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Effective Media Relations in Times of Crisis

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- ▶ “When you face a crisis, you know who your true friends are.” Magic Johnson

- ▶ “I went to sleep as Rihanna and woke up as Britney Spears.”

Rihanna (on Chris Brown aftermath)

- ▶ “There cannot be a crisis today; my schedule is already full.” Henry Kissinger

- ▶ “It always looks darkest just before it gets totally black.” Charlie Brown

What is a crisis?

- ▶ “A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your organization, usually brought on by adverse or negative media attention.”

Vic Salazar
Media consultant and
former broadcast journalist

Examples of emergency situations



NATURAL

Severe Winds
Tornado
Ice Storm
Blizzard



BOTH

Fire
Flood
Disease



MAN-MADE

Internet Virus
Cyber Attack
Agro-Terrorism
Chemical Explosion
Water Poisoning
Radiological
Bio-Terrorism
Civil Disorder

A crisis also can be...

- ▶ A legal dispute
- ▶ An accident
- ▶ Theft or mishandling of property, funds, etc...
- ▶ Or a situation where (in the eyes of the media or general public) your college or university did not react to any of these situations in the appropriate manner

When dealing with a crisis...

- ▶ “Tell it all.
- ▶ “Tell it fast.
- ▶ “Tell the truth.”



John Hicks
Headline Promotion,
Press and PR

Crisis communication team

- ▶ President or chancellor
- ▶ Public information officer
- ▶ Vice president or senior-level manager from the affected area(s)
- ▶ Campus police official
- ▶ Legal counsel



Crisis communication team support

- ▶ Enlist support from competent individuals who can answer phones and - if required - escort media
 - ▶ Ensure media calls are answered promptly.
- ▶ Prepare a statement for staff as quickly as possible
 - ▶ Example: "We are in the process of gathering information. There will be a news conference before 1 p.m. Give me your name and number, and I will let you know when and where."



Responsibility

- ▶ Determine the appropriate message to convey information and to address the emergency/crisis
 - ▶ Try to view the crisis from the viewpoint of the public
 - ▶ Protect the reputation and integrity of your college or university
 - ▶ Do not lie or try to hide involvement
 - ▶ Realize that ignoring the situation will only make it worse
 - ▶ Don't let attorneys make all of the decisions

Public information officer

- ▶ Designate one individual (usually the public information officer) to serve as the primary spokesperson
 - ▶ to represent the institution
 - ▶ to make official statements and answer media questions throughout the crisis
- ▶ Identify a back up to the designated spokesperson to fill role in the event that the primary spokesperson is unavailable
- ▶ Identify individuals who will serve as technical experts or advisers
- ▶ Identify public information contacts for all other agencies involved in the crisis



Media center

- ▶ Establish a media center some distance away from the location of the crisis communication team
- ▶ Don't make it too remote if there is a visual element
- ▶ Locations for news conferences and interviews are determined by crisis communication team



Rules for reporters

- ▶ Establish rules for reporters...and don't change them in midstream
 - ▶ If media are required to be escorted on campus during "business as usual," make sure they are escorted in a crisis
 - ▶ If media are not required to be escorted on campus, it will be difficult to escort them in a crisis situation

Interviews

- ▶ Reporters may ask to interview students, faculty and staff who have been affected by the crisis
 - ▶ Best to restrict interviews to spokesperson, back-up spokesperson or technical expert
 - ▶ Remember: Reporters have the right to interview anyone they want to interview.
 - ▶ Treat all reporters equally



Preparation

- ▶ Over-prepare
- ▶ Rehearse prepared statements and responses to “tough” questions (for internal use only)
- ▶ Anticipate new questions as the event evolves

News releases and prepared statements

- ▶ Have a prepared statement on hand that can be used to make an initial general response to the media
- ▶ First news release should include at a minimum the who, what, when and where of the situation
- ▶ As the crisis progresses, develop prepared statements to be made by the spokesperson at the onset of any media interview, briefing or news conference
- ▶ Collateral materials can be helpful (brochures, maps, etc.)

Remember your key audiences (geographical and functional)

- ▶ Local, regional, national, international
- ▶ Faculty, staff and students
- ▶ Community
- ▶ Businesses/industries (suppliers)
- ▶ Media
- ▶ Academia (boards, other institutions)
- ▶ Governmental entities
- ▶ Special-interest organizations

How to respond during a newspaper interview

- ▶ Obtain advanced information regarding interview topics
- ▶ Prepare in detail
- ▶ Make major points in statement form
- ▶ Try to maintain control of the interview
- ▶ Set a time limit (in advance)
- ▶ Don't let reporter "wear you down"
- ▶ Don't get so relaxed that you say something you wish you had not said



How to respond during a newspaper interview

- ▶ Avoid jargon or professional expressions
- ▶ Reporters often repeat questions
- ▶ Don't answer inappropriate questions
- ▶ Be prepared for interruptions with questions
- ▶ Do not speak "off the record"
- ▶ Never say "no comment"
- ▶ Remember, the interview lasts as long as a reporter is there

How to prepare for broadcast interviews

- ▶ Prepare "talking points"
- ▶ Anticipate questions and prepare responses
- ▶ Practice answering questions
- ▶ Cover controversial areas ahead of time
- ▶ If possible, know who will be interviewing you
- ▶ Determine how much time is available
- ▶ Audiences often remember impressions, not facts



Do's and don'ts during the interview process

- ▶ Do use specifics/facts
- ▶ Do use contrasts, comparisons
- ▶ Do be confident and cool
- ▶ Do be a listener
- ▶ Do be correct/accurate
- ▶ Do be anecdotal (reporters often look for anecdotal leads)

Do's and don'ts during the interview process

- ▶ If you don't have the answer or can't answer, do admit it and move on to another topic. "I don't know" is an acceptable answer!
- ▶ Don't fall for the "A or B" dilemma
- ▶ Don't accept "what if" questions
- ▶ Don't accept "laundry list" questions
- ▶ Don't go "off the record"
- ▶ Don't think you have to answer every question
- ▶ Don't speak for someone else

The news conference

When you are answering questions:

- ▶ Remain approachable and confident
- ▶ Answer only the questions asked and answer them as succinctly and clearly as possible
- ▶ Remember that you do not always have to know everything. You can say "I will have to get back with you on that. Please see me after the interview."
- ▶ Avoid allowing one person to dominate the questions by moving on: "Thank you for your interest. I'll be glad to talk to you after the news conference. Right now, let's see if anyone else has questions."
- ▶ Remain long enough to give individuals an opportunity to talk with you
- ▶ Make arrangements to distribute information to the group, if requested and/or appropriate

Recommended books and Web sites

- ▶ *Crisis in Organizations: Managing and Communicating in the Heat of Crisis* by Laurence Barton
- ▶ *You'd Better Have a Hose if You Want to Put Out the Fire: The Complete Guide to Crisis and Risk Communications* by Rene A. Henry

Thank You

Questions?

