



# Media Relations During a Crisis

BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI

**G**ood media relations is crucial when you have a crisis on your hands. When an emergency—such as a natural disaster or a shooting—happens in your city, the media will come calling (whether you like it or not), and the public will get most of its information about the situation from the media. It's important to be ready for this before the crisis occurs.

## MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY

The first step in managing relations with the media is to establish a sensible, professional crisis media relations policy. This should include the following steps:

1. Designate a spokesperson for your city, such as the mayor or city manager. Select someone who is comfortable talking with the media, citizens, and a wide variety of organizations and groups.
2. All other employees must secure prior approval for any outside publication, speech, interview, discussion, or other communication with or to the media if it involves or could impact the city.
3. All media calls are directed to the designated spokesperson or the person in charge of media relations. Together, the spokesperson and media relations representative will decide who will speak with the reporter. You may want to involve your city's attorney, as appropriate, in the decisions about what to say and who should say it.

## GOOD SPOKESPERSON PRACTICES

In situations of crisis or catastrophe, it is crucial to have a competent, compassionate, careful spokesperson. During a crisis, bad things happen faster, and control is lost much more quickly.

The spokesperson sets the tone, tempo, and expectations of those paying attention or relying on the spokesperson for information. Follow these good practices when speaking to the media.

### *Remain calm, but act quickly.*

Crisis and catastrophe communications require the highest level of professionalism. Whether you are the mayor or another city representative, your job as the spokesperson is to truthfully and carefully reassure people, exhibit confidence and competence, and choose your words to help focus on resolving the issues at hand and reducing the production of victims and collateral damage.

While providing reassurance, you must also act quickly. The first hour or two is critical to getting the organization's story or plan of response out. Once a story is out, it will be difficult to change the perceptions that result.

*Use positive language.* Distortions, lies, misunderstandings, and conflicting information are generally caused by negative characterizations and responses. Your goal in writing and in speaking is to answer questions and provide information in completely positive and declarative language. Avoid all negative words, phrases, and descriptions, as negative language causes confusion, additional questions, and bad headlines.

*Disclose some facts immediately and continuously,* even if the news is bad. Information delayed is considered information withheld. In addition, piecemeal disclosure can result in prolonged coverage. As the spokesperson, you must quickly begin to collect the facts and initiate information flow to various audiences and the media.

*Create a page or section of your website dedicated to the controversies at hand.* A growing repository of useful, current, and generally helpful information should reside on your website. This may include studies, laws, rules and regulations, questions and answers, and

corrections and clarifications of information already provided.

Refer all inquiries to the website initially so everyone has access to the same basic information. This approach can reduce media calls and inquiries significantly.

In crises, most reporters are not calling to do an original story, but to verify information or validate other stories they have read, seen, or heard. A visit to your website can often satisfy those concerns, and reporters will move on to other things.

*Make sure all comments are consistent with the information on your website and any other materials.* Since most real news covers adverse situations, reporters tend to be experienced in covering crises. Therefore, they have a natural suspicion of information handed out by paid representatives, causing reporters to look for discrepancies rather than story lines. Make certain that whatever you say is identical to or compatible with whatever is written on your website or any other materials.

*Stick to the facts.* Talk about what you know to be true. When asked a question for which you do not have an answer, instead of saying, "I don't know," your response should be positive and declar-

ative. For example, you could say, "My knowledge of that is limited. I know a couple of things."

You then say what you know, and ask if the inquirer would like additional information. In most cases, this response will satisfy the person asking the question. If the inquirer needs more information and says so, you can respond appropriately.

You should also be sure to avoid guessing, speculation, and making estimates. Many will attempt to estimate the costs of catastrophe and damage. Be ready for it. Either have appropriate estimates available, a forecast for when such estimates will be available, or a reasonable and truthful explanation as to when such estimates will be available, if ever.

*Avoid flatly refusing to provide information.* The use of phrases such as "no comment" needs to be avoided. These phrases automatically establish a negative environment, with the spokesperson being the target of doubts and distrust.

Learn more about this topic at the League's

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Some excellent response options when information has either yet to surface or must be withheld are:

- I'll need more information before I can answer that question.
  - That information is being withheld at the present time for \_\_\_\_\_ reasons, but we hope to release it soon.
  - The answer to that question will become available as the situation unfolds.
  - When we have reliable information in response to that question, we will provide it.
- As you can see by these responses, it is possible to respond in a positive way to even the most negative, challenging, harsh, or intimidating question. Use positive, declarative language.

*Express genuine regret if there are fatalities or injuries to report.* Being empathetic is expected. Responsibility is a matter for the city officials and attorney, and possibly the courts, to determine. Say

*(continued on page 32)*

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If you set the bar at competence,

how do you reach excellence?



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something like, "Responsibility will be determined sometime in the future. Our

## How to Manage Media Interviews

Manage the interview and yourself by doing the following:

- Remain calm.
- Establish ground rules.
- Help reporters make their deadlines.
- Set starting and ending times for interviews or press conferences.
- Be brief and positive.
- Avoid all negative words and phrases.
- Bundle your main points into groups of three or four.
- Remain calm.
- Make photographs and videos available.
- Use approved statements and messages.
- Repeat key information several times.
- Tell the reporter what is important.
- Remain calm.

concerns now are helping the victims, cleaning up, talking with neighbors, etc."

Empathy and sympathy may actually reduce exposure to litigation. Always show concern, empathy, sympathy, remorse, or contrition, and use compassionate language, such as "alarmed," "concerned," "devastated," "regret," and "saddened."

Also, only release information about victims after families have been notified, and you have the permission of the families—or, best of all, help the families provide that information themselves.

*Anticipate likely questions* and prepare answers for them. Test the answers, say them out loud, and fix them so they work. Keep them to about 75-100 words, about 30-45 seconds of speaking time.


The media will always want to know:

- *What happened?* Describe the incident with as much detail and as little technical jargon as possible. Be ready to comment on the nature of the emergency and if there were any injuries.
- *When did it happen?* Reporters like precise detail, but it is reasonable to approximate to the nearest half-hour.

- *Who was involved?* Withhold names until families have been notified. In the event of injuries or deaths, confirm to the reporter that the injured were taken to a hospital. Also, this question provides the opportunity to comment briefly on the employees instrumental in rescue or clean-up attempts. Advise the reporter of the company's emergency plans and other procedural safeguards in place.

- *Where did it happen?* Identify the location of the emergency. Also, indicate the effect or lack of effect of the incident on the rest of the facility or the communities adjacent to the site, if any.

- *Why did the incident occur?* Until more complete information is available, indicate that an investigation is underway and the cause has not yet been determined.

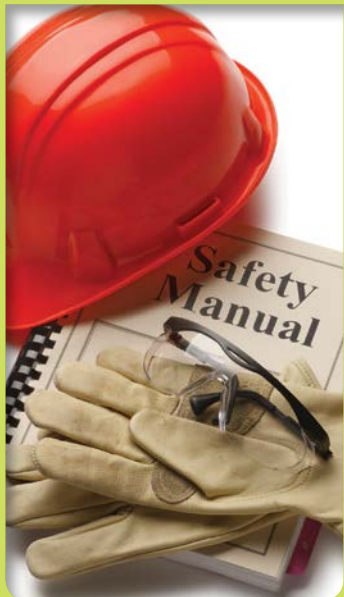
By following these good spokesperson practices, you will provide the information that your community needs to know, and help everyone remain calm. 

James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, Fellow IABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, BEPS Emeritus, is America's Crisis Guru® and author of *The Manager's Guide to Handling the Media in a Crisis*.

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