Practical Environmental Crisis Communication: Messaging

Understanding how to present accurate and timely information to the media and the public

Failure to communicate effectively during or immediately after an environmental crisis can sometimes lead to greater public anger and concern than the crisis itself. When an organization is in the spotlight because of a crisis, its reputation and public image are at stake. That's why it is crucial for organizations to understand the nuts and bolts of effective crisis communication.

About This Article

In the winter issue of this journal, we discussed the process of mounting an effective crisis communication response by using a team approach.[1] In this article, we discuss how to develop effective crisis communication messages.

The discussion begins with some basic background on messaging. We then move on to specific topics of relevance to crisis communicators, including how to work effectively with reporters. We outline what messaging should aim to accomplish (including the elements needed for achieving "closure") and offer ideas for developing effective messages.

We also touch on a range of challenges that crisis communicators typically must confront, such as handling uncertainty, dealing with the difficult (but very real) issue of stakeholders' emotional reactions to crises, and issuing apologies. We include practical advice on crafting news releases, message points, and questions-and-answers.

In the next issue of this journal, we will conclude our series on crisis communication with a discussion of postcrisis review and recovery. This involves reviewing not only the crisis itself and the organization's crisis communication response, but also the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the organization's handling of the crisis and crisis communication.

Background: Messaging Basics

Messaging involves conveying the facts about an environmental incident (such as an oil spill) or situation (such as the discovery of contamination). Good crisis communication depends on releasing only *confirmed* information about the incident or situation itself.

But, as in the case of effective risk and environmental communication, truly effective crisis communication also involves surrounding these facts with contextual information that allows

Carol J. Forrest

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Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)
DOI: 10.1002/tqem.20323

stakeholders and the general public to understand more fully what has happened.

Context, Not Spin

"Context," as we use the word here, includes information such as how an incident occurred or a situation came to develop, where it happened, who was involved, what the consequences are, and what is being done to investigate, remediate, or otherwise manage, minimize, or eliminate threats to human health and the environment.

Nobody likes bad news. But providing context can reduce public anxiety about a crisis and help stakeholders look ahead to what is being done to address the problem rather than dwelling on the incident itself.

If a crisis is obvious enough to require communicating with the public, it is pointless (and arrogant) to refuse to acknowledge it.

Please note that we are not talking about "spinning" information to make a crisis look better than it is or to hide unpleasant facts. The biggest mistakes crisis communicators can make include lying, omitting unflattering facts, or soft-pedaling information tied to actual, potential, or perceived risk.

But it is also irresponsible to make loose statements that have the potential to scare the public or create serious confusion about what has happened and what its consequences might be. Thus, understanding how to present accurate information using language that the public understands is extremely important.

Concerns About Legal Liability

When an organization experiences an environmental incident or situation, it can face potential legal liability—which means that legal counsel may want to be involved in the communication process. Communicators should of course be willing to work with the organization's legal department (and outside counsel, if necessary). However, legal counsel should not have "veto power" over the decision to communicate, and organizations should not use concerns about potential liability as an excuse to avoid communicating with the public. Messages can be crafted to convey information and acknowledge what has occurred without admitting fault or liability.

Handling crisis communication is a management issue that involves more than narrow concerns about legal damages or fines. The company also has to recognize that its ability to continue operating in the community could be at stake. Refusing to provide accurate and timely information to the public will not allow the organization to evade legal responsibility. Moreover, failure to communicate can backfire by generating anger and resentment within the community—thereby creating fertile ground for future litigation or public activism against the organization. If a crisis is obvious enough to require communicating with the public, it is pointless (and arrogant) to refuse to acknowledge it.

Role of the Media in Crisis Communication

Before we explore how to build effective messages, we consider reporters and how they perform their jobs. As discussed in the previous article, we recommend that the crisis communication effort include outreach to key local officials, neighbors, and other stakeholders within a facility's community, as well as to reporters. However, since most members of the general public will receive information about a crisis from the media, the majority of the crisis communication efforts (at least during the immediate aftermath of the crisis) will concentrate on providing information to reporters. It is important to also consider "citizen journalists" (see **Exhibit 1**) since their influence continues to increase, particularly on the local level, as small, local newspapers cease publication.

Exhibit 1. Citizen Journalists

The Internet and websites such as YouTube have given rise to a rapidly increasing army of citizen journalists who publish their own news stories, videos, or opinion pieces online. Many of these individuals have not had formal training in journalism. Some citizen journalists may advocate for specific causes or viewpoints (and present their information accordingly). Others simply gather information or video and post it online so that viewers can draw their own conclusions.

Problems With Citizen Journalists

The contributions of citizen journalists to the coverage of environmental crises can be problematic for several reasons:

- Readers or viewers who have limited knowledge of environmental issues can't easily judge the level of expertise or knowledge of the citizen journalist who authored or is presenting a particular story or video.
- Lacking journalistic training and the discipline imposed by editors overseeing their work, citizen journalists may neglect to "vet" their information, rely heavily on fringe viewpoints, or cross the line from objective reporting into opinion (while still presenting their work as "news").
- The relative anonymity of many citizen journalists makes it difficult for crisis communicators to reach out to them with information that would improve the accuracy of their reporting.

Despite these shortcomings, citizen journalists aren't likely to go away. Particularly as local newspapers cease publication and major metropolitan newspapers lose circulation, the influence of citizen journalists is likely to increase.

Fortunately, some of today's citizen journalists are talented amateurs, former reporters, or journalism majors who opted for other careers as their "day jobs." These individuals can be quite skilled at gathering and communicating information.

Reaching Out to Citizen Journalists

From what we've seen in this rapidly evolving field, informative citizen journalism about environmental issues (including crisis incidents or situations) can most often be found on websites devoted to covering community or locally based issues. Blogs and stories on many of these websites are written by diligent men and women who are seeking to report objectively (with some commentary) on issues that are important to their communities.

Facility managers should consider including popular or competent local citizen journalists on e-mail lists for news releases and other information. They might also want to engage these individuals (as practical) in dialogue as issues surface. The initial outreach to citizen journalists ideally should take place before a crisis arises.

One key point to keep in mind: Like their professional counterparts, most citizen journalists don't like to be "handled" by communicators. Crisis communicators can provide them with information and offer to speak with them, but citizen journalists most likely will rebel at attempts (or perceived attempts) to control their work.

Expect Bad News

News about an environmental incident (such as a fire or chemical spill) or situation (such as the discovery of contamination) will be bad news. There is no way around it: Some, and possibly most, of the news coverage will be devoted to negative information.

Although it may seem obvious that crisis news equals bad news, hearing or reading negative stories about one's organization can still be a shock to crisis communication novices. But crisis communication team members must set aside their sensitivities and recognize that no matter how responsive they are, the news coverage *will* contain some negative content. The team should focus their efforts on working with reporters to provide them with information that encourages objective reporting and minimizes sensationalism. If communicators are able to achieve such coverage, they will have done an excellent job.

It is worth noting that, in our experience, many crisis communication efforts fall short not because reporters are inept or malicious, but because the people who are supposed to be communicating about the crisis do a poor job of providing reporters with the information they want or need.

Reporters and Their Work

Unless they work for trade or professional publications or websites, most reporters for print and broadcast media are what are called "general assignment" reporters. This means they do not have a particular area of subject matter expertise, but instead report whatever stories their editors assign them to cover.

Thus, crisis communicators cannot assume that the reporters covering their incident or situation know about environmental regulations or science, risk assessment, facility operation, or other specialized topics.

Deadlines and the Rush to Report

Reporters' work is driven by deadlines. In previous decades, these deadlines tended to have predictable schedules, such as the cutoff time for the ten o'clock television news or the filing deadline for the morning newspaper. But with around-the-clock news coverage on cable and satellite TV and websites, deadlines have become shorter—and "breaking news" can be published or aired at any time.

We have found that reporters will frequently use whole sentences, paragraphs, and sections (often verbatim) from documents that we have written—thus ensuring that our organization's messages are included in the story that gets reported.

As reporters race to beat their competitors to the airways, the Internet, or the newsstand, they must work with whatever information they can get. This means that if crisis communicators are slow to issue news releases or answer questions, their organization's voice will be absent from the initial stories—and accuracy may suffer.

Seeking Out Controversy and Multiple Viewpoints

Professional reporters are trained to look for conflict and controversy and to include diverse viewpoints in their stories. So even if reporters include all of the information that crisis communicators have given them (a best-case outcome), they will not stop with the communicators' version of events.

Good reporters will seek to interview a variety of people in order to probe for additional or conflicting viewpoints. And they will include quotes from persons who provide perspectives other than those voiced by the crisis communication team.

Making Sure Your Message Gets Reported

Crisis communicators can greatly increase the likelihood of accurate, objective, and balanced reporting by providing written information (e.g., news releases, fact sheets, other background information) for reporters to use in preparing their stories. We have found that reporters will frequently use whole sentences, paragraphs, and sections (often verbatim) from documents that we have written—thus ensuring that our organization's messages are included in the story that gets reported.

The key to accomplishing this is to provide basic, objective information, written in news style, that reporters can easily integrate into their stories. See **Exhibit 2** for a list of questions that reporters frequently ask in cases of chemical accidents or other incidents involving the environment.

Exhibit 3 offers a model for "first contact" with reporters when communicators do not yet have much in the way of confirmed information. This template takes the guesswork out of the designated spokesperson's initial briefing to reporters.

Discussion of media monitoring (gathering, reviewing, and analyzing news stories for their content, tone, and presentation) will appear in the third article of this series on practical environmental crisis communication.

Messaging: What Are Crisis Communicators Trying to Accomplish?

Crisis communication is undertaken to help the public understand what has happened in

Exhibit 2. Typical Questions From Reporters

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Was anyone hurt or killed?
- Is the public in danger?
- What was the cause of the incident? (How did it happen?)
- When will you know whether people were exposed or could be exposed to hazardous chemicals or contamination?
- How much environmental damage is this accident going to cause?
- Have you had other accidents or situations like this?
- Did you know that an incident like this could happen?
- What effect is this incident or situation going to have on the company/facility/organization?
- Is your organization going to get fined because of this situation or incident?
- What is the monetary value of the damage to the facility?
- How much will it cost to rebuild/conduct a cleanup?
- Are you going to reimburse neighbors who were evacuated, sheltered-in-place, or otherwise affected (including damage to property)?
- What steps are you taking to bring the situation under control?

regard to a crisis incident or situation. In crises in which the environment or human health has been (or is perceived as having been) affected, much of the messaging will focus on potential risk and on efforts to mitigate or prevent exposure.

But after a crisis is over—or is in the process of being addressed (e.g., during the cleanup of a spill, during the investigation and cleanup of newly discovered contamination)—novice crisis communicators soon realize that the ultimate goal of the crisis communication effort extends beyond simply providing facts. Rather, the ultimate goal is to help stakeholders achieve "closure" in regard to the crisis.

"Closure" does not mean that an incident is wiped from the public's memory. Closure means that the incident is no longer top-of-mind or a source of immediate or recurring concern. In other words, in the eyes of stakeholders (especially at the local level), because the incident has been adequately addressed, it is no longer viewed as an active, ongoing issue.

Achieving Closure: Four Key Messaging Elements

Our experience conducting interviews of local officials and residents of communities after serious incidents has helped us identify four key messaging elements that are vital to helping stakeholders achieve closure after an incident. (Readers will note that several of these elements overlap. For example, providing accurate information and working with experts and authorities also serve to convey competence.)

1. **The crisis communication effort provides accurate information about the crisis (and does so in a timely manner).**

   Delivering accurate information to the public in a timely manner may seem like the absolute minimum that an organization should do, but many still can't manage to accomplish this task. Inability to deliver information to the public about a crisis creates an appearance of managerial ineptness that can be hard to dispel. By

Exhibit 3. Model for "First Contact" With Reporters

Persons who are new to crisis communication often dread the first contact with reporters. But in many ways, making this first contact may be the easiest task a spokesperson will have to perform. This is because at the beginning of a crisis (such as a spill or fire), very little confirmed information may be available—and reporters are aware of this.

Why Not Wait Until You Have More Information?

You may be wondering: If there is little information available at first, why not wait until you can gather additional details? The answer is that a first contact does more than provide information. Equally important, it:

- Establishes the organization's intent to provide information.
- Introduces the spokesperson to reporters.
- Allows the organization to confirm that it is working on addressing the incident and (if applicable) that it is working with others, such as the local fire department.

Remember that news doesn't wait. If you don't talk to reporters, they will find someone who will. It is better to have reporters looking to you for confirmed information rather than seeking all of their information from other parties. You can't keep reporters from approaching other parties, but you can ensure that other parties won't be their only sources.

Moreover, by reaching out to reporters, you cannot be accused of refusing to comment. This can be a particularly damning accusation, especially at the community level, where residents and officials may be worried about the potential for adverse health or environmental effects—and will view a failure to provide information as arrogant or uncaring.

First Contact Template

The following is the model that we use—and that is used successfully by many other crisis communication experts throughout the world.

Step 1: Come out to where the reporters are located and introduce yourself (e.g., "Hello. I'm John Smith, facility manager here at XYZ Corporation.").

Step 2: Explain to the reporters that you only have a few minutes to talk with them, since you are in the midst of dealing with the crisis, but that you do intend to be responsive to their needs as confirmed information becomes available. (Gather reporters' business cards or have an assistant do this to ensure that you know who is covering the story.)

Step 3: Make a general statement confirming what has happened. ("We have had a fire," "We have had an explosion.")

Step 4: Make an optional statement, if appropriate: "We have called the fire department," "We have notified the Coast Guard." Such statements communicate responsiveness to the situation and that competent people are involved.

Step 5: Indicate that, at this point, you do not have other confirmed information, but that you intend to get back to them with what you do have in an hour (or some other reasonable length of time).

Step 6: Thank reporters for their interest and walk away. If a crisis has just occurred or emerged or is ongoing, you can do this immediately after the first contact—even if reporters continue to shout questions.

Working With Reporters

Ideally, in connection with this first contact, an assistant can pass out background information on the facility and organization that includes a web address. This will allow reporters to prepare a basic news story, which is likely to include the following information:

> Facility manager John Smith confirmed that a fire occurred at the XYZ Corporation facility on North Avenue. Smith said that the fire department is on the scene, working with facility personnel to ensure that the fire is extinguished.
>
> XYZ is a multinational corporation that manufactures widgets at its North Avenue facility. According to information provided by the company, the North Avenue facility has been operating for 20 years and employs 64 workers. . . .

The assistant should also gather information on deadlines from the assembled reporters to ensure that, if possible, an update on the incident can be provided before air time/newspaper production time.

contrast, delivering accurate information to the public promptly can demonstrate organizational competence and concern for stakeholders and the environment that speaks volumes.

2. **The crisis communication effort provides insights into the processes being used to investigate and/or remedy the situation and to ensure that the chance of such an incident happening again is minimized.**

The public wants to know that the company or other organization responsible for a facility or activity is taking action (or will be taking action) to address the crisis. Such information provides context that helps relieve some of the anxiety stakeholders often feel.

This information need not necessarily be detailed. One-liners are often enough (e.g., "We have engaged an outside expert and are inspecting the equipment that we believe may have malfunctioned," "We have secured the area where the fire occurred and are working with safety experts to determine how the blaze started").

3. **The crisis communication effort communicates that competent people are addressing the situation and that the organization responsible for the crisis is cooperating with authorities.**

Competency and cooperating with authorities are closely related. The public wants to know that the organization that experienced an incident is willing to look beyond the expertise of those who (rightly or wrongly) may be perceived as having allowed the incident or situation to occur. Thus, if corporate personnel or outside process safety experts are reviewing an incident at a facility, communicators should say so. Additional detail isn't required initially, but the fact that outside experts are on scene is important.

Organizations that do not appear to be cooperating with local, state, or federal authorities often are seen as untrustworthy and attempting to "hide something." This is especially true if the incident had (or was perceived as having) the potential to cause effects beyond a facility's fence line. When we interview people after crises in cases where discussion of government authorities' involvement is absent from the news coverage, a common perception many people voice is that the corporation or other organization "probably swept this one under the rug."

4. **The crisis communication effort includes an acknowledgment that the crisis occurred and clearly states the organization's regret over the consequences (e.g., injuries, environmental damage, that people have been evacuated, sheltered-in-place, are frightened and concerned). Note: Public fear, whether it was warranted by the actual incident or not, is very real to those who experienced it and needs to be acknowledged.**

Crisis communicators must use consistent wording to ensure that their information (which often discusses concepts of a complex nature) is communicated in a manner that will increase public understanding and minimize confusion.

Acknowledging a crisis and expressing compassion for those who may have been injured or are simply frightened does not mean that an organization has "taken the blame" or admitted culpability. Instead, it means that the organization's managers are responding on a human level to human emotions.

Failure to express sympathy conveys coldness and disrespect for others on a human level that can lead to public anger. This anger can easily eclipse concerns over the incident itself.

Communicators must avoid making statements of fault if the causes of a crisis are not yet fully understood. They must also avoid making blanket promises to reimburse those who may have been affected, or engaging in excessive, over-the-top apologies. But neighbors and others who may have been affected or frightened typically need to have their concerns acknowledged before they will listen to explanations that can move them toward closure. The technique we use is to say, “I can see you are upset. Let me tell you what we know. . . .”

Building Effective Messages

As discussed in the first article in this series, multiple news releases and multiple briefing sessions will likely be required to respond to crises of significant or major magnitude. Crisis communicators must use consistent wording to ensure that their information (which often discusses concepts of a complex nature) is communicated in a manner that will increase public understanding and minimize confusion.

Developing messages that are accurate and sufficiently complete to provide context—and ultimately closure—is no easy task. It can be especially challenging in crises of significant public concern (and remember, a crisis that seems minor to a large organization may seem significant to facility neighbors).

Good communicators can do better than “no comment,” no matter how little confirmed information they have available to them.

Developing Messages for Spokespersons

Spokespersons who try to speak off-the-cuff about risks to health or the environment often find themselves making statements that can be seriously misinterpreted. For this reason, we advise crisis communicators to develop not only news releases, but also sets of message points (“talking points” or “key messages”) and questions-and-answers.

These documents, which typically are used only internally within the organization, can help spokespersons deliver clear and consistent messages. They also can be used in subsequent news releases or other information pieces.

Worksheet for Designing Messages

The worksheet in **Exhibit 4** is a tool to help crisis communicators develop the messages that are included in news releases, message points, and questions-and-answers. At the beginning of the crisis, you won’t be able to fill in all of the blanks, nor will all of the information you write down find its way into formal statements. However, going through this worksheet will help you build statements that will ultimately include the four key messaging elements necessary to achieve closure.

Remember: If the incident caused effects outside the fence line (or is perceived as having done so), people will expect answers—and they should get them. Businesses operate at the discretion of the public, and even a minor incident can be viewed as serious to persons who live or work nearby.

Avoid Saying “No Comment”

We counsel our clients against saying “no comment.” Responding to a question with “no comment” often is viewed as arrogant or inept. It may suggest that the spokesperson either can’t be bothered to talk to the media or stakeholders, or that he or she can’t come up with a better answer (even if that answer is “I don’t know”).

Good communicators can do better than “no comment,” no matter how little confirmed information they have available to them. For some ideas, see Exhibit 3 (model for first contact).

Handling Uncertainty

Confirmed information is often hard to come by early in a crisis, which means that crisis communicators invariably deal with a lot of uncertainty.

Admitting When You Don’t Have Answers

Credible communicators admit when they don’t have the answers to questions. They may

Exhibit 4. Worksheet for Designing Messages

What Happened? (Communicating Basic Information on the Crisis)

Describe the situation or incident in simple, brief terms (e.g., “We had a fire”):

____

____

If the cause is known and confirmed, how would you explain it? (e.g., “Sparks from a welding torch ignited the fire”):

____

____

Describe the effects (e.g., “There were several minor injuries”) or lack of effects (e.g., “Fortunately, there were no injuries”):

____

____

Describe the organization’s actions (e.g., “We evacuated our workers from the area,” “We implemented our emergency response plan and called the fire department”):

____

____

Describe the current status of the incident or situation (e.g., “We have transferred the remaining oil out of the leaking storage tank and begun cleanup activities,” “The fire department is investigating the area where the fire began to determine how it started”):

____

____

Actions Being Taken to Remedy or Investigate the Incident or Situation

(Note: Much of this information is vital to addressing stakeholders’ specific concerns about health, safety, and environmental protection.)

What can be said about the potential for exposure/environmental damage/property damage/ability to deliver product to customers? (e.g., “The spill was contained and did not enter the creek,” “The visible emissions seen rising from our facility were primarily water vapor”):

____

____

If additional investigation is required to determine possible effects, what will this investigation involve? Who will conduct it? When might the results be available? (e.g., “We are working with the state environmental agency to determine whether emissions from the accident could have traveled from our facility in concentrations that could have affected people”):

____

____

If there was a release of chemicals or potential exposure to chemicals, you may need to describe in general terms the possible health effects that exposures can cause relative to dose (e.g., “Ammonia can be smelled at concentrations that are many times lower than the levels at which it can cause harm. It can cause temporary irritation to the eyes. At high concentrations, it can also injure the lungs and other organs.”). If the concentrations to which people were likely exposed are known, you might describe how this dose compares to the dose at which health effects may be seen (e.g., “Computer modeling indicates that the amount of chemical X that people in subdivision A may have been exposed to during the 20-minute release is less than half the amount that workers can be exposed to over an 8-hour workday under government regulations”):

____

____

Is there any aspect to the response (e.g., evacuation of facility personnel) or the organization’s actions that may need to be explained? (e.g., “One of our procedures in the event of a fire in the processing area of our facility is to evacuate our employees to the administration building”):

____

____

Describe in general terms the actions you intend to take to investigate and/or ensure that the situation or incident does not recur (e.g., “We have hired storage tank experts to inspect the rest of our tanks to ensure that they are free of defects”):

____

____

Exhibit 4. Worksheet for Designing Messages *(continued)*

Demonstrating Competence and Cooperation With Authorities

Who have you worked with or informed of this incident or situation? List their credentials and/or affiliations, if relevant (e.g., "We have brought in consultants who specialize in this technology," "We have been working closely with the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and local police on this issue"):

____

____

In the case of a terrorist incident (or suspected terrorist incident) or other criminal activity, such as workplace violence or sabotage, who did you contact in law enforcement and are they going to be investigating? If it was a case of suspected terrorism, did they investigate and determine that the incident was not terrorism? (If terrorism or suspected terrorism is involved, refer reporters to law enforcement for additional information.)

____

____

What statements can you make about the competence of your employees in dealing with this situation or incident? (e.g., "Our employees are trained to respond to such incidents, and they immediately implemented our emergency response plan"):

____

____

Acknowledging and Taking Responsibility for the Situation or Incident

(see also the section of this article on "Making Apologies")

Statement of the organization's policy toward safety and environmental protection:

____

____

Describe actions the facility/organization will take to remedy the situation, investigate the situation, or minimize the likelihood of another incident. How long will it take? Who will conduct it? What is involved? What will you do with the results?

____

____

Statement describing the organization's intent to address the situation or incident (e.g., "We intend to clean up the spill and investigate how it occurred"):

____

____

Are there specific issues that should be commented on in an apology to stakeholders? Were neighbors sheltered in place or evacuated? Was an area of importance to the community affected (e.g., local stream, lake, playground)?

____

____

Describe the method or process by which you will make additional information available to the public. Who can stakeholders contact if they have questions?

____

____

explain why they don't have information yet (e.g., "We are waiting to hear what the fire department finds in their investigation"). If possible, they should state when they think they will have the relevant information (e.g., "We expect the laboratory results later today and will make them available after we have had a chance to review them"). Either of these responses is preferable to refusing to talk to reporters or resorting to making speculative statements (see below).

Providing Contextual and Interim Information

In situations where little confirmed information is available, communicators should consider their options for providing general, contextual information that will help prepare reporters and the public to better understand the crisis incident or situation when confirmed information can finally be provided.

For example, in one case we worked on that involved concerns about possible contamination in a public school building, we knew that the results of the laboratory analyses would not be available for several weeks. However, given the extreme level of media interest (and the concerns of parents), we knew that we couldn't wait until the analytical results were ready to release information.

Instead, we provided information to both the media and parents about how the investigation in the school building was being conducted. We described the procedures that were followed in collecting and handling samples, the types of substances for which the samples would be analyzed, and the rigorous quality control/quality assurance processes that the laboratory (which held government certifications for analyzing environmental samples) used to perform the testing.

This "interim" release of information demonstrated the competence of the investigators and the responsiveness of the school district administration. It also provided sufficient background on the process surrounding the sampling and analysis effort so that when the results were finally released—and showed that no contaminants were present in concentrations of concern—both the media and the parents were able to accept the validity of the results since they had insights into (and confidence in) the investigative process.

Keep Responses Limited to Confirmed Information

While some communicators get into trouble by failing to be sufficiently responsive to reporters and stakeholders, other communicators sometimes find themselves in trouble when they attempt to be too helpful—and stray beyond confirmed information.

Avoid "Volunteering"

"Volunteering" refers to off-the-cuff remarks that spokespersons add to the confirmed information or message points they are supposed to be delivering. Such remarks can cause confusion. Worse, they sometimes can be construed as admissions of serious problems that reporters will want to pursue. The following example highlights volunteering:

> Question: "Have you spilled oil into the creek before?"
>
> Answer with volunteering: "No. This is the only spill we have had that has entered the creek. *Though you know, last year, we had a spill that almost made it to the creek, but we caught it in time. We also have a lot of little spills—but those don't cause any harm because we clean them up right away.*" (volunteering in italics)

While some communicators get into trouble by failing to be sufficiently responsive to reporters and stakeholders, other communicators sometimes find themselves in trouble when they attempt to be too helpful—and stray beyond confirmed information.

A more appropriate response (without volunteering) would have simply included the straightforward statement that "this is the only spill we have had that has entered the creek."

Avoid Speculation

Incautious communicators can fall victim to yet another trap: answering a question that calls for speculation with a speculative answer. Reporters and other stakeholders often ask speculative questions. Communicators need to be able to identify such questions and keep their answers on-point with confirmed information. For example:

Question: "What would have happened if the fire had managed to make it to your chemical storage area?"

Answer: "The fire was contained to the utility shed."

Additional Question: "Yes—but what would have happened if the chemical storage area caught fire?"

Answer: "Since that didn't happen, I'd rather not speculate. What's important is that the fire was contained to the utility shed."

Bridging involves moving the conversation away from questions you can't answer (or aren't in a position to answer at the time) to messages that you do wish to emphasize.

Communicators may need to discuss "what ifs?" with local stakeholders after the crisis is over, but for purposes of crisis communication and media briefings, it is better to avoid straying into speculative areas that reporters could use to sensationalize an incident.

Going "Off the Record"

When dealing with reporters (and other stakeholders as well), communicators should avoid making comments that are intended to be confidential and "off the record." There are two reasons for this. First, since reporters are competing against one another, an "off the record" comment may be too juicy for a reporter to pass up. Second, in the heat of note taking or taping, reporters may forget just what information was supposed to be "off the record." This happens more often than you might think. So avoid confusion and stick with information that you won't mind seeing in print.

Don't Play Favorites

During a crisis, it is considered bad form for professional communicators to "play favorites" when releasing information to reporters. All reporters who have called or shown up at the front gate should receive the same information at the same time. Communicators don't want to make enemies during a crisis, so requests for "exclusives" should be politely declined. Communicators also should not appear to be withholding information from any legitimate news outlet that makes an inquiry.

After the major reporting on a crisis has passed, communicators have more latitude about providing additional information to specific reporters who want to write follow-up stories. Determining whether to grant or decline follow-up interviews is a strategic decision that should be made by senior management.

Bridging: A Useful Tool If Used Appropriately

This leads us to a valuable communication tool: bridging. Bridging involves moving the conversation away from questions you can't answer (or aren't in a position to answer at the time) to messages that you do wish to emphasize. For example:

Question: "Do you think you were negligent to let this accident happen?"

Answer: "We don't yet know the cause of this accident, but at this point, I think the important thing is that everyone is safe and we are in the process of cleaning up the spill."

Communicators can use bridging to stay on-message with reporters. When dealing with broadcast media in particular, bridging allows them to avoid making statements that could be edited into sensational or unduly negative coverage.

In our opinion, however, bridging should be used very sparingly when talking to stakeholders such as neighbors, local officials, and the like. Excessive use of bridging often comes across as evasive and unresponsive to stakeholders' concerns.

Dealing With Emotions

This brings us to dealing with emotions, particularly those of local stakeholders. While neighbors and local officials will want to hear the facts, they are also often seeking a human connection with (and human responsiveness from) an organization's communicators.

When dealing with frightened or worried stakeholders, one of the first steps communicators must take is to acknowledge the stakeholders' emotions. Failure to do so is a common mistake, especially among communicators who have technical backgrounds. They often assume that sticking with the facts and making statements to assure stakeholders that "everything is all right" will suffice. But neighbors, local officials, and others who are caught up in a crisis need to have their fears and concerns acknowledged before they can listen to "the facts."

Even when stakeholders' concerns are unfounded, communicators should still acknowledge them and express sympathy before offering explanations. It *is* unfortunate that people are upset—and whether their fears are warranted or not, they aren't going to listen until communicators acknowledge what they are feeling. Often, acknowledging emotion is as simple as saying "I can see that this was very upsetting to you. Let me tell you what we know. . . ."

One statement that communicators should probably avoid, however, is "I know how you feel." In our experience, we have found that some stakeholders view this statement, when it is coming from strangers, as patronizing or as an attempt to minimize public concerns.

The following examples highlight the dynamics involved in addressing the emotions of stakeholders who have been affected by an environmental crisis.

Example: Failure to Acknowledge Fear and Concern

> Neighbor: "This is just really scary. How do we know the problem at your facility is fixed, and that we won't have another cloud of chemical vapors rolling through our neighborhood?"
>
> Answer: "You don't need to worry about that. We have the best people working on it, and it isn't going to happen again."
>
> Neighbor: "You don't understand. This was really scary—to be told you have to leave your house in the middle of the night because of toxic chemicals."
>
> Answer: "But what I'm telling you is that there is no need to worry. We're going to install new tanks if we have to—so it won't happen again. We're taking care of the problem."

Even when stakeholders' concerns are unfounded, communicators should still acknowledge them and express sympathy before offering explanations.

Research in risk communication (and our own experience) strongly suggests that, even though the communicator offered some good information, this exchange is not going to satisfy the facility's neighbors. It may even lead to significant anger because the communicator doesn't appear to be interested in hearing their concerns or acknowledging their feelings.

Example: Acknowledging Fear and Concern

> Neighbor: "This is just really scary. How do we know the problem at the facility is fixed, and that we won't have another cloud of chemical vapors rolling through our neighborhood?"
>
> Answer: "I can see that you are upset. I know that this had to be a frightening experience, and we are sorry for that. Let me tell you what we know about how the chemical release happened and what we are doing to prevent future releases."

During briefings or meetings with local stakeholders, communicators should solicit input, comments, questions, and feedback.

> Neighbor: "Just so you know this was bad for us—being evacuated in the middle of the night."
>
> Answer: "I haven't had an experience like that, but I'm sure it had to be very frightening. And we definitely don't want you to go through it again. What we've found is that the accident was caused by . . . ."

In a group briefing or meeting, other participants might still wish to reiterate their own fears (and need to have them acknowledged too). But the audience will be much more willing to listen to "the facts" now that its members see that the communicator acknowledges the emotions they have experienced.

Soliciting Input and Feedback

During briefings or meetings with local stakeholders, communicators should solicit input, comments, questions, and feedback. Doing so helps establish rapport with stakeholders. In addition, stakeholders' comments may disclose issues that the communicator and emergency responders don't know about (e.g., that an oil spill followed an old, abandoned drain tile and ended up somewhere that none of the emergency responders have inspected).

Additional information on conducting follow-up meetings and briefings with stakeholders will appear in the next article of this series on crisis communication.

Making Apologies

How Not to Apologize

When apologizing for an incident, communicators should avoid making statements that appear to admit fault or that might be inferred as promises to the public. It may be appropriate to state that the organization will work with parties who experienced actual physical damage, but communicators should avoid making statements beyond that.

Spokespersons should also avoid going overboard with their statements. Doing so often rings false to the public and can raise concerns that the incident was, in fact, a lot worse than the organization has indicated.

Communicators should not try to substitute other types of statements in place of actual apologies. Thus, they should not attempt to minimize an incident by defensively citing past good (or non-bad) behavior (e.g., "We never had anything like this happen before"). They also should not compare the incident to a situation at another facility (e.g., "This wasn't nearly as bad as what happened at ABC Corporation").

Communicators should not attempt to blame others for the incident—although it is appropriate to note that other parties may have been involved (e.g., "The fire was ignited by sparks from a welding torch that a contractor was using to install some new piping"). Accurate statements such as this are part of an objective description of an incident.

What communicators *don't* want to do is use messages that appear to duck responsibility by pointing fingers at other parties (e.g., "It only happened because the contractor wasn't careful with his welding torch, so it wasn't our fault"). Such statements sound petty and are unnecessary if information about the source of the sparks has already been described.

Moreover, the injudicious use of "finger-pointing" statements such as this may lead to embarrassing rebuttals and other problems. First, if the accident happened at an organization's facility, safety experts could correctly point out that it is the *facility's* responsibility to ensure that contractors are working in areas free of hazards (e.g., through issuance of "hot work permits" and the like). Second, such statements undercut the organization's image as competent—since competent organizations don't shirk their responsibility to operate safe facilities.

Apologizing Appropriately

An example of an apology that is thorough and heartfelt without going overboard is the following:

> We are very sorry that this terrible accident occurred. We regret that several people were injured, and our hearts go out to them. We also apologize to our neighbors and other members of the public who were inconvenienced or frightened. We are working hard to determine how this incident happened, and we will keep our neighbors and local officials informed of the status of the investigation and the cleanup.

Note that in this example, the spokesperson does not admit fault since the exact cause of the incident isn't yet known. However, since the spokesperson's facility was the scene of an accident, it is appropriate to acknowledge and express regret for those who were injured, frightened, or inconvenienced.

Preparing News Releases

Exhibit 3 (model for first contact with reporters) includes a bare-bones news story based on the first briefing from a facility spokesperson. The first news release that an organization issues is typically also bare-bones. News releases providing updates will often contain more information, although they will still typically contain the same elements as the initial news release:

What communicators don't want to do is use messages that appear to duck responsibility by pointing fingers at other parties (e.g., "It only happened because the contractor wasn't careful with his welding torch, so it wasn't our fault").

- Statement confirming the crisis: "XYZ Corporation's facility on North Avenue has discovered that oil has leaked from a rupture in the side of a storage tank." If a news release is an update, communicators should lead with the update information and follow with a brief statement describing the crisis for contextual purposes.
- Statement describing what the organization is doing or is planning to do to address the situation: "We notified the local fire department of the spill and our facility response team took steps to stop the leak and contain as much of the spilled oil as possible." Information on the status of these actions is included in updates.
- Statement of other confirmed information (including updates, if applicable): "We have shut down our process units so their operation won't interfere with the spill response."
- A quote from an organization spokesperson or executive: "Our first concern is the safety of

the public and the environment. We will work with local authorities and, if necessary, bring in outside cleanup contractors to clean up the oil. We are also launching an investigation of how the tank ruptured and are inspecting the rest of our storage tanks at our North Avenue facility," said Douglas Schaeffer, vice president of corporate environmental management for XYZ. (Note: The crisis communication team member who is writing the news release typically comes up with this quote. The quote is then reviewed by the person who is credited and is revised, if necessary.) New quotes should be included in updates to indicate that senior-level managers are engaged in addressing the crisis.

Communicators who wish to be credible to reporters and have their messages appear in print or quoted on air must avoid self-serving statements or statements that appear to soft-pedal bad news.

- Basic information about the facility: "XYZ's North Avenue facility has operated in Anytown for the past 20 years. The facility, which has 64 employees, manufactures widgets."

The information should be presented objectively and in news style. Communicators who wish to be credible to reporters and have their messages appear in print or quoted on air must avoid self-serving statements or statements that appear to soft-pedal bad news.

Sidebars and Other Supplementary Material

Significant or major stories may sometimes require the release of more information than can easily fit within a news release. Often, such information is of a technical nature or provides important context and background.

Communicators should consider presenting supplemental information like this in a separate sidebar document—which media outlets can run as a separate supplementary story accompanying the news update. Sidebars, "backgrounders," and other supplementary materials should be presented in news style (that is, with objective presentation and no "spin"), except in cases where communicators are using existing organizational or government fact sheets.

Structure of News Stories (and Preferred Structure of News Releases)

News releases that are written in "news style" are more likely to be used by reporters in the preparation of their stories. News stories display several characteristics that communicators will want to follow:

- News stories are structured in an "inverted pyramid," with the most important information placed at the beginning of the story. Additional information is presented in descending order of importance. This structure allows editors to "edit from the bottom" without having to worry about omitting vital information. This structure also allows readers to scan the first few paragraphs and get the gist of the story.
- The lead sentence (which ideally should be no more than 20 words in length) should include the most important piece of information in the story.
- Most news stories are written so that each sentence is its own paragraph (although a few short sentences may sometimes be strung together). This structure also allows for easy editing of stories—an important consideration when reporters and editors are rushing to get a story aired or published.

News releases should use a double-spaced format for ease of editing, whether they are distributed in hard copy or sent electronically. In addition to including their contact information, communicators should include a headline on the news release (even though media outlets may not use it). Incidentally, it is editors, not reporters, who write headlines.

Most professional journalists follow certain style guidelines (with regard to matters such as punctuation and handling of abbreviations) that are dictated by their news organizations. For guidance on accepted news style, communicators might want to consult *The Associated Press Stylebook,* which is updated regularly. It is available at bookstores and online.

Creating Message Points

Message points—also called "key messages" or "talking points"—are the three or four important concepts that communicators want reporters (and the public) to hear or read. Message points may reiterate important facts that communicators wish to emphasize or convey themes that communicators hope will provide context to the crisis. Key messages help communicators (and particularly spokespersons) maintain their focus and promote consistent messaging that minimizes confusion.

Message Points and Supporting Statements

Message points should be short, crisp sentences (sound bites) that are easy to say. Supplementary statements, facts, or examples should also be developed so that spokespersons can support their key messages. The following are examples of message points and supporting statements that crisis communicators could include in briefings and in written materials:

Message 1: Our first concern is the safety of the public and our employees.

Supporting statements:

- We reported the oil spill immediately to both the fire department and the state environmental agency according to our facility's safety and environmental procedures.
- We are working with the authorities, including the local fire department and the state environmental department, on the cleanup.
- Personnel from the local fire department tour our facility at least once a year to ensure that they are well acquainted with our facility. We have also conducted training drills with our local emergency responders.

Message 2: The oil spill will not affect the drinking water supply.

Supporting statements:

- We have already managed to capture much of the oil that entered the creek.
- Most people in town get their water from a public water-supply well that draws water from groundwater that is located 250 feet deep. Oil from this spill won't affect this deep drinking-water source.
- Some people in the community use shallow, private wells for their drinking water. However, these wells are located upstream from the spill and the flow of the creek, and the oil from the spill cannot reach them.

Key messages help communicators (and particularly spokespersons) maintain their focus and promote consistent messaging that minimizes confusion.

Message 3: We do not believe that any accidental release is acceptable, and we intend to take steps to minimize the likelihood of an incident like this ever happening again.

Supporting statements:

- We have hired a consulting firm that specializes in storage tank maintenance to inspect the rest of our storage tanks to ensure that they are secure.

- Protecting the environment, as well as the health and safety of our neighbors, is very important to us. In addition to inspecting the storage tanks, we will also review how we responded to this unfortunate accident and, if necessary, take steps to improve our performance.

Using Key Messages With Different Audiences

Key messages are most often used when spokespersons are briefing reporters or answering their questions.

■ *Broadcast Media*

Sticking with key messages (and, of course, confirmed information) is especially important when communicators are working with broadcast journalists. By doing so, spokespersons are basically limiting their taped comments to the "sound bites" that they want included in a broadcast. The recitation of key messages often sounds repetitive, but communicators are better off sounding repetitive than making off-message remarks that could be misinterpreted if they were included in a broadcast.

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■ *Print or Internet Reporters*

Key messages can also be used when briefing or interacting with print or Internet reporters, although communicators will not want to be as repetitious as they are with broadcast journalists. Using key messages liberally during briefings increases the likelihood that they will be included in news stories.

■ *Neighbors, Local Officials, and Other Stakeholders*

Communicators will want to use key messages sparingly (and avoid obvious repetition) when they are talking with other stakeholders, such as neighbors and local officials. Neighbors and other such stakeholders will lose patience if key messages are repeated too often. They may assume that the communicator is trying to avoid providing "real" information or engaging in corporate (or government) spin.

Preparing Questions-and-Answers

Preparing questions-and-answers can help communicators develop responses that get to the heart of stakeholders' concerns and provide context, while still being understandable to laypersons. We typically work on questions-and-answers (Qs-and-As) at the same time we are working on key messages.

We advocate that communicators proceed from the most basic questions (e.g., "What happened?" Answer: "We had an oil spill"), to the most obnoxious (e.g., "Do you even care whether the fish all die?").

Developing Effective Answers

When communicators are talking to reporters and the public, facts are of course important, but so is the way they are presented. The Q-and-A process helps communicators "try out" different approaches to answering questions before they talk to reporters or other stakeholders. In significant or major crises, a good Q-and-A can be worth its weight in gold. Consider the following example:

> Question: "Do you even care whether the fish all die?"
>
> Off-the-cuff answer: "Uh, well, of course. We don't want to kill fish. We like fish.

We're hoping that we can clean up the creek before too many of them die."

Better answer: "Yes, we definitely do care. Accidents like this are unacceptable to us. We work very hard to adhere to all of the environmental regulations that apply to our facility, and in some cases, we do more than we are required to do because we believe it makes good sense, both for our business and for the environment. We are working with the local fire department and a professional emergency cleanup contractor to minimize damage to the creek so the ecosystem can recover."

Responding to Tough Questions

One pitfall in Q-and-A development occurs when communicators shy away from asking questions they fear may be too tough or potentially insulting to senior managers of the organization. Communicators who are new to the crisis communication process often worry that including such questions could create problems for them.

This is one reason why it can be useful to bring in outside crisis communication consultants. Touchy managers are often more amenable to accepting difficult Qs-and-As from outside consultants than from in-house staff.

Another approach in-house staff can use is to initially submit a list of hard-hitting, but generic, questions that do not "point the finger" specifically at their organization. They can accompany the list with an explanation that these are the types of questions the organization should be prepared to address.

Conclusion

The messages that an organization communicates during or after a crisis often carry disproportionate weight compared to day-to-day communications. The public is watching and listening. And in many cases, all that most people will ever know about an organization is what they hear, see, or read about it in conjunction with a crisis.

Providing accurate, timely information (accompanied by explanations and compassion for those affected) can help an organization move toward regaining public trust after an environmental crisis. By contrast, communicating offhand, tardy information (accompanied by snippy or confusing explanations) can make the organization appear incompetent and uncaring—and can potentially create more animosity than the crisis itself. Organizations will find that it is definitely worth the effort to develop and deliver effective messages.

Note

1. Forrest, C. J. (2011). Practical environmental crisis communication: Process and procedures. Environmental Quality Management, 21(2), 1–12.

Carol J. Forrest has more than 21 years of experience in the environmental consulting and management field. She is president of Rose Hill Communications, Inc. (www.rosehillcommunications.com), which specializes in environmental community relations/public involvement and environmental, risk, and crisis communication. She has worked with more than 50 private- and public-sector clients throughout the United States on site investigations, public communication programs, and corporate and facility environmental and safety programs. She holds a master's of management degree from the J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. She coauthored *The Practical Guide to Environmental Community Relations*, published by John Wiley & Sons (1997). She is based in Wheaton, Illinois. She can be reached at caroljforrest@aol.com.
