

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

When a crisis happens, be ready to respond to questions from the news media and the public. Failure to address concerns and questions quickly, accurately, and completely can lead to the perception that your agency is not qualified to respond and that you do not care about your community.

WHY WE DO IT

Effective crisis communication with the public through the media grants many long- and short-term benefits, including:

- Getting important information to the public when they need it,
- Creating and/or enhancing response organization authority and credibility,
- Calming public fear and anger,
- Enhancing control over media “spin”, and
- Providing damage control for agency image.

Ineffective crisis communication can result in many negative consequences, including fatalities, injuries, and property loss.

Information the Media Will Want during a Crisis

The cause – The why, which is usually the last of the W’s (who, what, when, where, why) to become known, but the first question asked. Do not speculate but provide as much accurate information you can at the time.

Eyewitnesses or first responders to the scene – Eyewitness reports add color and first-hand knowledge to an event. It makes everyday people into heroes and on-the-scene observers. Other information the news media will want includes:

- Who called the alarm
- How many injured/killed
- Nature of injuries, where injured are receiving care, where the dead are being taken
- If anyone of prominence is among the dead or injured
- Circumstances surrounding the escape of survivors or why the dead could not escape
- How many affected
- How many response workers
- What agencies are involved
- Who’s in charge
- Extent of event
- Who first arrived to help
- What they saw on arrival
- Any indication/warning/advance notice that the emergency was about to happen
- Could this have been prevented

Extent of response to the incident –

- How many persons, pieces of equipment, and departments responded
- How the situation is handled
- Assistance by any prominent persons

- Acts of heroism
- What is being done to safeguard the community from a recurrence
- Who is paying for what
- Statistics to identify the scope of the crisis or event

Following the Crisis

Encourage media outlets to continue to send out the recovery message after an event:

- To direct citizens to assistance, basic necessities, and comfort after an emergency
- To help maintain calm, stability, and community cohesiveness

MAKE A PLAN

No crisis communication effort will be successful without a clear and comprehensive plan. Make sure the plan addresses how information is gathered and verified; how the Joint Information System is utilized; how and when to activate a Joint Information Center; how to craft a message; how to work with special needs populations; and how to work with the media.

WHEN YOU CAN'T SAY ANYTHING

In some circumstances, information must be withheld from the public. Classified information, details of law enforcement investigations, private medical reports, and some personal data cannot be discussed. If these issues arise, explain why the information cannot be discussed and then bridge back to key messages. Avoid talking about cause, blame, and costs. These issues can be addressed following the crisis.

HOW TO SAY IT

- Determine what information and messages you want to communicate, and know what you do not want to say or what you cannot discuss.
- Be clear and concise – don't ramble. Keep your statements short. Phrase things so that a 12-year-old could understand.
- Stick to the facts and key messages.
- If you don't know, say so. Never lie.
- Never speculate ("what if" questions). Speculation can lead to the perception that the crisis is much more severe than it is.
- Be first with the information – slow release of verified information will lead the media to other, possibly less credible, sources.
- Be empathetic and reassuring – even a small crisis can be devastating to those involved.
- Stay positive yet realistic – public confidence in the response effort is critical.
- Communicate technical details clearly – avoid jargon and acronyms; have visuals such as maps or models available for enhanced explanations.
- Do not repeat negative words from questions.
- Speak only about your agency and what it is doing.
- Off the record? No such thing.

ELECTED OFFICIALS & POLICY MAKERS

Most crises will garner the attention of local, state, and federal elected and appointed officials. Keeping these individuals informed about the situation can reduce criticism, minimize uninformed interference and sometimes result in additional resources being brought to help to resolve the problem. Be sure to provide quick responses to all government inquiries, with assurances of full cooperation. One caution, though – work to avoid any signs of political favoritism that could cause damage to agency image. Ideally, politics should have no place in responding to a crisis.

KEY MESSAGES - WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE

When dealing with the media during a crisis, it is often easy to forget that the people we are actually trying to reach are the members of the public. When developing statements about the crisis, remember that you have multiple audiences:

- Community and/or nation
- Special populations, including non-English speaking, special needs, etc.
- Workers responding to the incident and their families
- Members of your organization
- Other stakeholders
- Media

KEY MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Any statement should consist of no more than three or four key messages you want to convey to the public. In the initial stages of a crisis, information about health and safety should constitute the primary message. Other key messages should have information to calm the public, such as what is being done to respond and recover from the crisis, commitment to solving the problem, levels of expertise involved, and statements of concern. Try to phrase your key messages in 10- to 12-word sound bites for ease of understanding.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION MESSAGE TRIANGLE



Immediately following a crisis, the public will want to know three things:

What happened? These facts should be released as soon as the information is confirmed. Updates should be frequent and numerous.

What does it mean to me? Place yourself in the public's shoes. Provide people with information to enhance their safety and address potential concerns they may have. Fear of the unknown is greater than

MEDIA CRISIS COVERAGE CYCLE

Most crises tend to follow a cycle. Media coverage will mirror this cycle in the form of news content and issues covered. Know these phases and anticipate the questions/stories the media will pursue.

- **Breaking Phase**—Media arrives on scene requiring access and information; basic coverage of who, what, when, where, why and how.
- **Sustaining Phase**—Media attention grows, use of subject matter experts to fill immediate information void.
- **Recovery Phase**—Crisis is defined, questions on cause, problems, and blame surface. A reduction in media interest may occur.
- **Anniversary Phase**—Spike in interest, questions on current status or lessons learned.

fear of the facts.

What are you doing about it? The public wants to get “back to normal” as soon as possible. Tell people what you are doing to control the situation and return order. Explain how the process will work, how long it could take, and what can be expected.

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER