefully can often prevent a crisis and help show that the organization is concerned with resolving problems. The prodromes section of the crisis communications plan should be regularly updated.

List of Related Internet URLs

List the URLs of organizations and companies that may have information you need during a crisis. Also include brief descriptions of the data available at the URLs. For example, a restaurant might list the URLs for the National Center for Infectious Diseases, the state department of health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Center for Disease Control.

Evaluation Form

Evaluation is a crucial step in preparing an effective crisis communications plan. As assessment, it is helpful in determining what did and did not work. It also helps plan for, prevent, and cope with future crises by pointing out what needs to be revised in the crisis communications plan.

An evaluation form should be developed and placed at the end of the crisis communications plan for later distribution to internal publics for input. An environment where suggestions are made freely will add to the effectiveness of the evaluation and the crisis communications plan.