

Commandment #7: Don't Talk to the Media? Maybe, Maybe Not

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In this day and age where the media and social media are all over a case before the facts are fully developed, Corporate Executives and Corporate America must make critical decisions on how to respond to the media and over the Internet. Over the years, our Firm and strategic communications subsidiary, NP Strategy, has routinely dealt with crisis management including quite a few high profile matters. The following groups of suggestions are provided to our clients who are dealing with an unforeseen crisis and when dealing with the media. I have modified the suggestions a bit based on some experiences with my clients who have had to deal with crises and the media.

Crisis Response First Steps:

The media (usually) is just doing its job and (usually) is just trying to "break the story" before any other media outlet. Organize your Crisis Management Team, ideally well before a crisis hits, and be prepared by analyzing the situation and coming up with anticipated action items.

1. **Be ready:** As soon as you know there is an issue, gather your "Crisis Management Team" and start outlining your strategy.
2. **Get the facts first:** Don't blow it by assuming certain facts when you haven't fully analyzed what has happened.
3. **Identify the issues:** Before taking any action outside the company, consider the following questions:
 1. What is the Problem?
 2. What is happening?
 3. What should be happening?
 4. Do we need to contact an attorney or law enforcement or both?
4. **Identify three key points and one point of contact:** Be prepared with three key points to be made (see Tips to Minimize Impact of the Crisis

below) and have only one point of contact communicating to the employees and outside the company. Tell the other members of the "C-Suite" to refer all media inquiries to the point of contact. Don't let key employees or line employees provide "off the record" color commentary.

5. **Stay on message.** Company officials, company employees or individuals outside the company might try to expand the scope of the crisis that you are handling. Don't be distracted by side issues. Stay on message responding *only* to the current issue.
6. **Do not lay blame:** Don't start blaming other companies or other people from the outset. Let someone else handle that. You just deal with YOUR company and your situation.
7. **Never lie:** Sooner or later, lies will catch up with you. The best way to lose all credibility with the media (AND your employees AND the public) is to start out by providing false information.
8. **Replace "no comment" with other options:** You can essentially say "no comment" in a variety of ways such as "We haven't reviewed the lawsuit yet, so it is premature to talk about it." Consider the tips to minimize the impact of the crisis (see below) by at least acknowledging your company is investigating the situation and/or is cooperating with law enforcement or other governmental officials- if there's already an announced investigation.

Tips to Minimized the Impact of a Crisis:

1. Speak the truth, always (that is if you speak at all).
2. Notify employees and stakeholders first. Wouldn't you prefer to hear about some internal crisis as an "insider" before you see it on TV, read it in the paper or receive it from the Internet?
3. Express care about the victims. The worst fallout could be from appearing callous, insincere or disingenuous.
4. Acknowledge cooperation with emergency officials (and see Section II above).
5. Appoint someone to monitor media websites, Facebook, Twitter, etc. I'm not suggesting that you respond to all commentary, but at least know what's being said. You may need to quickly adjust your public message if your initial message is reverberating badly in the press or on social media.

Anticipate Media Questions and Prepare Written Responses:

If you are talking to the media, consider keeping your message as simple as possible. Gather your crisis management team and roundtable what you believe will be the media's questions and prepare written responses based on the following outline (with some adjustments depending on the circumstances):

1. What happened?
2. Where and when did it happen?

3. Who was involved (hurt, killed)?
4. Is there danger and how long will it last?
5. How are you going to fix it? The answer might be as simple as "we are cooperating with and will continue to cooperate with the appropriate authorities."
6. How can you prevent it in the future? Same answer here: the answer might be as simple as "we are cooperating with and will continue to cooperate with the appropriate authorities."

If you don't know the answer, don't pretend to know the answer and as stated earlier, don't be deceptive or evasive. At the outset, the simple response that you are still gathering facts or still cooperating with the appropriate authorities might be the best response.

Next Week: Commandment #8: Don't Lie- Tell the Truth

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