

Crisis Communication for Managers

By William Gowan – NEMO Consultant

Following are guidelines that will assist Crisis Communication Managers, Agency representatives and spokes person preparing for that inevitable crisis/disaster. This annex should be used as the reference source and training manual before the press is faced.

Extreme care has to be given and considered when facing the media before, during and after a disaster. What is said, how it is said, and the context in which it is said can all deliver a message to the public that was unintended.

When dealing with the press always consider carefully your choice of words.

Example: “Emergency Operation Center” is a stronger, darker more serious term than an “Incident Command Center”. They are exactly the same entity.

When being interviewed during a crisis situation appear clam.

If the media event is for television delivery chose your background to convey the message that you want. Sitting in your office during an emergency may not present the image of a manager that is down in the trenches doing everything that he/she can possibly do overcome the situation. The scope of this section is general and intended to provide limited guidance to the reader.

The function of Crisis Communication is to paint the best possible picture for the media and the general public. It is not to paint a picture that is unrealistic or untrue.

To present an accurate picture and an image that all possible situations, are being or have been addressed, it is advantageous to have a planning document on which to build a response. The existence of a comprehensive document that details that the crisis/disaster situation was anticipated, and a detailed response was planned for, will allow the crisis/disaster to be presented in a positive light. “We anticipated it, we planned for it and we committed the time and the resources available to address the crisis/disaster.” In essence we did our job and we did it well.

The planning document will be the rock upon which Crisis Communication Managers will build a response. Without a solid planning document the situation becomes reactive instead of proactive. It is always desirable to be in a proactive position as opposed to a reactive one.

When it is proactive you are in charge.
When it is reactive, events are in charge.

The government/Agency/department/individual will show that all possible actions were taken to avoid the present crisis/disaster. If the crisis/disaster was beyond the control of the government/Agency/department/individual, that serious planning considerations were given on how to respond to the crisis/disaster if and when it occurred.

Crisis/Disaster Communication without a supporting plan is a toothless tiger.

Introduction

The following elements are suggestive in nature and need to be tailored to the crisis/disaster situation.

The Crisis Communication Team

This team is essential to identify communication actions to be taken. The Crisis Communication Team is necessary to provide the depth of background that will be required of the presenter, advise of possible questions, summarize the points that need to be stressed, keep the presenter focus and on message. The message is that we anticipated, planned for and responded with the resources that were available.

Management and Resources

The key pitfalls will be **management** of the crisis and **resources**.

Was or is the crisis/disaster being managed correctly?

Were/are the necessary resources available to address the crisis/disaster?

Question of Management:

Unless the management is incompetent it is always possible to frame the response in terms of the long hours worked, time away from family, dedication to job, community and country.

If the management is incompetent there is a responsibility to those that are server to replace the management. Replace the management and announce the new management and the virtues of the new management. Do not indicate clear incompetence of the departing management. If departing management is incompetent it will reflect on the appointing/employing party.

Departing management should be given a soft out. Words like overworked, health, family affairs and the crisis were emotionally overwhelming should be considered. Inform management of the change before it is made public.

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Question of Resources:

Allocation of resources is management decision; constraints on available resources are always a fact of life. Resource constraint is no where more evident in the planning process.

When the question of resource allocation comes to the forefront it will be time to take responsibility for past decisions. Every resource allocation that has been made over the past five years will come into question. Have examples of difficult resource allocations that had to be made in the past. "I had to decide on hiring extra policemen or building that extra shelter". "We had to decide if a new fire truck would save more lives or reinforcing the school."

Establishing the Crisis/Disaster Communication Team

Individuals will be needed to support the message. Specialist from affected entities (medical, hospitality, transportation, works, etc.) will need to be identified to support a strong message. Competent people, who can answer telephones, and if required escort media, will need to be organized. Having calls from the media answered promptly is essential. They will need to be provided with a script. A statement should be something such as: *"Facts are still being gathered but there will be a press conference before 4:00, give me your name and number and I will call you back to let you know when"*.

One of the first responsibilities of the Crisis Communication Team should be to determine the appropriate positioning or message to address the emergency.

The Message

The first and foremost goal of the Crisis Communication Team is protecting the integrity, reputation and image of Saint Lucia. The message for internal audience will be different from that of the external audience.

The focus of the internal message is that the government has prepared for and is executing a pre-planned response to aid the communities and the individuals of the country in this time of crisis/disaster. Outline the steps that are being taken.

The external message is intended to protect the economic integrity of the country. "Yes we have had a crisis/disaster and we are prepared to deal with it. Detail a positive message for the entity that is being protected...the tourist industry, agriculture, etc.

Keep in mind that people tend to remember what they hear first and last.

Designated Spokesperson

One individual should be designated as the primary spokesperson, make official statements and answer media questions throughout the crisis/disaster.

A backup to the designated spokesperson should also be identified to fill the position in the event that the primary spokesperson is unavailable.

In addition to the primary spokesperson, and the backup spokesperson, individuals who will serve as technical experts or advisors should be designated. These resources might include a financial expert, an engineer, a leader in the community or anyone deemed necessary during a specific kind of crisis/disaster. There should be an authority or technical expert, as required, to supplement the knowledge of the spokesperson.

Criteria for the spokesperson, backup spokesperson and crisis communication expert is:

Spokesperson is Comfortable in front of a TV camera and with reporters. Preferably, skilled in handling media, skilled in directing responses to another topic, skilled in identifying key points, able to speak without using jargon, respectful of the role of the reporter, knowledgeable about the organization and the crisis at hand, able to establish credibility with the media, able to project confidence to the audience, suitable in regard to diction, appearance and charisma, sincere, straightforward and believable, accessible to the media and to internal communications personnel who will facilitate media interviews, able to remain calm in stressful situations.

In addition to the designated spokesperson and backup, it can be anticipated that other parties might be involved in the crisis; police, fire department, health officials, etc., will also have a spokesperson. It is important to obtain the identity of that individual as early as possible so all statements and contacts with the media can be coordinated between the two individuals and their organizations/interests whenever possible. If the decision is made to centralize all responses it should be noted and all other possible outlets informed that all press inquiries and interviews will be directed to the Crisis/Disaster Spokesperson.

Media Policies and Procedures

Select a place to be used as a media center. It should be some distance from offices of the Crisis Communication Team, and Spokesperson to ensure that media are not in the middle of the action if they happen to take the wrong turn or have to pass by those offices or areas on the way to the restrooms. If there is a visual (a fire or rescue operation) don't make the media center in such a remote site that they can't see what is going on because they may not show up and if they do you will lose their confidence and it may appear that you are hiding something.

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The Crisis Communications Team will decide locations for interviews and press briefings

Reporters may ask to speak to staff that are involved with or have been affected by the crisis/disaster. It is best to restrict all interviews to the primary spokesperson, back-up spokesperson or technical expert. Controlling the interview process is key to managing the crisis/disaster.

However, remember that reporters have the right to interview anyone they want to and if they don't get the answers they want from you they will get them somewhere. They are all after the scoop. They all want a different angle than the reporter standing next to them. They will try for that scoop with you. If the possibility is there to provide them with what they want, consider it very carefully. All media should be treated equally. What is given to one (such as access to an area effected by the crisis) should be available to all media.

Practicing Tough Questions

A crisis situation is always difficult when dealing with the media. Therefore, tough questions and rehearsals are necessary to help the spokesperson prepare.

It is important, at the onset of the crisis/disaster, that the spokesperson, backup and advisors spend some time rehearsing prepared statements and answers to possible "tough" questions that may be asked by reporters. If possible, similar rehearsals should be conducted prior to each media interview, briefing or news conference. It is also important to anticipate and practice new questions as the story evolves.

It is better to over-prepare than to be surprised by the depth of questioning by the media. Be tough and be prepared.

The Communications/Public Relations staff should prepare questions and answers for the practice sessions. These questions and answers should be for internal use only and not for distribution outside the organization.

Don't volunteer information unless it is a point in your favor.

Don't talk off the record.

Prepared Statements

If you don't communicate immediately, you lose your greatest opportunity to control events. (Following is a fill-in the blanks news release that can be used with little or no preparation as your first news release). Your first news release should include at a minimum the who, what, when and where of the situation.

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You must give the facts that have been gathered from reliable sources and confirmed. Do not over reach and do not speculate. There is a limit to the role of the spokesperson. To exceed that limit is a mistake. If you do nothing more than show concern for the public and for your employees in your first press interaction, you are already on the right track. You must have a prepared statement on hand that can be used to make an initial general response.

As the crisis progresses and new information and facts become available, it is also advisable to develop prepared statements to be made by the spokesperson at the onset of any media interview, briefing or news conference.

These prepared statements also can be read over the telephone to reporters who call to request information but are not represented at news conferences or briefings. The statement can also be sent by FAX or e-mail upon request. In the case of messages for external consumption make sure that they are put out early. International news media lose interest if the initial offering is professional, timely and informative. There is no need to send anyone if they are going to receive an accurate and timely picture direct from the source. Don't let the external media smell a story. If they come they will greatly control the way the event is display to the outside world.

Some will content that the more pathetic we look the more outside aid will be received. The small amount of additional outside aid that will is received will not outweigh the long-term damage to the image of the country and a tourist industry that is dependent on an image of a gentile Caribbean Island.

Sample News Release

Incident

A _____ at _____ involving _____ occurred today at _____. The incident is under investigation and more information is forthcoming.

A (what happened) at (location) involving (who) occurred today at (time). The incident is under investigation and more information is forthcoming.

Natural Disaster

At (time) the Island of Saint Lucia was struck by (event) The (describe the event). At present the per-planned responses for this event have been executed. Initial damage assessments are

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underway. We expect to have our first statistical information by (time) At that time more information will be made available.

Contact Log

A log should be established to record all telephone calls from the media or other parties inquiring about the crisis. This will help to ensure that the many callbacks required are not overlooked. It will also assist in the post-crisis/disaster analysis.

The contact log should contain the following information:

Date | Name of caller | Questions(s) asked | Telephone number
 Person responsible for response | Additional follow-up needs

Speaker Presentations

CHECKLIST OF DO'S AND DON'TS

The Do's ... When preparing to give a speech,

- Use a full script with LARGE TYPE for easy reading.
- Leave wide margin for notes to yourself.
- Leave pages unstapled for easier handling at podium.
- Highlight and mark your script to guide your delivery.
- Time your presentation to fit the program schedule of the group you will address.
- Practice: Read it aloud using a mirror and tape recorder until it sounds like you are talking, not reading.
- Be sure you have the facts about your audience-size, contact person's name, facility, etc.
- Based on your audience and your presentation, determine what, if any, equipment you will use. If you are not familiar with the equipment, contact the Communications Department to arrange a briefing on how to use slide projectors, video players, or overhead equipment.

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When you arrive at your engagement,

- Be at least 15 minutes early.
- Check equipment in advance if possible.
- Slides:
 - Be sure slides are in correct order and clearly focused.
 - Be sure slide advance mechanism is convenient to you where you are speaking, or arrange for someone else to advance the slides.
 - Check the lighting in the room to be sure the slides will be visible to the audience.
 - Check microphone (whether it is free standing or lavalier) before beginning-
"Can you hear me?"
 - Check lighting to podium to be sure you can read.
- Overhead Transparencies:
 - Be sure the type of room and size of crowd are appropriate for the use of overhead equipment.
 - Be sure the words/graphics are large enough for people to read.
 - Check to be sure you are situated correctly in the room with the overhead projector, screen, microphone and audience.

When you are speaking,

- Stand erect and direct voice toward audience.
- Speak loudly, slowly and distinctly.
- Establish eye contact (or appear to do so) with audience from time to time.
- Stay within the allotted presentation time.
- When you are answering questions,
- Remain friendly, cool-headed and confident.
- Answer only the questions asked and do so as succinctly and clearly as possible.

- Remember that you do not always have to know everything. You can say "I will have to check that out for you--please see me after the meeting."
- Avoid allowing one person to dominate the questions by moving on: "Thank you for your interest. I'll be glad to talk to you about your concerns after the meeting. Right now let's see if anyone else has questions for the group."
- When you are finished with your presentation,
- Remain long enough to give individuals an opportunity to talk with you.
- See to it that arrangements are made for distributing information materials to the group, if requested/appropriate.

The Don'ts: When preparing to give a speech

- When preparing to give a speech,
- Assume that you can "wing it"-- almost no one can.
- Decide you are better "off the cuff"--almost no one is.
- Use type that is too small to read with a dim light and margins too narrow for notes.
- Leave too little time to practice adequately.
- When you arrive at your engagement,
- Be late.
- Forget the group's contact person's name.
- Fail to check your equipment.
- When you are speaking
- Mumble your remarks to the podium.
- Speak to loudly into the microphone.
- Allow yourself to wander away from your prepared text.
- Tell an unprepared anecdote or joke, or make "top of mind" remarks.
- Speak longer than time allotted.

- When you are answering questions,
- Become defensive or emotional.
- Assume that tough questions are personal.
- Answer more than the question itself.
- Allow one person to dominate the question period.

Handling Media Interviews

Tips and Guidelines: How to prepare for Broadcast Interviews

- Prepare "talking paper" on primary points you want to make.
- Anticipate questions--prepare responses.
- Practice answering questions.
- Cover controversial areas ahead of time.
- Know who will be interviewing you, if possible.
- Determine how much time is available.
- Audiences often remember impressions, not facts.

Do's and Don'ts During the Interview process

- Do build bridges.
- Do use specifics.
- Do use analogies.
- Do use contrasts, comparisons.
- Do be enthusiastic/animated.
- Do be your casual likable self.
- Do be a listener.
- Do be cool.

- Do be correct.

If you don't have the answer or can't answer, do admit it and move on to another topic.

Don't fall for that "A or B" dilemma.

- Don't accept "what if" questions.
- Don't accept "laundry list" questions.
- Don't go off the record.
- Don't think you have to answer every question.
- Don't speak for someone else --beware of the absent-party trap. How To Handle Yourself During A TV Talk Show Interview
- Talk "over " lavalier microphone.
- Audio check-- use regular voice.
- If makeup is offered, use it.
- Sit far back in the chair, back erect...but lean forward to appear enthusiastic and force yourself to use hands.
- Remember... TV will frame your face--be calm, use high hand gestures, if possible.
- Keep eyes on interviewer-- not on camera.
- Smile, be friendly.

Tips On Appearance

- Avoid wearing pronounced stripes, checks or small patterns.
- Grey, brown, blue or mixed colored suits/dresses are best.
- Grey, light-blue, off-white or pastel shirts or blouses are best.
- Avoid having hair cut right before interview.

How To Respond During A Newspaper Interview

- Obtain advanced knowledge of interview topics.

- Make sure you are prepared in detail; print reporters are often more knowledgeable than broadcast reporters and may ask more detailed questions.
- Begin the interview by making your point in statement by making your major points in statement form.
- Try to maintain control of the interview.
- Don't let reporter wear you down.
- Set a time limit in advance.
- Don't let so relaxed that you say something you wish you hadn't.
- Avoid jargon or professional expressions.
- Reporter may repeat self in different ways to gain information you may no want to give.
- Don't answer inappropriate questions; simply say it is "not an appropriate topic for you to address at this time," or "it's proprietary" for example.
- Be prepared for interruptions with questions...it is legitimate for reporters to do that.
- Do not speak "off the record."
- Remember, the interview lasts as long as a reporter is there.

After The Interview

- You can ask to check technical points, but do not ask to see advance copy of the story.
- Never try to go over reporter's head to stop an interview