

Seven Needless Sins of Media Mismanagement

1. We don't have time to develop a media relations plan. This may also include the 'it won't happen to us' mentality. Ignorance or arrogance may fuel this mistake...take your pick...because the damage may well be crippling.
2. We aren't sure who will do what in an emergency or when the media comes calling. It isn't just designating roles and responsibilities...it is also the contingency plans for when someone is away, dead or otherwise unavailable...backups, systems of reporting, information sharing and methods all need to be determined and understood organization-wide.
3. We have a plan, but we don't know if it will work. Practice, debate and blue-sky at least annually. Given a choice between being embarrassed at something not working in a drill or in front of the TV cameras, I know what I would choose!
4. We may be sued, so let's not say anything publicly. Often litigation follows adversity (more so in America), but lawyers will often caution against communicating or taking actions (like apologies) that may ascribe fault. They are usually wrong on this. However, messages can be couched in terms like "We can confirm at this time..."
5. Putting the media ahead of your own employees or members. Nothing is worse than disenfranchising employees during a time of crisis. Employees should never hear news of their organization from the media first. Also, if you don't tell them, gossip and misinformation rush in to fill any communications vacuum.
6. We'll handle the news media when the time comes. You CAN be prepared for a variety of eventualities and even prepare Key Messages and Q/A's about different outcomes that will prove to be very useful to your spokesperson. Media training annually is essential.
7. Ignoring the 'window of opportunity'. This used to be a long and luxurious 12 -- 48 hours, but the Internet has shortened the critical time period in which to communicate to as narrow as two to six hours. If you lose the opportunity to tell your side, to offer a credible message of support or sorrow or apology or correct misinformation, the window slams shut and your reputation is damaged...maybe forever.

Notes from *Public Relations in Legal Matters: from Pro-Active to Crisis Management*, a presentation by Deborah Folka, APR for BC Continuing Legal Education's Risk Management Workshop, November 2012

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