

Crisis Communication & Media Management

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The NFPA 1600 Standard on Disaster Management requires established procedures to provide disaster and post-disaster information to internal and external audiences, such as the media. This includes:

- A central contact facility for the media.
- An emergency information handling system.
- Pre-scripted information bulletins.
- A method to coordinate and clear information for release.
- The capability of communicating with special needs populations.
- Recommendations/action guidelines to those impacted (i.e., shelter-in-place or evacuation).

During any crisis, the press can become the emergency manager's best friend or worst enemy. The media shapes the public's perception on how well a situation is handled. Therefore, it is crucial to create and maintain a positive relationship with the media before a disaster hits.

Working with the press requires a thorough understanding of how the different media (print, radio, TV) work and what their goals, needs, deadlines and capabilities are.

The Challenges

Using today's technologies (satellite, Internet, etc.), the media can run live pictures from anywhere in the world within minutes, shared by TV stations around the globe. If it is in the middle of the night in the U.S., it is primetime in Europe.

To meet the everlasting demand for stories for 24/7 news channels airtime, the media is always looking for casualties, for drama, blood and tears. But this is nothing new. One hundred years ago, a newspaper publisher made the statement, "It is a newspaper's

duty to print the news and raise hell."

In any disaster close to metropolitan areas, hundreds of journalists may show up within an hour. With news helicopters and chartered airplanes, it may not even take much longer in rural areas.

It is the most bothersome reality, that in the most critical stages where resources are usually thin, the media demands are huge. They will require everything you may not have or may need to commit to the incident: from manpower, to workspace, to access and parking for vehicles and large satellite trucks, power, sanitation and other utilities.

In addition to these physical needs, the media immediately creates a tremendous and very competitive demand for information and interview opportunities. Every reporter wants to talk with witnesses, victims, responders and officials.

The problem is that if your entity does not address this need for information, reporters will start looking for other opportunities. Those sources that are always attracted like vultures to a disaster scene include "experts," lawyers, activists and pressure groups, unions, special interest groups, corporations, politicians and other undesired commentators. Their comments and "knowledge" often lead to distorted facts and bad publicity.

The Solution

It is therefore critical that you constantly feed information to the hungry media from early on. This way you gain some control, and you may even be able to coordinate the appearances of grieving or angry friends and family members, survivors, and eyewitnesses.

To coordinate, communicate and cooperate with the media, emergency managers need to be

prepared. They must have established procedures and, most importantly, need to have a well-trained Public Information Officer (PIO) assigned and available on a 24/7 basis.

Most questions in any crisis situation are predictable (where, when, casualties, damage, impact, cause). This allows for the gathering of facts in advance. Pre-written materials with a few blanks to fill in must be prepared and ready to be distributed on a moment's notice. Means for mass dissemination must include phone, pager, e-mail, fax and the Internet.

Large scale emergencies are multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional events. To ensure consistency in the flow of information and a unified message, a Joint Information Center (JIC) needs to be established on or near the disaster site as soon as possible. This facility, equipped with the needed hardware (phones, faxes, copy machines, computer work space), must serve as the single point of contact for the media and all stakeholders involved (private, public, corporate, NGOs, etc.).

In today's world, many incidents may involve citizens from non-English speaking countries. At this point, the ability to receive and distribute information in other languages via live and present interpreters becomes essential. A good connection with foreign press and communities will avoid misunderstandings and clarify issues.

Old Ways of Media Management No Longer Work

The ancient way of media management, such as information from headquarters only, still utilized by some old fashioned corporations and governmental institutions, does not fit into today's world of instant messages.

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Establishing a Temporary Information Post Aids With Communications to Media and Public

By Thomas Strider, Group DELTA, Bonita Springs, Florida

Background

A large local bus, driving people from 10 to 20 miles away to work, fell off a high bridge onto a football field. Some 30 DOAs and eight critically injured were taken to the same hospital, resulting in a bedlam of hundreds of people in the street between the morgue and the rest of the hospital. There was a need to restore order and determine names of DOA and injured, as well as to permit the identification of DOAs by a relative.

Solution

There was a solution to crowd control and keeping people from clogging entrances to morgue and hospital. A temporary information post (TIP) was established away from the entrances, in a large and uncluttered area away from the road to get the crowd off the roadway. From that location, from time to time as patients either became conscious or as their identifications were ascertained by means of identifying papers (as in the case of those in the morgue),

the names were read from that TIP (and only from that TIP). This permitted the relatives of the passengers to be informed as soon as possible about where they were needed. A quiet and orderly line was formed at the morgue to permit identification of bodies, and the beginnings of burial plans. The status of patients as well as identification of casualties was read from the TIP until such time as the remaining crowd dispersed with the knowledge that their relatives were not among the 47 people on that fateful bus.

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PIOs, emergency managers and other officials must *always* obey the essentials for all media statements and interviews:

- Tell the truth. Never lie.
- Organize your key messages and prepare a brief script.
- Always think and speak in terms of sound bites and headlines.
- Make your key points in short sentences.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Coordinate messages within ICS and with all other agencies/entities involved.
- Offer hard-copy background information.

- Never use irony or sarcasm.
- Never say “no comment.”

Instead say, “I don’t know, but I will try to find out for you,” or “I am sorry, but that information is not available at the moment.”

- Never speculate.
- Never use alarming words that may cause anxiety.

Conclusion

It has been proven numerous times that the long-term cost of a damaged reputation may far exceed the short-term impact of the disaster event itself.

Public and private entities that communicate effectively and compassionately in times of crisis may recover well and emerge with strong credibility and respect.

What Do I Need To Tell the Media?

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more efficiently and might preclude numerous, disruptive phone calls.

9. Who else can the media or the public contact for information?

Give people somewhere else to turn. Setting up a separate 800 number for additional information can prove very helpful.

Conclusion

In summary, you do not have to go on and on. Just answer these nine points to carry out your responsibilities.

About the Author: Judy Hoffman is a crisis communications consultant and author of *Keeping Cool on the Hot Seat: Dealing Effectively with the Media in Times of Crisis*, available at www.judyhoffman.com.



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