



Never Say "No Comment"

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PE Product Management

Television reporters gather at the local medical center after learning that a patient may have suffered a severe reaction to a popular medication that was pulled from store shelves. They have called the center's director and public relations manager, but their phone calls haven't been returned. No one will meet them in the lobby, and the security guard is keeping quiet.

Although they have very little information, the reporters will go live in minutes to broadcast the noon news. The story is already on the radio.

As the members of the media stand outside drinking coffee, they speculate about what is happening at the prestigious company that has recently been linked to another highly publicized product problem. Moments later, the first report is broadcast:

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

"At this time, the company hasn't returned our phone calls, and security is keeping reporters away from the entrance to the facility. As soon as additional information becomes available, we will broadcast it live."

Creating Credibility

Unfair reporting? Inaccurate statements? It is easy to blame the media for negative reporting. But, in this case, the real fault lies with ABC Medical Center and XYZ pharmaceutical company for doing nothing to control the flow of information. A company's response often drives what the media reports.

When news breaks, reporters have to tell the story, with or without the help of those concerned. They'll set the scene and tell the public what they've learned, even if the information is sketchy. Details will follow. Instead of shutting journalists out and opening the door to speculation and inaccurate reporting, savvy product managers will try to make the media their greatest allies.

Handling the Media

In a product recall case, it is imperative to minimize incorrect information by providing timely and accurate facts. Medical experts should be available to explain the impact on patients' daily lives and to let the public know what is being done.

Through such communication, product managers can reach the public quickly and minimize mistakes. By offering accurate data, the company appears responsive, credible, concerned, and helpful to reporters who simply want current news to build their stories. Otherwise, those reporters may fill the time with speculations that may have the force of facts. In that case, even if a misstatement is corrected, the damage is already done.

It is crucial to respond quickly so reporters won't think the company has something to hide. Even if the company cannot release any details, product managers must explain why. Simply by offering an explanation, the company appears responsive and cooperative. To avoid alienating the media-and the public-companies should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Offer information immediately to reduce the chance of speculation and reporting inaccurate information.
- Never say "No comment." Instead, tell reporters the situation is being reviewed and that they will have a statement as soon as the company has all the facts.
- Show compassion and concern for the people involved.
- Never speculate. If the interviewer says something that is not factual, correct the information.
- Report the company's bad news. If the media might find out about something that happened, go to them first. If they have to dig, they may find the company guilty before it's had a chance to respond.
- If the company made a mistake, say so. Explain why it occurred and what steps are being taken to fix it.
- Stay "on the record." If the company doesn't want something reported, don't discuss it.

Taking the Reins

Consider how reporters might have treated the ABC Medical Center story if the product manager at XYZ Pharma had followed those guidelines and made a brief statement to reporters:

"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 store shelves. However, just moments ago, a medical center spokesperson said hospital officials are not sure why the patient took the medication or if that alone caused his condition to worsen. They confirmed that medical center doctors are neither prescribing nor stocking the treatment, so it is unclear how the patient obtained it. The patient has also suffered a series of complications from an unrelated illness and is taking other medications.

"The medication in question is made by XYZ Pharmaceutical, which has recently had several products recalled. The ABC Medical Center says doctors are trying to determine exactly what caused the patient's current reaction.

"XYZ has declined interviews until it knows more about the situation. However, it did release a short statement saying that, when routine tests found this particular medication might lose its effectiveness before the expiration date, it was immediately recalled. The company says it is unaware if the product is still being prescribed or sold."

Edward Segal, crisis manager and author of *Getting Your Fifteen Minutes of Fame*, says, "How you handle a problem can have a direct impact on what the public thinks about you and your company." He cites a survey conducted by the National Family Opinion Center concluding that 95 percent of people are more offended by a corporation that lies about a crisis than they are about the crisis itself. Most companies fail in the early hours of a critical situation because they fall into a reactive mode and allow the media to define the story for them.