

THE PRESS ISN'T THE PROBLEM

Managing Communications During a Media Frenzy

There is a comic strip that hangs in my office. The punch line says; *“If at first you don’t succeed, blame the media!”* I chuckle every time I see it because blaming the media is almost as all American as Monday night football and probably with good reason, right? After all, reporters dig and interfere. They hardly ever get the facts straight and they have this vulture mentality that requires them to crash all kinds of parties. They’re only interested in ratings, allow sales departments to drive story content and they don’t seem to care about ruining reputations. After all, if it bleeds, it leads as the saying goes.

I will not argue with the criticism. After all, as a veteran reporter I shoved many microphones in faces of grief and have overstayed my welcome in numerous neighborhoods. I can tell you from experience that even if there is nothing new to report; news editors and producers will insist that you look for new angles to keep the story alive. Take the O.J. Simpson media frenzy, the Monica Lewinsky story, or the Kobe Bryant sex scandal to name a few. You might think there is nothing else happening in the world.

While blaming the media may be a popular past time, let’s not overlook the real problem which happens to be attitude....not theirs, but yours. Regardless of media shortcomings, the media doesn’t create your crisis. They simply report it. For many, this might be considered synonymous. After all, if they didn’t report other people’s problems, incorrect facts, negative comments or hearsay, then someone’s credibility might not be damaged.

However, let’s approach this another way. If your seven year old child asked you for the car keys, would you throw them over and let him get behind the wheel? If your employee walked into your office and told you she was taking over, would you leave without a fight? Reporters are no different. They can only walk all over you if you let them. So, instead of complaining that they are ruining your reputation, that other companies received better coverage during negative events or that no one is reporting your side of the story, perhaps you should consider swimming with the tide instead of against it.

To do this, you need to understand a reporter’s job:

1. It is not their job to protect your reputation.
2. It is not their job to advance your career.
3. It is not their job to ask questions to help you say what you want to say.
4. It is not their job to write the story you think should be told.
5. It is not their job to include everything you told them

When a situation unexpectedly thrusts your company or event into the spotlight, stop focusing on what others are saying and start focusing on what you want to say. Figure out how you are going to solve the problem and then keep the media informed so they can be a resource that will keep the public accurately informed. Once you do this, you will be perceived as an advocate who is managing difficult circumstances instead of someone

who is just trying to defend their actions. If you want to further your own agenda, then you need to fuel reporter's tanks with high-octane information.

For starters, media motives are pretty predictable. They ask questions their readers, viewers or listeners would ask?

1. What happened?
2. Why did it happen?
3. Was anyone hurt?
4. Could this have been prevented?
5. Has this ever happened before?
6. What are you doing about it?
7. When will it be resolved?
8. How will you prevent this from happening in the future?
9. Did you know this was going to happen?
10. What would you like to say to the (those affected)?

If you think about these questions in advance, you will realize that you can quickly provide information and reassure audiences you are acting in their best interest. Organizations that understand this also understand the necessity of preparing in advance so when an adverse event occurs, they control the crisis instead of letting the crisis control them. Here are some suggestions:

Promptly Prepare

Even if you believe a problem will never become public, you need to fix it as fast as you can. You should develop talking points, tactics, strategies and designate a spokesperson. That way, if the media does call, you are prepared to answer questions.

Crisis Calls

If you anticipate aren't sure whether to call the media, ask yourself the following questions:

Is the public in jeopardy?

If the media reported this first, would public trust be jeopardized?

If you answer yes, you're playing a dangerous game of roulette. Consider notifying the media before they find out and contact you. This way, you are taking charge instead of going on the defensive.

Announce Action

About a year ago, I worked with a company that fell victim to a terrible fire. This company did everything right. They set up shelters, provided food and clothing, worked closely with authorities, provided long term temporary housing, and worked hand in hand with the American Red Cross. Yet, they never shared this with the media so it was never reported.

Manage Messages

Write down the three or four points you want to communicate and do it! When being interviewed, don't wait for the reporter to ask you a question to trigger those points.

Public Perception

Stories are almost always about people who are affected by something that happened. That's why victims are often seen at the top of a story following a response from the company that is usually aired or printed later in the story. If you are not perceived as concerned or acting in their best interest, the story will then become about you.

Last year, I worked with a well known company that was unexpectedly forced to slash healthcare benefits. Longtime employees were angry, skeptical and scared. It never became a news story because the company went out of its way to take care of those affected by the cuts. They provided training, education, opened hot lines, set up question and answer sessions, provided detailed brochures, offered other benefit packages and always kept the lines of communication open. Employees were still upset but didn't go public because they were reassured by a company acting in their best interest.

Truth Talks

Try to provide as much information as possible without breaching security or confidentiality issues. You want to stay in front of the information so you are delivering it and not responding to what others have learned. If you don't have an answer, simply say so, but offer to provide updates as information becomes available.

Unfortunately, when news breaks and there is a rush to cover it, inaccurate facts are inadvertently reported. If you don't contact a reporter to correct the information, you have no one to blame except yourself.

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