

Dealing with the Media in a Crisis... And Convincing the Boss You're Right By Rosanne Desmone

Picture this:

There's a crisis on your doorstep, the media are hounding you for information, and the boss won't let you give them anything. You know that keeping the media informed is in your association's best interests, but you can't convince the boss it's the right thing to do. That evening, your association's major competition is on the news talking about your crisis and taking control of the messaging.

No communications person wants to be in that position. Experience with organizational crises has taught me that when CEOs and other senior executives won't talk to the media, they have two reasons:

1. They don't understand why they need to.
2. They think they can control the situation and keep it out of the news if they say nothing.

Wrong. On both counts.

The truth of the matter is that the longer you take to communicate about a crisis—or fail to communicate about it—the greater the likelihood that your association will suffer some kind of damage to its reputation, credibility, and value. Ignoring or freezing out the media simply isn't an option; to control the discussion, you have to communicate.

And, before our imaginary crisis becomes a reality, you have to convince the boss. Start by giving him or her the reasons why communication is necessary. Then present your crisis communication plan and substantiating information.

Five good reasons to keep the media informed

1. **Taking the offensive lets you control the discussion.** Depending on the type and extent of your crisis, once it occurs you'll have no more than 24 hours—and maybe as little as 30 minutes—to respond in a way that allows you to shape the flow of information. You need to size up the situation and make a statement quickly to frame the discussion.
2. **If you don't talk to the media, they'll find somebody who will.** Nature abhors a vacuum. If you won't talk to them, the resourceful media will find someone else, and it could be someone who'd like to run down your association. Then you'll be on the defensive and looking bad all around.
3. **When you talk to the media, you're really talking to all your publics through the media.** In a crisis, media communication could be your best opportunity to let your stakeholders hear your message and enhance your association's reputation and credibility. After all, what do you honestly think when a news anchor says that someone "could not be reached for comment" or "had no comment?"
4. **Every interview or briefing is an opportunity to get out your message.** Even if you're doing Q&A, start every media session by making a statement that contains all the information you want to give, positioned as you want it communicated. The questions that follow are then more likely to be based on your information.

5. **Your association has as many spokespersons as it has employees.** Employees may not talk to the media—although reporters will try to get to anyone in a crisis. But they will be talking to their spouses, parents, friends, and others who'll be asking them about what's happening, and those folks might talk to the media. Don't forget, therefore, to deliver to employees a clear message of what is happening that is consistent with any statements you make.

Convincing the boss

When you've pointed out the above five reasons for talking to the media, you still have to convince the boss to adopt a policy of communicating quickly during a crisis. Set up a time and make a presentation to sell the concept.

1. **Arm yourself with facts.** Recount stories of how other organizations have survived a crisis with proactive communication. Although it happened years ago, Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol incident is a good place to start. Do some additional research to find similar crises and outcomes at associations.
2. **Use the recent corporate scandals (think Enron) to bolster your argument.** By now, everyone should be familiar with the results of hiding all sorts of activities and the fact that people are much more suspicious of a cover-up when no information is forthcoming.
3. **Always have an answer.** Plan your presentation. Think about what questions might come up and make sure you have strong replies. You don't want to be scrambling for answers or figures, particularly if the missing information would support the outcome you seek.
4. **Point out how a proactive stance can benefit the association.** Any business disruption, particularly one that gets out of hand, can cost the organization in terms of reduced productivity/downtime, lost members, and damaged reputation and credibility. If the crisis or disruption can be controlled, these potential problems can be avoided or minimized.
5. **Present the plan you've developed.** Explain that a planned approach to crisis communication limits the number of decisions you must make in crisis mode and gives you the tools you need to get right on top of things—and maintain control. The plan should include information about who will act as spokesperson during a crisis, identify the crisis communication team that will collect and assess information on the situation, and describe how messages and positioning will be developed. (For more on tools to have at the ready, see the sidebar "Stockpiling Ammunition for Crisis Response.")

It's also important to state that an early assessment may determine that no real crisis exists and that you can handle the situation with a single media statement revealing the facts of the matter.

6. **Identify what resources are required, tell how you'll gather them, and provide an estimate of any costs.** If you can keep the boss's attention long enough to present this information last, you're probably doing well. Make sure you know as precisely as possible any costs involved (they should be few) and present them clearly. Contrast any costs against projected costs of downtime and lost productivity.

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Now, picture this:

There's a crisis on your doorstep. Less than two hours after receiving the news, you've already prepared a media statement, which the association spokesperson delivers immediately. Your crisis communication plan is being implemented and the members of your crisis team are working on an assessment of the situation. The boss has asked to be briefed when the assessment is done so he can review the messaging they've developed. This evening, your boss is on the news discussing the crisis and what's being done about it.

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