

When bad news is good news

In the first of a new in-depth series about the media, and how to plan for media handling in an emergency, **Anna Averkiou** looks at the need for an integrated crisis media strategy

WHETHER IT IS AN EARTHQUAKE, flood, famine, explosion, protest or terrorist attack, journalists will initially only see two words: "Breaking news!"

And, just like crisis response teams, they will be trying to find out what happened, while deploying their nearest team to the scene. They also know they have to be quick and efficient – but there the similarity ends. While the crisis response teams are assessing the disaster and deciding how to deal with it before bringing it under control, news teams will be racing to beat their rivals to report what is happening, the possible causes and to obtain eyewitness accounts.

This means that as part of any risk strategy, organisations also need to plan how to deal with the media and, with the rise of social media, even more public scrutiny. Until recently, there would be time to make assessments and then issue a statement, but today's 24/7 news culture is a hungry animal, demanding to be fed.

The first few hours are crucial to establish control of what is being said and it is vital to provide an official reaction or statement as soon as the news is out – if not before. If you ignore their calls while you are 'getting on with the job of dealing with the crisis', journalists will obtain comments from eyewitnesses, experts (possibly from rival organisations), former employees – indeed, anyone who might help them piece the story together.

The longer the delay, the more the risk of exposure to a whole new set of problems, which could not only hamper any immediate response operation, but could seriously damage your reputation and affect the long-term survival of your organisation.

Despite this, there is still an attitude of: "It won't happen to me – and even if it does, we'll deal with it and the media when it happens." A recent survey by Burston-Marsteller revealed that 35 per cent of organisations do not have a crisis plan – even though 45 per cent had experienced a crisis. And while the remainder may have a strategy – most will not have included robust crisis media planning. Too often, this is an aspect that can be added on after a plan has been drawn up and is the first to go when efficiencies are needed.



The way that BP's former CEO, Tony Hayward (pictured top right, talking to local fishermen in Venice, LA) handled the Deepwater Horizon oil spill is regarded by many as one of the worst in public relations history. Contrast this with how Chilean President Sebastian Piñera (above), a former journalist, dealt with the San José mining disaster – he not only dressed and sounded the part, but also ensured that journalists were looked after

David G Crawford / USGS; Alex Ibañez / Presidency of Chile

As far as risk consultant Andy Bulgin is concerned, this is a false economy: "Crisis media response is the linchpin of effective crisis management; it is not just about what you do, but how you communicate this in a way that maintains or enhances your reputation. Most companies now accept the importance of crisis media management, but few have developed truly effective controls – the possibility of unauthorised media comment from a distant part of a global supply chain remains a constant threat for many organisations."

Whatever you do, you can guarantee that when something happens, the media will find out. It is important to be accountable and be the primary source of information about what has happened and what you're doing about it.

So planning and understanding what journalists need are vital to effective crisis media management. Once all possible risks have been identified, it is not only necessary to have a strategy about how to deal with them, organisations must consider the impact they could have on their stakeholders and the general public and, as far as possible, plan ahead what can be said, who will say it, to who and how.

Think ahead and see things from the perspective of potential victims, their relatives, employees, customers, donors and other partners and official bodies. What would you want to know and how would the news be received?

Then work out the best channels of communication – both in the field and back at headquarters. This should include everything that you already use – both traditional and digital – as well as plans for holding press conferences. Include an emergency contact list for all staff. It is important to let your teams know what is happening – they should not find out via the media. Establish internal procedures for emergency alerts that include the people responsible for dealing with enquiries. You will also need up-to-date contact details for partners, local emergency services, local authorities and the media.

Your website will be the first place journalists look. Prepare in advance initial holding statements, press releases and web pages acknowledging the issue and that it is being investigated. Although you cannot know the details of any given crisis, these templates can be turned around at a moment's notice and set the parameters for what can and cannot be said. This might include personal information about victims, staff or internal discussions and emails while the facts are being established. These need to be regularly reviewed and new statements added for new potential risks.

It is advisable to provide media training for all the top management to ensure that they can deal with journalists' questions during interviews and press conferences. It is important to have the most senior person available – but not everyone has the right mix of confidence, reassurance and empathy – and some may be terrified of public speaking. It is therefore vital to have an honest appraisal of who is suitable, as they will be judged not only on what they say, but their body language, clothes and tone of voice.

The way that BP's former CEO, Tony Hayward, handled the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill is regarded by many as one of the worst in PR history. At first he was not to be seen, but when he was spotted, he was playing golf on a weekend break. He also told reporters: "I'd like my life back." Within a week he was one

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of the most vilified people on the planet.

Contrast this with how Chilean President Sebastian Piñera dealt with the San José mining disaster. A former journalist, he not only dressed and sounded the part, he ensured that journalists were looked after – WiFi was even provided so they could file their reports. He appealed to the world for help – and the world responded and rejoiced when the 33 men were finally rescued.

A key finding of the 2011 Edelman Trust Barometer found that safeguarding customers and employees is the top-ranked action (92 per cent) to re-earn trust when faced with a crisis. This is closely followed by transparent and open communication about the extent of the crisis and honest and frequent communication by the CEO about repair efforts (90 per cent each). Justifying what caused the crisis and keeping information private to minimise damage to the company are at the bottom of the list – 52 per cent and 47 per cent respectively.

So telling the truth is vital. It is hard to hide anything these days and if mistakes have been made you need to admit them and demonstrate that you are doing everything to sort the situation out. Journalists not only see their role as telling the story, but also as one of holding people and organisations to account.

Spend time getting to know the specialists in your area of operation. This will help to build up trust in your organisation and in what you have to say in the event of a crisis. Aid workers and journalists are brought together for scenario

exercises during operational safety courses run by Aid Training & Operations Ltd. Operations Manager, Gary Purssey, explains: "While they still have to deal with the same environmental conditions, their objectives are different – we've found that participants benefit far more from being able to share experiences. Very often aid workers feel journalists are interfering and getting in the way. It doesn't have to be a massive disaster – road accidents are one of the main causes of death within the NGO sector – and it only takes one angry and grieving relative to start making public accusations that could damage your reputation as an organisation."

Public interest

It is also beneficial to bring different departments together to play out all the possible scenarios so your teams are ready and prepared for any eventuality and are aware of their different roles. Every person in the organisation should be informed about company policy on media. In addition, you must regularly update and test your crisis media plan to ensure its viability.

With emergency planning well underway for the London 2012 Olympic Games, a good relationship between stakeholders and the media is crucial.

"I've been pleasantly surprised to discover that there is a line that most reputable journalists and news organisations won't cross if what they know it's not in the public interest and could endanger lives or cause widespread panic," said Mark Fitt, Director of N49 Intelligence. Citing the recent kidnappings in the Horn of Africa, he added: "Groups like Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab just want free public relations and constant media attention as it helps to raise their profile. It's good to see journalists taking the moral high ground, respecting Foreign Office advice and trying to do the right thing. At the end of the day it's about what's best for the victims."

Accidents and disasters happen and a crisis media strategy is not about spin or trying to hide the truth. The organisations that survive and protect their reputations the best are those who are seen to care about people and the impact on their lives.

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