

## Guidelines for Media Relations in a Crisis

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Effective media management is the single most important part of effective crisis management. The following eight principles have been proven in practice.

### 1. Accept responsibility.

Unless the crisis is something that has clearly been done *to* you (ie. terrorists have just bombed your airplane), accept responsibility. It's your bank that just lost people's money, your factory that just accidentally spilled green stuff into the river, your software that just crashed. It won't increase the amount of eventual judicial damages against you. It will demonstrate to the public that you're not irresponsible schmucks.

### 2. Show and feel real concern for the public.

You just screwed up somebody else's life. For Heaven's sake man, stand up and apologize.

Don't wrap it in legalisms. Say you're sorry, and mean it.

### 3. Don't lie.

No matter how hard you are tempted to tell just one little...fib...to avoid a present embarrassment, don't. Tomorrow you'll have to tell a bigger one to cover the first; the day after tomorrow, you'll be staying at the Watergate Hotel. Trust me, you won't like the rooms.

### 4. Don't hypothesize.

Particularly in the early phases of a crisis, when there is precious little reliable information available, the media will pressure you with "yes, but what do you *think* happened?" questions.

Avoid falling for this. Even if you hypothesize in all good faith, when your hypothesis falls apart (as they often do), you'll be accused of lying.

Solution: talk firmly, in detail, and often, about what you *do* know. Get the media focussed on that.



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## 5. Respond to all reasonable media needs.

Don't think of the media (or let your management think of the media) as the enemy. Reporters are only doing their job. If they're asking you whether your organization screwed up, it's only because the rest of the world wants to know. Don't take their questions personally, ever.

More to the point, go out of your way to accommodate all reasonable media requests. You don't have to allow them into places which are dangerous, or where they would get underfoot, or where secrets are hidden. But do honor their deadlines and do go out of your way to get them a place to set up shop, a place that has phone lines, power outlets, and most important, well-informed people they can interview.

If you want them to treat you like the enemy, start by treating *them* like the enemy.

## 6. Feed the hog.

Business executives sometimes have a hard time understanding that reporters get paid for writing stories...not for *not* writing stories. A reporter has to produce. Therefore, go out of your way to disclose newsworthy information to reporters as frequently as you can, consistent with the usual legal safeguards. (You're not going to release the names of next-of-kin until they've been notified by the police, for example).

Think like a reporter. Seek information on what you know their top concerns will be: death and injury; environmental damage; public health and safety; financial impact on the public.

## 7. Develop key messages and return to them often.

It's very important that you position the crisis in a way that emphasizes the organization's responsibility and good citizenship.

## 8. Dramatize the company's responsibility with visible acts.

Your organization (we assume) is acting responsibly – cleaning up the oil spill, providing blankets to people, extending financial compensation. Obviously you need to find words that leave a lasting public impression that while your organization may have screwed up, it is run by decent and honorable people who are trying their best to fix it and prevent it from happening again. Think of ways to dramatize this. Jimmy Carter didn't just tell the public that Three Mile Island was safe: he went into the nuclear plant on foot and took a tour.