

Handling Media Relations in a Crisis

RESPOND. Even if you're only saying "I can't talk now, but we'll have a statement in an hour" – which isn't at all uncommon in the first hours of a crisis. In crisis comms, silence is not golden. In the coming days and weeks, you're likely to engage in a lot of back and forth with each reporter covering the crisis as new storylines emerge and fresh information arises. Your success in shaping the story will depend in part on keeping that conversation going, even when you need to push back or say no.

EXPAND. You may need to beef up your media relations team, either internally or by bringing in consultants. Assign a traffic cop to create and maintain a running list of inquiries, scheduled interviews, promised follow-ups and the like – you'll need more structure to keep track of it all than you usually need. (You'll also want to increase the depth and frequency of media monitoring, including social media.)

DON'T FREEZE ANYONE OUT. It's tempting, and sometimes strategically sound, to provide more information and access to reporters and outlets that tend to provide more favorable coverage. But let's think counterintuitively for a moment. In a crisis, your organization's reputation is on the line. Reputation can be defined as your stakeholders' opinions of you. You'll want to shape the coverage of the crisis by every outlet that could influence those opinions – including those outlets that tend to be tough on you. In fact, those outlets are arguably the top priority during the crisis, because they can cause the most damage to your reputation. The resources in time and effort that you devote toward shaping negative coverage is often worth more in a crisis than generating relatively positive coverage.

SCHEDULE BRIEFINGS. Because the onslaught of media requests can be overwhelming, even with a beefed-up team, many organizations in a crisis use regularly scheduled briefings, press conferences or updates to highlight new developments. A daily update lets reporters advance the story while giving you a predictable, controllable window to present your organization's narrative. It also provides you a backstop when reporters ask questions in the interim; "we'll have more at our daily briefing" is a common placeholder response that buys you time when developing answers to difficult questions.

PLAN. During the crisis, develop a recovery strategy and incorporate it into your media relations tactics. In your conversations with reporters, try to get a sense of their plans for future coverage as the crisis is dying down. Post-crisis coverage can be as important as the crisis coverage in shaping stakeholders' views of your organization. Think of it as an opportunity as much as a risk.

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