

You can handle a crisis - and keep the media happy

By Jeri Lynn Burgdorf *

From the Counselor, Fall 2001

Well, happy may be a bit strong. Let's say, you can keep the media neutral. There is a method by which your organization's needs can be handled in a crisis, while still allowing reporters to perceive that you're also conscious of their needs. Two things must happen.

First, it's about attitude. If your attitude is such that you want to defend yourself and your colleagues against the media, then it's you 'against' them. That translates into a debate at best and a battle at worst. And that translates into the story.

Those of you who have been reporters know, as I do, that the tone of the communicator combined with the tone of the interviewee colors the writing and editing of the story. Are they defensive and edgy? The words the writer will choose to write that story are different than words chosen to describe someone who seems cooperative and open. We all know that. But it's difficult to shift that attitude when you're afraid that the media might do some damage to your organization. And that's the reason we must shift it.

The news media don't expect you to help them if it means that you risk your own organization. They don't expect you to say "yes" to their every request. They do expect you to listen to the request, to consider it, and to respond to it. They don't expect that you'll be able to line up everyone they want to interview; they just ask that you try. They don't expect you to walk into the kind of "firing line" type interview they would like to set up on live television, i.e., two people on each side of an issue and an incendiary host. But they do expect to be allowed to make the request.

So calmly allow them to make their request, then tell them you'll get back with them in 20 minutes, then call them back to give them the parameters for the interview.

The second important thing to know: What are the media's issues involved in the crisis at hand? Is it a story with enough importance to merit live national or local television coverage? If so,

- you have to set aside parking areas next to the facility or site to allow satellite trucks to park.
- Live TV requires cable for its cameras.
- Designate a door through which TV crews can run their cables.
- Let crews know where they can and can't go.
- Rope off parts of the building, which are off limits to the news media. (Provide the media with identification tags so that everyone will know them.)
- Place volunteers in the hall to be certain no one passes.
- In meeting rooms, rope off an area just for the media.
- Post signs in areas where reporters are welcome, but where electronic gear and other equipment are not.
- Know when live broadcasts will occur.
- Have those who will be your spokespersons briefed and ready during those hours.

Are you involved in a breaking story? That would be a story which is in the process of happening, or which has just happened. Examples: A drowning. A church fire in which there are victims. These are breaking stories. In a breaking news story, what the reporter needs is the latest information, bit by bit. A breaking story, by its nature, means that details will be sketchy at first.

Your job, in serving the needs of the media, is to hold a news conference every 30 minutes or so. If you have no new information, you stand before the media to explain that you have no new information. If you're there like clockwork for the media, they'll trust that their information will come from you in an organized way, and they will be less likely to go poking around trying to wrest information from those who are involved in a traumatic situation.

If it isn't a breaking news story, both media needs and your response to the situation are different. An example would be a criminal charge being levied against one of your people. In this case, there's no site for live coverage as there would be in a fire or drowning. There is the story involving a small cast of characters: the alleged perpetrator, the alleged victim, the boss of each, witnesses, friends, and members of the congregation.

Your job in this sort of scenario is to first be sure steps are taken to suspend or replace the person charged, if appropriate. Then your job is to notify those few people who initially "need" to know. Next, you brief those who might be called by the media and those who will serve as spokespersons. They may not be the same. Then you prepare a written statement to be used in case you are contacted and can't place a spokesperson with a reporter. And then you start to gather details about the incident, so that you can further brief those who "need" to know. Then, when the story is about to break - in other words, you've gotten media calls and you know it will break in tomorrow's paper - you notify your organization, along with coaching tips in case they get a call from the media. And so, it is attitude, knowledge of media needs, and preparation that allow you to handle a crisis well.

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