

NEVER SAY NO COMMENT

By Karen Friedman

The reporters gathered at the medical center after hearing that a patient might have suffered a severe reaction to a popular product that was recently pulled from the shelves. They had called the medical director and the public relations manager, but their phone calls were not being returned. No one would meet them in the lobby and the security guard was rather rude.

While they had very little information, it was 11:45 a.m., just fifteen minutes before the noon news aired and the broadcast journalists would be going LIVE. Radio reporters were already reporting the story and competitive print reporters pointed out that this same pharmaceutical company recently suspended shipments of another product after it was linked to complications in patients.

As reporters stood outside drinking coffee and swapping stories in the light rain, they began sharing information and speculating about what was happening at a prestigious company that had recently been linked to other highly publicized product problems. One of the reporters claimed an inside source confirmed the company knew this particular product might be unsafe, but continued to sell it anyway.

Media Messaging

Moments later, the first report was broadcast:

“It appears a patient here at the ABC Medical Center on Wisconsin Street may be seriously ill after taking a product that was recently pulled from the shelves. Look at the expiration date on this box. While the product is still good, sources say the XYZ pharmaceutical company that makes the product has known for months that it might be unsafe before the end of its expiration period. This is the same company that recently pulled another product off the shelf.

The pharmaceutical company will not comment and phone calls are not being returned. Security is also keeping reporters away from the entrance to the facility so there has been no contact with the family of the patient. As soon as any additional information becomes available, it will be broadcast LIVE.”

Creating Credibility

Unfair reporting? Inaccurate statements? Speculation? It is very easy to blame the media for negative reporting and sometimes that blame is justified. However, in this case, the real blame lies with the ABC Medical Center and the XYZ pharmaceutical company for doing nothing to control the flow of information. How a company responds often drives what the media reports.

When a story breaks, reporters will report that story with or without the help of the company. Often, it is about being first. The reporter will set the scene, tell the public what has been learned even if the information is sketchy. The details will follow. Instead of shutting reporters out and opening the door to speculation and inaccurate reporting, savvy companies understand the media can be their greatest ally. In a product recall case, it is most important to

minimize incorrect information by providing timely accurate information. Medical experts should be available to explain the medical impact by telling patients what is being done and how their daily lives will be affected.

Through the media, companies can minimize mistakes and reach people very quickly. By offering accurate and available information, the company appears responsive, credible, concerned, and helpful to a reporter who simply wants information to build a story. Otherwise, that reporter will just try to fill time. Sometimes that results in rumor becoming fact that isn't true. Unfortunately, even if the mis-statement is corrected, the damaging information has already been reported.

It is crucial to respond quickly even if there is little to say. When a company does not respond to the media, reporters wonder if the company has something to hide. They tend to take the word of inside sources, but the source might not always be in the know. Make no mistake about it, no matter how hard a reporter tries to be objective, their perception and attitude is reflected in their report. Therefore, if the company cannot release any information, management should take control of the story by explaining why the company can't release details. By offering an explanation, the company appears responsive and cooperative even if it does not really have anything pertinent to share.

Crisis Management 101

During a crisis, keep these goals in mind.

- Offer information to reduce the chance of speculation and inaccurate information being reported to the public.
- Never say "No Comment." Instead, tell reporters the situation is still being reviewed and you will have a statement as soon as you have all of the facts.
- Respond quickly to define and control public perception of how you are handling the crisis or the media will do it for you.
- 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, then go to them first. If they have to dig, they may decide you're guilty before you've had a chance to respond.
- Admit mistakes. If you made a mistake, say so. Explain why that mistake occurred and what you are doing to fix the problem. Don't be afraid to say I'm sorry.
- Stay "on the record." If you don't want something reported, then don't discuss it.

Taking the Reins

Let's consider how this story may have been reported if the ABC Medical Center or the XYZ Pharmaceutical Company followed these basic rules and made a brief statement to reporters. The broadcast follows:

“It is believed that a patient here at the ABC Medical Center became very ill after taking this popular product that was recently pulled from the shelves. However, just moments ago, an ABC Medical Center spokesperson said hospital officials are not sure why the patient took the product or if the product alone caused the patient to become ill. The spokesperson medical center doctors are not prescribing the product and the medical center is not stocking the product, so it is unclear how the patient obtained the product. Additionally, the patient had suffered a series of complications from an unrelated illness and was on other medication.

This pill is made by the XYZ pharmaceutical company, which has recently come under fire for a series of product recalls. The ABC Medical Center says doctors are trying to determine exactly what caused the patient, who is in critical, but stable condition to become ill.

The pharmaceutical company has declined interviews until it knows more about the situation. However, it did release a short statement saying that this unexplained problem might be “sheer coincidence.” The XYZ pharmaceutical company says when routine tests found that the product may lose its effectiveness before the expiration date, it was immediately recalled. The company says it has no knowledge of the product still being prescribed or sold.”

As crisis manager and author of *Getting Your Fifteen Minutes of Fame*, Edward Segal says, “How you handle a problem can have a direct impact on what the public thinks about you and your company or organization.” Segal goes on to explain that a survey conducted by the National Family Opinion concluded 95 percent of people feel more offended by a corporation that lies about a crisis than the crisis itself.

In this particular case which is fictional, but based on real cases, by providing even a little bit of information, the ABC Pharmaceutical Company can take control of the situation by appearing cooperative and concerned. Most companies fail in the early hours of a story because they fall into a reactive mode by letting the media define the story for them.

*Karen Friedman brings 20 years of on-air television experience to media and communications training and consulting. Her Philadelphia area company, **Karen Friedman Enterprises** prepares people to take advantage of media interviews, presentations and public appearances. Friedman is a frequent speaker and can be reached at: 610-292-9780 or through her website at www.karenfriedman.com*