

GET THE MESSAGE OUT: 10 TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

You've spent weeks, months, perhaps years preparing to respond to a crisis. Then it happens:

- Explosions rock a local fertilizer plant, setting fire to nearby businesses in the city's industrial park.
- A data breach occurs involving city records. Vital information for thousands of city residents may have been compromised.
- An active shooter situation is reported at City Hall. An elementary school is located nearby.

Whether the event is similar to one of these examples, or something entirely different but no less challenging, your city will be ready. Your staff has worked hard to prepare and train for this day. Now it's time to act and put your crisis communications plan into action.

When a crisis occurs, you can be sure news reporters won't be far behind. Even though they may seem like the last people you want to deal with during a crisis, members of the media actually have a key role to play in a crisis and your city's crisis communications plan. They will be vital in communicating the city's messages and conveying important information to the public.

Here are some tips for working successfully with the media:

1. CRAFT EFFECTIVE MESSAGES AND GET THEM OUT QUICKLY

Your crisis communications team should be quick to convene as soon as a potential crisis occurs. The first job of the team will be to assess the situation and determine how best to respond. This is where your team will benefit from having developed "holding messages," draft messages designed to provide a template for your earliest responses. They might not contain a great deal of details, but they are intended to put the city out in front of the event. Remember, an early response is critical, even if at first is little more than an acknowledgement that an event has occurred. You can add details as they become available, but it's important you establish yourself as the go-to source for credible information relating to the event. Whatever the message, it must be focused and targeted directly at the points you're trying to convey to the media and the public. Less is sometimes more. Don't risk letting the message get bogged down with extraneous points that do not need to be part of the story and could detract from your main message.

2. DETERMINE COMMUNICATIONS VEHICLES

While you are determining the content of your messages, you also must give thought to how you'll deliver the information to the media and the public. Determine the vehicles you'll use, whether that means releasing written statements, issuing news releases or holding news conferences – or a combination of all three. Consider setting up a special page or section on the city's website to carry the latest updates. That way, the public will always know where to find the most current information.

3. COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN

Whatever communications vehicles you choose, get information to reporters quickly, and be considerate of deadlines when possible. We live in a 24/7 news cycle. In a crisis, the news coverage will be continuous and reporters will have an insatiable thirst for details – anything they can report as "new" information. Provide them with steady updates. Establish yourself as the key source for the flow of

credible information, and maintain your credibility by following through with what you promise to reporters. If you promise a statement by 3 p.m., make sure the statement is ready; if you promise a reporter you'll get back to her with a specific detail, be sure to track down that piece of information and get it to her quickly; if you announce a 10:30 a.m. news conference, make sure it begins as close to that time as possible. That's especially important for television coverage, as television news organizations are likely to cover news conferences live during a crisis and will promote the fact that the public can tune in to get the latest. An unexplained delay will raise questions and the suspicions of reporters and the public that "something's up."

4. BE PREPARED BEFORE TALKING WITH THE MEDIA

Clarify the process that was previously established when you prepared for how messages would be approved and delivered. Have your messages and any related materials written down. Practice by bouncing the messaging off the various team members to get different perspectives on whether changes are needed. If a statement is to be delivered in person, have your spokesperson practice delivering the message, and consider questions that might be asked by reporters. If you have time, consider holding a mock news conference with crisis team members acting as reporters. Make sure the spokesperson is well-prepared before he or she goes before the microphones and cameras.

5. ANSWER THE QUESTIONS THAT YOU CAN

Here is a key rule for dealing with the media: Never say, "No comment." A "no comment" is usually equated with guilt or trying to hide something. Instead, use a non-committal response such as, "I'd like to answer your question, but I don't have enough facts to answer it at this point." If you know the answer, but for whatever reason you cannot provide it, it is appropriate to say: "I'm sure you can appreciate the sensitivity of the information you are requesting and understand I am not at liberty to speak about it. What I can tell you is ..." Even if your response doesn't convey specific information or answer the question that was asked, it still better than "no comment."

Do not speculate if you're asked a question to which you don't know the answer. Instead tell the reporter you will find out and get back to him or her. Be realistic in setting response timelines. Then make sure to follow through on your promise. Also, never panic if you're surprised by a reporter. Always keep your cool and take charge. If you're asked a negative question, always rephrase it to a positive; restate the underlying concern, and balance the bad news with a positive, solution-oriented message.

Here's an example of making a statement when there isn't a lot of information available:

"Our Police Department is committed to serving and protecting the people of this community. We take allegations of this sort very seriously and we have ordered a full review of this incident. As this is an ongoing investigation, we cannot make any further comments, but will keep the public aware of any developments."

6. ANSWER QUESTIONS, BUT DON'T GO OFF THE RECORD

Treat all reporters equally. When communicating with reporters individually, give the same information to each, and return calls in the order they were received. Depending on the circumstances, the city and the media may best be served by setting up news conferences at regular intervals throughout the day.

Do not have an “off-the-record” conversation with a reporter. Don’t presume that just because a camera or tape recorder is shut off, your comments won’t be used. Never say anything that you would not be comfortable seeing in the morning paper or hearing on the news.

Sometimes you may wish to go “on background,” which is when a reporter is provided information from a source with an agreement on how the information can be used. Sometimes the agreement will allow publication of the information but can only be attributed to general sources such as “city officials.” These briefings can be arranged in groups or individually. Keep in mind, however, that some reporters may have a different understanding of what “on background” means, so make sure you spell out carefully how the information can or cannot be used. And keep this in mind: There’s always a risk that a reporter could still attribute the information to you, despite your agreement (there may be a miscommunication, for example.). So tread very carefully here, and only go “on background” if it’s absolutely necessary.

7. NEGOTIATE THE TERMS BEFORE AN INTERVIEW

Before you agree to an interview, especially a one-on-one, be sure to do a pre-interview with the reporter(s). Pre-negotiate the questions you can answer and what you don’t want to be asked. Avoid being put in a spot where you are unable to answer questions and put in a negative situation that will distract from your coordinated response plan. Make sure you limit the interview to no more than 20-30 minutes. After that, even the best-trained interviewee begins to wilt.

8. KEEP THESE TIPS IN MIND FOR INTERVIEWS

- Speak in simple terms: How would you explain this to your 12-year-old neighbor?
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. The reporter may understand what it means, but the citizen reading your quote or seeing your interview on the news may not.
- Use examples and anecdotes to explain complicated issues.
- Make it personal. Be human.
- Even if you are delivering the same message that you have delivered to other reporters a dozen times before, make it sound like the first time. Sound authentic, rather than as if you are spouting scripted comments.
- Do not be afraid to say, “I don’t know.” Promise to find out the information and get back to the reporter.
- If it’s a print interview, feel free to put your notes in front of you.
- For television interviews, it’s okay to ask for a “do-over” if you misspoke or tripped over your words. Just ask: Can I answer that again?

9. CORRECT ERRORS AND MISINFORMATION

If a reporter puts out an erroneous story, talk with the reporter individually and not in front of his or her colleagues. That will prevent embarrassment and make it easier to get an appropriate correction or get the information fixed in a follow-up story. If you don’t get satisfaction from the reporter, decide how important the error was. If it warrants a correction or change, contact the reporter’s direct supervisor. If that person refuses to issue a correction, strongly consider going higher up the chain. Contact the newspaper’s managing editor, or the television station’s news director or station director. If the error is libelous or slanderous, copy the media outlet’s outside legal counsel on any correspondence.

Even if the mistake doesn't generate a separate correction, the news organization may correct the information in a follow-up story, and be more careful in the future.

10. REMEMBER THE BOTTOM LINE

Remember: It's important to demonstrate that the city is on top of the situation by providing frequent updates, even when there is little new to report. Tell the public what the matter is, and what you're doing to handle it. Tell residents what they need to do, if anything. Communicate early and communicate often. Be in charge.