

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

The Ammerman[®]
Experience

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Just the Talking Points?

So Last Century.



Earlier this year, tragedy struck close to our home office. The BP refinery in Texas City, Texas, suffered an explosion that resulted in the loss of 15 lives. From all appearances, BP handled the event in textbook fashion: they responded with a spokesperson; they declared their overriding interest in safety; and, when their CEO arrived from the UK, he reiterated their position. Unfortunately, their textbook was outdated. Their response was too slow for today's media environment, and BP took a beating from the press. It didn't take long for the *Houston Chronicle* to offer this headline: "On Safety, BP Only Talks a Good Game." And BP's subsequent full-page newspaper ads, intended to enhance company image, were met with extreme ridicule by many. That extended the life of the story even more.

Setting aside issues of blame or negligence (for that is not our area of expertise), we observed the media during and after the event, viewing it as another example of how the classic approach is in need of an extreme makeover.

In a catastrophic event, with instantaneous, wall-to-wall coverage, it is easy to lose control of the information flow. Reporters scramble to scoop their rivals and passers-by with cell phones, and handi-cams become part of the story. Indeed, it has never been easier for erroneous information to get on the air. A woman claiming to be the wife of a BP Plant Safety Manager called a Houston TV station to give her husband's view of why it happened. They put her on the air! Hearsay presented as news.

So what must you do?

You must always be prepared to mobilize for the purpose of framing the response and setting priorities. Understand that fast means FAST. Assume that your first

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Quick Bites

The Two Biggest Issues Facing Us

The Wall Street Journal (June 7) told the story of Amit Srivastava, a 39-year-old activist who lives in California. He owns neither a house nor a car, but he does have a computer, and it is with that tool he is having an impact on one of the world's most successful global brands - Coca-Cola. Srivastava claims that in India, Coke is guilty of stealing water, poisoning land and selling drinks laced with dangerous pesticides. The *Journal* says Coke acknowledges Mr. Srivastava and his fellow activists have cost the company "millions of dollars in lost sales and legal fees in India, and growing damage to its reputation elsewhere."

Meanwhile, Ford Motor Company announced that it

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reporter contact will come in less than 10 minutes. The two big failures in this area are personnel related: too few and unprepared. Most sites have a designated spokesperson, but given the amount of time people are out of the office, most need a number of designated spokespeople on-site, and corporate must be prepared to back them up immediately.

1. Have a communications response **team on-site and at corporate** and execute practice drills at least yearly and whenever there have been substantial personnel changes. Have plenty of backup people. **Every member and backup person needs crisis communications training.** Pick spokespeople by their ability to perform, not by their titles.

Initial statements to the press will likely be light on facts, and that is fine. What this quick response does is set a context and let reporters know that you are accessible. It may also fill up time that might otherwise be used to put some uninformed cell-phoner on the air! But **platitudes and message points are no longer enough.** We live in an era where audiences understand talking points and spin. Many are hip to how the PR/media machine works; clichés will not cut it.

2. **Sincerity works.** If the incident is tragic, shocking and devastating, say it, show it. Express grief or shock - this is not an admission of guilt or a placing of blame, but a very human reaction to a tragedy. The cold reading of a statement about safety being a priority and prayers being with families is no longer enough.

As the event progresses, responses to the media must have more depth. Topic and technical experts will be asked to respond. In our consulting, we are often asked whether the head people should even be seen anywhere near a bad news event. The answer is yes, almost always.

3. Tragedies require the person at the top. A loss of life is always tragic.

Research shows that people believe that anyone who won't speak must have something to hide, that stonewalling is an admission of guilt. Having the CEO express the company position, which must first address the human losses in human fashion, is very important, for it says something about company values. Can your head person express compassion, care and concern with the cameras rolling? Is training needed?

The following story is told among the Detroit media about Ford Motor Company. After an explosion at the Ford Rouge Plant that resulted in lost lives, then CEO Jacques Nasser was out of town. Heir and future CEO Bill Ford wanted to drive to the plant immediately and see for himself what was happening. The PR staff at Ford was against it, believing it was potentially damaging for Bill Ford to be so closely associated with a tragedy. Ford went anyway. What TV viewers saw was a man who was clearly shaken and covered with a dusting of snow, approaching reporters on the street to ask what they knew and expressing his horror at the loss of life.

We use the tape in our training as an example of someone who did it right.

would be discontinuing its daily televised newscast at the end of June. Those programs were part of Ford's internal communications and were broadcast to Ford facilities worldwide. Citing pressure to cut costs and greater reliance on Internet technology, Ford closed a department that had been an integral part of the communications plan for over 20 years.

So what do these two stories have in common? They are perfect examples of **the two greatest issues facing communications professionals today** - the flattening of the communications pyramid and the continuing tendency to chop communications budgets first.

There was once an information hierarchy: the big city newspapers, the three TV networks, a few serious magazines. They were credible and the locals took their leads from them. Nowadays, everyone is a publisher. As a Coke manager told the WSJ, "The moral high ground seems to be anyone with a website."

The logical move, given the deluge of information, would be an increase in communications staff, but that is simply not common. Most of us are being called on to do more with less. But we hope that news stories, such as the one about Coke's challenges in Asia, will help businesses everywhere understand the real value of a solid communications foundation that includes sufficient staff to track the tales being told and to act on the information with grace and speed.

We remain your allies in this endeavor. ■

We have only skimmed the surface of 21st-century crisis media management, but remember this: while the old rules still generally apply, much more is needed to effectively work in the instant, multi-outlet media environment that caters to savvy viewers and **potential plaintiffs**. ■

The medical profession has long been at the forefront of research into the link between communication and legal actions. **In our next issue**, a review of the findings and an analysis of what every business could learn about litigation avoidance.

Learn more about our [Communications Crisis Team](#) installations, training and drills.

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Ammerman Style

Back in ancient times, meaning the 1970s and '80s, the dress code for Ammerman associates was simple - dress like a television news anchor. Nowadays, anchors dress in no particular way. Men wear ponytails and baggy polo shirts; women get sexy in low-cut sweaters and short skirts. Leather jackets replace sport coats, and sandals and bare legs are common. As the number of channels has expanded, so has the variety of anchors' attire. What is a person to do?

How to look good for TV, webcast or video conference

Colors

Go for non primary tones - no to fire engine red, yes to cranberry. Forget black - gray works. And except for one day of the year, leave the shamrock green in the closet. The more pure and saturated a color, the more likely the camera will make the clothing "glow." White is okay for a shirt under a jacket; otherwise, off-white is a better choice.

Patterns

Some are fine. A subtle glen plaid of grays and blues will work, but anything with highly contrasting colors is discouraged. A bold pattern won't just glow; it can actually pulsate on camera.

Fabrics

Avoid anything shiny, including ties. They can end up looking like plastic or mirrors.

Logos

Many companies have shirts with logos. These are fine when the TV coverage is of a positive or promotional nature. For controversial or negative coverage, avoid having the logo on TV.

But it's an Educational Video. Honest.

Did you hear about the video featuring racist jokes, lesbian soft-porn and topless babes that was used as a training video for the San Francisco 49ers? Though originally shown to players last summer, it recently made its way to the newsroom of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which wasted no time in letting the public in on the "training."

The man who made the tape, team PR Director Kirk Reynolds, said the video was intended to coach the athletes on handling media questions in diverse San Francisco and never meant for public consumption.

At many Ammerman seminars, participants ask if they can get a copy of the tape that they are on, and the answer is always the same: no. As our alumni know, sometimes things take place in workshops that, while hardly titillating, could prove to be embarrassing or simply misinterpreted. What happened in San Francisco is just an extreme example of the fact that anything committed to tape or any other medium can and will be used against you if there are no safeguards.

Meanwhile, 49ers team owners Denise and John York declared the video offensive, inexcusable and "absolutely contradictory to the ideals and values of the San Francisco 49ers."

"Ostensibly, the video was created to raise player awareness about how to

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Jewelry

Wear nothing that moves or could make noise. Remove jewelry that could hit your microphone.

For those who ordinarily wear makeup

Be sure to de-shine. You may add a little extra color, but just a little. Choose a matte-finish lipstick or blot your lips on a tissue.

For those who don't usually wear makeup

De-shine as well. At the very least, blot or wash your face. If you think you could be on camera more than once, get a compact with colorless "translucent pressed powder" and/or a package of special oil-blotting tissues, both of which can be found in drug and discount stores. Keep these in your desk. Anyone with less than a full head of hair should pay special attention to potential shine areas.

Hair

Simply make sure it is under control. If you are in studio lighting, thin hair will be more obvious, and that includes styles that are teased, wispy or puffed up with product. Avoid hair products that add shine.

What to wear

It is hard to go wrong with a classic suit or variation on that. GOOD FIT IS ESSENTIAL for you to look your best. Socks should be long enough to show no leg when seated and while you may go without a jacket, men must never wear a tie with a short-sleeved shirt. If you know you will be seated and seen below the waist, sit in front of a mirror and check your outfit.

Exceptions to the above

The event will dictate the attire – no suits at a fun run, for instance. People in creative professions, such as fashion, design and the arts, may dress flashier. **Most people should simply dress as they would for an important client meeting while still following the basic rules.**

Self-critique

Get or make a video of yourself and then watch it with the sound off. **Don't be hypercritical**, just look for distractions.

Remember, the important word here is *subtle*. The goal is to be heard. Anything that could distract a viewer from your message goes back in the closet. ■

deal with the media and to demonstrate by example how poor conduct can unintentionally make news," the Yorks' statement said. "Unfortunately, this video is an example in itself."

But we can all learn from this experience. Just remember to avoid contact with any reporter who is totally or even partially nude. ■

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2005

Ammerman Individual Enrollment Training Dates

Effective Media Communications

August 16
August 23
September 13
October 13
November 8
December 6

Effective Presentations

September 14

Advanced Communicators

November 10 - 11

Marketing EMC

November 9

EMC Refresher

September 15

The above schedule lists Ammerman individual, public workshops. For available dates for private (buy-out) training dates, please contact The Ammerman Experience at 1.800.866.2026.

The Ammerman Experience public workshops are scheduled on a first-come, first-served basis, and are available to a limited number of attendees to ensure maximum personalized attention. To register for a course, contact our office at 1.800.866.2026.

Our firm is a pioneer in understanding the link between effective communication and professional success. What we've learned and what we teach can improve your performance . . . and that of others in your organization.

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