

# Working With the Media

## Telling Your Story Effectively

By Diane Hurns and Linda Tapp

*In a crisis, a firm must manage the communication process in a timely manner, or the story will be written without its input.*

As an SH&E professional, you know that when it comes to addressing hazards and risks in the workplace, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The same principle applies to working with the media, especially in the event of a crisis. No two situations or messages are the same. During a crisis, a company is dealing with an unplanned event. This article provides some insight and tools to help the SH&E professional be better prepared and more comfortable when dealing with the media, whether print or electronic, either proactively or reactively.

Many different situations might be cause for facing the media. What would you do if a reporter called following one of these events?

- An employee is arrested for murdering his young son.
- A customer's plant catches on fire, the doors are locked trapping hundreds of employees inside resulting in the death of 25 and injuring many more.
- An earthquake, hurricane or other catastrophe occurs, affecting your company's employees, business operations and customers.
- A *New York Times* business editor calls you at 5 p.m. saying, "a local lawyer has filed suit against your company for wrongfully \_\_\_\_\_. . . I'll need a response from you in 30 minutes for this Sunday's front-page story."
- You have 500 protestors outside your plant.
- A worker is killed when overcome by fumes while cleaning a tank.
- Your company is working with customers, legislators and the media to educate the public about reform legislation as a special session is called.

It is the job of the public relations (PR) professional and the department in charge of the area affected to learn the facts and information needed, and communicate it to the targeted audiences in a timely manner. An organization's reputation and credibility with external and internal audiences is at stake. Whatever is communicated internally and externally will remain forever on record, so the firm must proceed carefully and provide the facts. It must manage the communication process and do

so in a timely manner, or the story will be written without its input. From a business perspective, that could be costly.

### Building Key Relationships

A PR professional should have a good working relationship and open door policy with top management and field management, and ongoing communications with customers and employees.

Employees should be aware of any news before it is released to the media. A knowledgeable employee base helps greatly when the company is communicating key messages and information to the mass media.

The organization should also have a good working relationship with the communities in which it does business, as well as with vendors, customers, employees and the media. If it does not, should a crisis

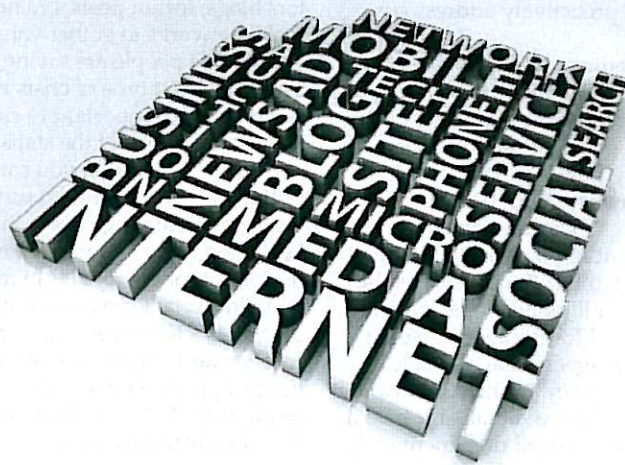
occur, the company's message and information may seem questionable to the audiences it is trying to reach, and the audience may be unresponsive.

An SH&E professional should maintain a good working relationship with the firm's PR and internal communications staffs. This involves working together to gather the facts on incidents, develop messages, provide expert knowledge, and deliver those facts and messages to key audiences in a timely manner. Also, if you or the company belongs to a trade association, become familiar with its PR staff and activities, as they can help. The more people you know and who know you and are familiar with your expertise, the better the chance that the correct safety message is incorporated into key communications.

So, how does the mainstream media work? What does and does not work in delivering information and how should you develop information and respond when a crisis occurs? Following is a brief overview.

### What CEOs Think

A recent *PR Week* study found that 1) compared to the year before, 62% of CEOs are spending more time on external communications; 2) 58% of CEOs



## Best Practices

They want a story that:

- will affect their audience;
- their audience will care about;
- has all the facts and key information;
- creates emotion.

### When the Media Calls

Media calls are generally handled by PR professionals. They are responsible for getting the key questions and information from the reporter so that they can present the inquiry clearly to an internal expert, so that person can be prepared well to answer the questions. The pre-interview checklist includes: 1) What prompted the call? 2) What is the reporter's deadline? 3) What is the format—phone interview, taped radio interview, panel discussion, e-mail, etc.? 4) What will your role be? Is the reporter interviewing other people or organizations? 5) Is the reporter knowledgeable on the topic? Is there a need to educate the reporter on the issue at hand?

### Establishing the Message

The company should already have a core message on various issues. However, consider and focus on the audience that you want to reach. When developing the core message/premise statement or response, develop at least three points that support the premise statement. This is important when it comes to "bridging." When being interviewed, answer questions by advancing your responses to the premise statement and its supporting points. During an interview, if you do not know the answer, say so. Offer to get back to the reporter with the information once you have it, or have the company's PR professional follow up. If you find yourself in an adversarial position, do not react negatively but simply return to the key points and supporting statements. When being interviewed, keep information clear and concise.

### They Like Me, They Really Like Me

The reality is that whether by phone, radio, e-mail, blog or on television, your personality comes through, and the media and the public often judge people by the way they act and respond. For example, if the interviewee seems shift and never looks at the interviewer, avoids questions, looks ruffled and unprepared, more harm than good will be done. That is why it is important to identify the proper spokesperson and

## Media Guidelines

The media is no longer defined by network news or the daily newspaper. It is a constantly changing, updating and revolving industry that packages and pushes content to consumers. Journalists are now content strategists, and interviewees are content experts. The fundamentals of managing a media interview in the new digital platform are more important than ever. Here are several quick tips to follow when the media contacts you:

- 1) Take part in the media process if it aligns with your business goals—and particularly if the story is about you or your company.
- 2) Determine the story angle. What is driving the reporter to do this particular story now?
- 3) Identify your key audience. Who do you want to reach via the media?
- 4) Develop a premise statement (key message) of 10 words or less and several key supports such as facts, figures and data.
- 5) Address all reporter questions first, then bridge to your key message.
- 6) Be yourself but amplified, engaged and energetic.
- 7) Do not repeat negative language such as "I am not a liar or cheat."
- 8) Do not speak off the record.
- 9) Practice the golden rule and treat reporters with courtesy and kindness. It will impact the tone of the story.



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prepare. Sometimes the proper spokesperson is not top management.

When appearing on television, wear clothing appropriate to your position. A white or blue shirt with a subtle striped or solid tie, if one wears a tie, is best for men, while a lightly colored blouse is most appropriate for women. Hair, jewelry and accessories should enhance your appearance, never detract from it. You want the audience to focus on your message, not your attire.

### Managing the Media in a Crisis

Managing the media in a crisis is critical. Before a crisis occurs, the organization should have a contingency plan in place that identifies the procedures to follow and the spokesperson for external and internal audiences. Never provide information until you have the facts. At the same time, do not slam the door on the media when they call. Provide some information, such as acknowledgement that something has happened and that your organization is working to learn what happened. However, your first concern is the safety and privacy of your employees, their families, the community and your customers.

During a crisis, reporters may seem hostile or overly demanding. It is not necessarily because they are targeting the company. They need information as soon as possible. By cooperating and communicating with the media, you can achieve your objectives and help them achieve theirs. Also keep in mind that social media avenues such as Twitter and those that use them act rapidly to

communicate events as they happen so you must be out in front of the situation.

During a crisis and while the crisis team is working on getting the facts, you will 1) evaluate the media inquiry; 2) update the current status; 3) finalize who the spokesperson will be based on the contingency plan and availability; 4) prepare a premise statement and key supporting statements; 5) prepare for anticipated questions; 6) do a quick rehearsal; and 7) make sure that all involved are getting the same information and a consistent message. You must do this within a very short time frame.

In all cases, be sure that the information you provide is based on facts. In addition, always express concern about the situation and those affected by it.

### Conclusion

Communications through public and media relations is a tool that, when used effectively, can positively affect the bottom line, increase employee morale and company credibility, and build a positive reputation.

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