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**“When Bad Things Happen to Your Good Name”**

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**Abstract**

This paper elaborates on some of the principles found in the paper by David Marder, UK, and posits some additional factors that might be useful to statistical agencies in managing media crises. When a crisis occurs, today’s media pose different challenges than previously -- some good, some bad. However, as statistical agencies facing the contention of publishing quickly but accurately and posting more data sets to the Internet without the same scrutiny of printed publications, we are more vulnerable to damaging our good names it took years to build. As communications professionals, we must insist that our agencies be prepared for various types of crises, have a process to follow if a crisis occurs, and provide crisis communications training to appropriate staff. We view this paper, therefore, to be a sort of primer to help all of us when the inevitable happens.

“There cannot be a crisis... my schedule is already full.” – H. Kissinger

As statistical agencies and because of the business we are in, we can expect a crisis will occur one way or another in time. There are various types of crises we may experience. Here are some examples:

- Accident or injury to employee;
- Employee disturbance or attack;
- Falsification of data;
- Loss of confidential data;
- Unauthorized access to Web site or computer network;
- Unauthorized access to Criminal activity by employee on or off the job;
- Public denunciation of a census or other data collection;
- Protest or demonstration;
- Natural disaster;
- Bomb threat;
- Payroll or other administrative problems;
- Impersonation of employee doing household interviews;
- Attack by politicians who do not like your data or the data you are collecting;

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- Challenges to your professional expertise; and
- Data. Errors.

### *The rise of Gigabyte goof-ups<sup>3</sup>*

This kind of error is one that is likely to happen increasingly as more statistical agencies turn to the Internet as their primary data disseminator. The rise of gigabyte goof-ups as reported recently in the *Chicago Tribune* is becoming a global problem. In addition to the kinds of error introduced by less scrutiny of data sets, in the rush to post timely information, other errors are occurring. The *Tribune* article states that:

“ Before the automation explosion ignited by e-commerce, human error was the key culprit when data went wrong; now software and network processes themselves are making more of their own messes.

In short:

“Fewer human operators plus more automation equals more computer-generated bugs.”

The article goes on to say that: “Previously, there was a person along the way reading the report or checking facts. If something was really silly, it had a good chance of getting caught. Now, if you don’t have human intelligence along the way, you had better start giving the computer much more common sense.”

Often a crisis involves a combination of these possible scenarios. When a crisis happens, it is important that our agencies take the necessary steps to protect our employees and the statistical community; “speak with one voice” and coordinate with appropriate offices; prepare spokespersons to give consistent, accurate responses; and control rumors or misstatements by the public, media or employees. Taking an open and honest, proactive approach to handling crises will enable you to contain the damage that can occur to your good name.

The goal of good crisis communication management should be to ensure that all the news, good or bad is communicated as soon as you can confirm it. If there is bad news, get it out all at once – to all the media at the same time.

## **Getting Prepared**

### ***A. Crisis Response Team(s)***

A crisis response team(s) should be formed before crises occur and receive training, if possible, from someone well versed in handling these communications. Usually this will be a consultant or former journalist. Ideally, no more than 10 people should be on a team(s). A smaller number of people on a team will enhance the ability to confab and make decisions quickly. Membership on the team should be flexible and determined by the incident. Generally, members should include the agency head; agency deputy or Chief Operating Officer; staff from the communications area (particularly media staff chief or spokesperson and chief of staff that liaise with legislative offices); and executive level manager from the part of the agency where the crisis occurred. The team(s) are responsible for developing a response to the situation for the media (initial statement, distribution); communicating, as appropriate, to other government agencies; overseeing all operations for the crisis response; communicating to agency employees, field offices, and other stakeholders. In some instances, it may be advisable to create two teams. One would focus on what to say and the other take charge of external communications to non-media audiences. Whatever the

<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, “Business.Technology,” July 10, 2000, p. 1.

composition, it is critical that the public affairs staff who have experience working with and communicating to the media be included on the team and play an integral role in shaping the response and its wording.

### ***B. Crisis Response Center***

As part of planning for the inevitable crisis, identify a location that will serve as the “response” or “nerve” center. The response center is the focal point for handling the crisis and access is restricted to team members and designated support staff. As the “nerve” center, it will function as the main inquiry-fielding location during a crisis and the base for developing and coordinating communications with target audiences (both internal and external.)

The center should be a private conference room or large office that is:

- Equipped with dedicated telephones, speakerphones; computers wired to the Internet with secure e-mail software and fax machines; has the capacity to increase phone lines, if necessary (remember, you do not want to discuss sensitive information on a mobile phone);
- Equipped with easel pads and markers, writing pads and pencils, phone logs and other reporting forms used to record information about the crisis;
- Equipped with a television and radio and recording equipment to monitor and log news coverage;
- Inaccessible to press or public.

All members of the response team(s) should be familiar with the center and equipment. Equipment should be tested periodically to ensure it operates. Any necessary manuals and written protocols also should be stored at the center for reference purposes. Always have a back-up location in case you must evacuate the primary response center location.

### ***C. Standby Statements***

Work with your communications and operational staff to identify the kinds of situations your agency is likely to experience. Then have the communications staff draft standby statements that can be issued quickly to the press while you are still assessing the situation. Standby statements are illustrative examples of what might be said and will need to be modified to fit the particular situation. Amendments to the statement might include:

1. Were there injuries, fatalities?
2. Were outside emergency personnel called?
3. Was the building damaged?
4. What steps were taken to control the situation?
5. What property or data were lost and/or damaged?

The statements always should include the positive core messages that you want to get across despite the crisis situation. Preparing draft standby statements prior to needing them helps assure that the right bases are covered and, hopefully, that you do not say anything that might result in litigation.

### ***D. Training***

Provide crisis communications training to members of the response team and others that might serve as a spokesperson. If your communications staff does not have the expertise to do the training, consider bringing in an outside expert. Use possible crisis scenarios and encourage the response team to work together in handling the “fictitious” crisis. This enables the team to develop rapport without the stress of a

real situation. Conduct periodic refresher training. Remember that staff change and our vulnerabilities will change. Review standby statements periodically to make sure they, also, are current.

## **Handling the Crisis**

### ***A. Five Stages of a Crisis***

1. *The event.* Something happens. You might be present when it happens or you might learn about it from a phone call. The event also could be a reporter or citizen's call with a question.
2. *First reactions.* Those involved in the event react, and you react to the information. Knowing that events can happen at any time, we need to be prepared to act calmly, thoughtfully and quickly.
3. *First actions.* What do you do first? Get the facts. Try to determine, as best you can, what actually happened. If possible, try to get verification of the facts. Answer these questions:
  - Who is involved?
  - Are there any injuries?
  - Is there physical danger to anyone?
  - Where and when did the event occur?
  - Do any emergency personnel (police, fire and ambulance) need to be called?
4. *Follow-through.* This is the actual handling of the event or crisis. There are two goals for this stage:
  - First, to respond appropriately with actions or statements that will take the event out of the "emergency" phase and get accurate information to the media and the public.
  - Second, to gain some measure of "control" of how the event is regarded by the media and the public, continuing to provide accurate information, giving the appearance of having the situation under control.
5. *Monitoring.* Is the event over? Has media or public interest in the event subsided? Is interest escalating? Does more need to be done? During this stage, keep in regular contact with all offices involved.

Critical factors are speed, accuracy, honesty and consistency in communications.

### **1. Assessing the Situation**

How you respond in the first few minutes of a crisis can affect how the crisis is handled, and can have an effect on how the media and the public think you are handling the situation. By its very nature, a crisis is an emotional situation that requires a level of detachment and calm. The Crisis Response Team should:

- Get the facts – Determine the exact nature of the crisis.
  - *What has occurred?* Get a complete description of the situation and when and where it has taken place.
  - *Who is involved?* Are those involved your employees only or are members of the general public involved as well?
  - *Why has a crisis developed?* Understanding the root cause of the crisis will enable you to better assess the situation.
- Get organized – Keep a record of key information. Develop or use existing forms to collect call information and keep a record of media inquiries. A Crisis Response Call Tree may prove helpful in

making sure that everyone in the chain of command has been contacted and that communications flow up and down the chain.

- Communicate – Establish a time to meet at the Crisis Response Center.

## **2. Assign responsibilities**

Determine who will do what including principal spokesperson duties, internal and field communications, statement drafting and issuance, press conference, media notification. If communication to other government agencies, stakeholders or legislative bodies is warranted, specifically assign someone.

## **3. Take appropriate action**

In addition to agreed mechanics in issuing a response, specific key media contacts should be assigned to communications staff for follow-up, to help ensure messages are reliably delivered.

## **4. Monitor the situation**

The communication specialist should assign staff to monitor the developing situation and the reaction by the media to your response.

### ***B. Working the Media***

The goals of communication between your agency and the news media are to:

- Ensure that the media receive timely and accurate information;
- Focus the public's perception of how the crisis is being handled;
- Develop appropriate expectations rather than waiting for them to be created by the media; and
- Reduce the chance of misinformation being reported to the public.

Your agency's response must follow the six cardinal rules of crisis communications management. All communications must be:

- Factual – never speculate;
- Compassionate – always convey concern for the people involved;
- Candid and forthright about all proactive steps being taken;
- Targeted directly to priority audiences;
- Positive and consistently persuasive; and
- Delivered as quickly as possible.

Remember, do not deny the obvious; do not place blame; and don't forget that privacy regulations apply during disasters and other incidents. Always stay "on the record." No matter what a reporter says about something being "off the record," and no matter whom the reporter is, **there is no such thing as "off the record."** Consider that anything you say to a reporter could be on the evening news or the front page of tomorrow's paper. We must remember that newspapers, radio and television stations are a business. They are in the business to increase circulation, listeners or viewership. However, they also may make mistakes. Developing a rapport with an outlet and its management can be of utmost assistance should a crisis occur.

### **The Interview**

**Prepare thoroughly.** Know the latest facts and information. Have supporting material available on paper. Anticipate which questions are most likely to be asked and know the key points you want to make.

**Be available.** Always respond to media calls as soon as possible. Make certain that phone messages from the media are among the first to be returned. It is critical that an open channel of communication is immediately established with the media.

**Speak to be understood.** Answer the questions in complete, easy-to-understand sentences. Avid using jargon and acronyms. Speak to the audience's interests.

**Be positive.** If a reporter asks, "Why haven't you fixed the problem?" do not answer, "We haven't fixed the problem because..." A better response is "We have been moving as quickly as possible to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Make as many positive points as you can.

**Be accurate.** Do not speculate or guess an answer. If you do not know, say so. Then commit to getting the information as quickly as possible.

**Tell the truth.** An organization is only as believable as the people who represent it. Once caught in a lie, it is difficult to regain credibility, and years of positive reputation building can be destroyed.

### **Specific Considerations for Television**

**Control the visual.** Pictures tell a story, so carefully consider where you will conduct the interview. Choose a location with a neutral background. Pre-identify possible locations for holding news conferences.

**Be brief, focused and conversational.** Stick to your key, positive points. For most stories, the reporter is only going to use a 10 or 20 second sound bite.

**Never assume the recorder is turned off.** Any time a camera and/or microphone is near, consider yourself "on stage" and act and speak accordingly.

**Look at the reporter, but talk to the audience.** Do not look at the camera; rather, speak to and look directly at the reporter. Remember, though to address your remarks with the viewer in mind.

**Keep your hands and body relatively still.** Even though you may be nervous, the camera can sometimes make fidgeting people look more like they're not responding truthfully. Be careful not to nod in agreement to a question simply because you understand it. The question may have a negative implication, and you will be on camera appearing to agree with it.

**Dress appropriately.** Business attire. If the crisis hits on an evening or weekend, more casual clothing can be worn with a blazer or sports jacket. Avoid T-shirts or clothing with logos or other writing (unless it is your agency's.) If make-up is offered, use it. Cameras magnify sweat and can make you appear nervous or out-of-control.

**Try to relax.** Remember that you have something important to say. Stretch your facial muscles, roll your shoulders forward, and breathe deeply in through your nose and exhale out of your mouth before you begin the interview.

### **Tools to help during a crisis**

Today's media operates at lightening speed. The advent of the Internet, and extensive reliance on broadcast media by the public for its news means that as public relations professionals, we need to consider all avenues of repairing whatever damage may have been done to our good names.

Here is an example:

Several weeks prior to the mail out of the questionnaire, the Census Bureau planned to mail an advance letter alerting the American public to the importance of the census. However, a few days before these mailings were to occur, the Bureau received information from the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) that there was a problem with the house number portion of the address for the advance letters. An extra digit was erroneously inserted in front of the house number on the address of the advance letters. For example, a letter with the correct address of 101 Main Street would incorrectly appear as 1101 Main Street. On the face of it, this may not seem to be much of a crisis as the error was consistent and easily fixed. However, this error occurred at a time when the majority side of Congress was publicly questioning our ability to conduct a successful census. In fact, the chair of our subcommittee already had characterized Census 2000 as a “failed census” and used this rhetoric to attack our plans to statistically adjust the count to improve its accuracy. Many of our other overseers such as the Monitoring Board, General Accounting Office and Inspector General similarly had questioned our ability to successfully conduct such a massive undertaking.

However, there was another issue with the advance letter. For the first time, the Census Bureau was making available census questionnaires not only in English and Spanish, but also Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog. The process for requesting a special language form was to check the appropriate language needed and return the advance letter in the envelope provided. Many in these Asian communities were not aware that they needed to proactively request the forms. At the same time the Bureau was addressing the extra digit problem, criticism was escalating for the Bureau not doing a better job of getting the word out to those linguistically isolated populations. The Communications Directorate decided to try to address both issues at the same time.

To counter the possible bad press, the Census Bureau response team quickly did several things:

- Fact-finding determined that the error did not result from an action on the part of the Census Bureau. The contractor caused the error by picking up the wrong fields when making the address labels. While the printed house number was incorrect, the postal bar code that is used by USPS automated equipment to sort the mail was correctly imprinted on the advance letter. The bar code is the actual basis for most USPS delivery, not the printed address.
- The Bureau investigated checked other mailings (questionnaires, reminder postcards) and determined that this problem did not effect the production, mailing or delivery of other census mail pieces. The printing of the advance letters was an operation independent of the printing of the other census forms and questionnaires.
- Census Bureau Director Prewitt issued a statement to the media expressing regret for the error and assuring the public that this would not affect the census. The statement explained how the error occurred and that Bureau staff as part of the quality assurance process should have caught the problem. The statement included a quote from “our long-term partners” the postal service that “America can count on the U.S. Postal Service to deliver this and all future census mailings.” It stressed that the census questionnaires were addressed properly and indicated that we would be working with our community partners, through advertising and the media to stress the importance of opening and reading the advance letter.
- A fact sheet on the Census 2000 advance letter mailing also was created that outlined the problem, what the Census Bureau was doing, that the problem had no effect on other mailings, the purpose of the advance letter and what the American public should do. The fact sheet was given to the media as well as to various stakeholders like our advisory committee members, Members of Congress, over 150,000 local government, corporate and community organization partners.
- Dr. Prewitt did one-on-one interviews with press from major newspapers.
- Staff from our Public Information Office worked over the weekend to field media inquiries.
- \$1 million was spent on new advertising:
  - Mechanicals in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog were produced for handbills and posters.
  - Newspaper ads were produced in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese.
  - Radio scripts for on-air reads were produced in English and Spanish.

Internet banner ads were purchased for Korean and Chinese Web sites encouraging them to open and read the advance letter.

Video News Releases (VNRs) were produced and fed 4 times to the media. The VNRs featured Dr. Prewitt and a postal service representative. In addition to explaining that the digit problem would not affect the delivery of the advance letter or census questionnaire, the feed also discussed how to request a form in a language other than English.

Posters, handbills and other materials were sent to partnership specialists in the Regional Census Centers to distribute to Questionnaire Assistance Centers, local media, and other local stakeholders. Headquarters sent letters and posters to partners, State Data Centers and advisory committee members explaining what had happened.

Regional media specialists distributed talking points and audio and video Public Service Announcements (PSAs) prepared by Dr. Prewitt to local media.

T-shirts were made up with the same graphic as the poster and distributed to headquarters and regional staff.

Information was posted on the Bureau's Web site including a graphic about opening the letter that could be downloaded by interested parties.

All of this occurred during the first few days after finding out about the problem from the postal service.

The results? One week after the problem of the extra digit occurred, the story was dead. The Press was no longer covering the story. Positive stories were appearing about our outreach to those with linguistic problems and that we appeared to be going all-out to include everyone in the census. It also assured staff that we were ready to handle most any crisis that Census 2000 might bring (and we sure have had our share!)

This example points out the kinds of things and avenues we must consider to get the word out when a crisis occurs. We must think beyond the traditional interview by newspaper, radio and TV reporters. Video News Releases (VNRs) and Video News Feeds (VNFs) can be used successfully by a statistical agency particularly when you include sound bites not only from an agency spokesperson but also a respected individual outside the agency. The Census Bureau finds VNFs to be particularly useful if the crisis is isolated in a particular region of the country. These targeted feeds allow the use of local information and references that increase their likelihood of pick-up. In fact, in strategically planning our feeds, the Census Bureau looks at mid-size rather than the large media markets because they are most likely to use our feeds. Don't forget the Internet. More and more people are using it and many subscribe to services that provide news tickers during the day. Newspapers with web sites often now post stories all during the day. Waiting too long to talk with the media can cause a negative story to get out before you can get your message out making it harder to do damage control. (This also is another way to get a heads-up on coverage as you can see the night before what the morning may bring.) Finally, advertising is a tool that can help when the crisis is big. The ads need to convey a message that reassures the public's faith in your agencies' abilities and restores your good name.