

Becoming a Crisis Manager: Whether You Want to or Not!

by Karen Friedman

Not too long ago, a nasty Valentine's Day storm grounded hundreds of flights across the country, delaying and stranding tens of thousands of passengers. While many waited it out in the comfort of heated airports outfitted with shops and Internet access, hundreds of Jet Blue travelers including small children were trapped on planes at New York City's JFK airport with no food, overflowing toilets and little, if any information for more than 10 hours. In fact, CNN reported that parents on these planes were ripping up tee shirts to make diapers for their babies.

While CEO David Neeleman said he was "humiliated and mortified" by the meltdown that eventually led to a passenger bill of rights, the pressing issue is how can organizations protect their reputation in an era of blogs, chat rooms and 24/7 news coverage that has the power to spread rumors at lightning speed and tarnish your reputation worldwide.

For starters, no matter how sophisticated your written crisis plan may be, it is not a one size fits all and cannot predict what people might feel in different situations—panic, anger, frustration, disbelief or fear. Handling an escalating situation is about doing the right thing, which can be ac-

complished by asking two simple questions you will be hard pressed to find in a book.

1. **What is the right thing to do?**
2. **If I were my listener, how would I feel?**

To address those questions, think about the opportunity. Is there opportunity to inform people, protect them, contain panic or correct misinformation?

Regardless of how well prepared you think you are, you're not. Events can easily spiral out of control and suddenly you find yourself in the role of crisis chief. The key is to help reporters tell your story so you clearly define the information and make the media your mouthpiece to the public. That means taking off your professional hat and putting on your personal cap so you think like your audience in order to better understand how the story will be covered, what questions will be asked and what you can do to manage the madness.

That's why it's important to understand where the story is. You are not the story. Stories are about victims, perceived victims or people who are affected by what's happening, which is why



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Lessons Learned From a Career in Television News

Offer basic information to reduce the chance of speculation and inaccurate information being reported to the public.

- Show compassion and concern for the people involved.
- Never speculate. If the interviewer says something that is not factual, correct the information.
- Report your own bad news. If you think the media might find out about something that happened, go to them first so you can control the information.
- Admit mistakes. If you made a mistake, say so. Explain why that mistake occurred and what you are doing to fix the problem.
- Stay “on the record.” If you don’t want something reported, then don’t discuss it.
- Be Real. People want to relate to you. No one wants to hear from a robot who is so “on message” or that he/she never smiles or shows emotion.
- Do not be offensive, argumentative, confrontational or tell the reporter how to do their job. You should provide information to guide them, but ultimately, they will write the story.
- Remember, the reporter does not work for you.

it’s so important to communicate.

Even if you have nothing to say, say something. For example, I remember covering a fire that left hundreds of elderly people homeless in

the cold night air. The landlord did everything right including providing free food and shelter at other locations, but it was never reported. When he asked me why the media ignored that part of the story, I explained we didn’t know about it. He said that’s because company lawyers told them not to talk.

TALK EARLY AND OFTEN

The media will report the story with or without you. But in the absence of information, they will fill it with what’s available, which can result in inaccuracies. Furthermore, the story will likely be reported from the victim’s standpoint, which can create the perception that the company is uncaring or guilty of wrongdoing.

BE AVAILABLE

When respected journalist Mike Wallace of TV’s “60 Minutes” was asked what he would do if he were at a company that got a call from his news show, he said “If I were running a company that got a call from ‘60 Minutes,’ I’d say come in. Ask me anything you want.” While you can’t give journalists unescorted access to your business, Wallace’s message is dead on. If you get a phone call, return it. If you’re asked a question, answer it. If you’re not available, provide someone who can meet a reporter’s deadline. If you receive an e-mail, respond. By being available, you create an environment of openness and honesty.

MANAGE THE MESSAGE

By being proactive, you also make the reporter’s job easier by helping them report correct information quickly so they don’t have to spend hours trying to track you down. But it’s also critical to manage your message, which means rather than just responding to questions, determine what you want to say in advance and look for opportunities to weave those messages into your responses. Additionally, it’s important to keep other audiences including employees, vendors and stake-

holders in the loop so they hear the news from you directly.

TALK, DON'T WRITE

It may be easier to e-mail than to pick up the phone, but e-mail can be impersonal and create the impression that you are hiding something by not permitting questions. Even if you fear being misquoted, most reporters can detect sincerity, empathy, compassion or a level of concern when they hear your voice.

And by all means, try not to ask reporters to provide lists of questions in advance especially when a story is unfolding. What they want to know won't change that much from story to story:

- **What happened?**
- **When did it happen?**
- **How did it happen?**
- **How many people are affected?**
- **Was anyone hurt?**
- **What are you doing to correct the problem?**
- **How will you prevent it in the future?**

STATE THE OBVIOUS

Even if a reporter has written about your business before, don't assume they understand your issues this time around. If you want them to know something, tell them.

Reporters are often sent to stories because

they're available or nearby. On the way, they might gather information from other news reports or sources. And don't kid yourself; reporters from competing newsrooms will share information with each other at the scene of a story. It's up to you to make sure they understand what you're saying.

WHEN TO CORRECT MISTAKES

If the reporter has made a significant mistake, call and correct it so it isn't repeated every time a story is printed or broadcast. However, there is a difference between correcting information that might impact the public and calling to complain just because you don't like the tone of the story. Think about other ways to turn a negative report into something more positive.

For example, recently a reporter aired a scathing story about broken security cameras at one of this country's busiest airports. The report was loaded with inaccuracies, but did not threaten public safety. Instead of complaining, public relations experts called the number one local television station in town and offered them an exclusive behind the scenes look at airport security. It was a positive story watched by a much larger audience.

Finally, if you don't know the answer, say so and stop talking. The only person that should be putting words in your mouth is you! **PRN**

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