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# *Crisis Communication – Creating Media Partners for Transportation Disasters*

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## ABSTRACT

The 24-hour news cycle is a phenomenon that is here to stay. As transportation professionals we must learn to control this phenomenon with confidence and finesse, especially when it relates to transportation incidents and accidents. The media should not be viewed as the enemy, but as a potential partner who can assist with providing, obtaining, and disseminating critical information to populations who have an interest and/or stake in the event that has occurred. Previously viewed as “just another function” of the public relations department, research in the areas of communications and mass media has discovered that the communication processes used during a disaster (crisis) of any type have become highly specialized. Traditional public relations skills and training provide a base knowledge, but specially trained individuals are needed to create and maintain a cooperative partnership with the media, in an effort to control the message to reduce unsubstantiated accusations, disclosures, and panic.

A Purdue University aviation technology researcher has been working with communication and media professionals to develop crisis / disaster communication programs and processes needed to handle the delicate and demanding area of crisis communication for the transportation industry. This paper shows the effects of using specialized programs to develop positive and trusting relationships with media (and other populations) during times of normal operations, and how these partnerships can be used to handle crisis communication in a controlled and positive manner. In addition, the paper addresses the need for specialized training in the area of crisis communication, and discusses programs to provide this training. Crisis communication is not an element transportation professionals can leave to chance, or rely on the basic skills of public relations professionals to handle efficiently. In this era of 24-hour, on-demand news we must be proactive in establishing communication processes and programs to provide accurate and timely information to maintain the public’s trust during a time of crisis. The inability to properly manage crisis communication can lead to public mistrust, unwarranted suffering, and devastating economic problems for an organization.

## INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication has become more prominent for corporations and other organizations over the past two decades. In the past, most incidents and / or accidents would generate local to regional media interest only, however with the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle and various types of news mediums being created at a quick pace the luxury of minimal or limited response by organizations is gone. All organizations must develop a crisis communication program (which

includes training for personnel) in order to meet the increasing demands of the media and the “public’s right to know” doctrine that is the common battle-cry of today’s journalists.

No matter what an organization’s image, if they become involved in a disaster their actions and responses to the public and media during this time of crisis will have long term effects that can be positive or negative. This issue of image in crisis is not just a matter of disclosing information and assisting in the recovery and healing process, but also one of maintaining public trust. If an organization attempts to protect its image during a crisis by choosing to withhold information it is making a tremendous mistake. Any attempt to withhold information generally back-fires for an organization by causing the public and media to lose confidence in them through the creation of a feeling of mistrust.

Establishing and maintaining a media relationship built on trust is an important factor in the process of maintaining an organization’s image during not only good times, but in times of crisis and disaster. Therefore it is necessary for organizations to develop crisis communication plans and establish mutually beneficial partnerships with the media so in times of crisis the media will assist in informing and protecting the public.

## MASS COMMUNICATION AND THE MEDIA

Mass communication “occurs when a small number of people send messages to a large anonymous and usually heterogeneous audience through the use of specialized communication media” (Mass Communication Context, 2001). Therefore anytime a person turns on the radio or television, reads a newspaper, or logs onto a news website they have become engaged in the mass communication process and system.

Mass communication is the process of transmitting information to the public and other interested parties. The media (in the form of journalists) is the messenger and it determines what information is shared and communicated to the public during the communication process. Mass media is a means of public communication which reaches a large number of people in an effort to inform and protect the public. The challenge for many organizations today is to determine which of the hundreds of media organizations are dedicated to the traditional values of public information (public’s right to know) and public welfare as opposed to the sensationalist media who are after the “story” of the day and high ratings.

Reputable media sources for this paper are considered to be news entities which have established themselves in the area of informational and factual reporting of events, plus they have a proven track record in unbiased reporting of events and facts. The reputable media sources used in this paper are, for electronic media: ABC News; CBS News; NBC News (and their local affiliates); CNN; and MSNBC; for print media: major local, regional, and national newspapers. Sensationalist (tabloid) and entertainment media sources were not used in this paper, due to the fact that the majority of these media outlets present consistently biased opinions in an attempt to sway public opinion and generate increased market share and higher ratings. While elements of factual presentation are seen in tabloid media, the predominance of sensationalism makes them an unreliable source for consistently factual information and accurate presentation of events. Fox News was not used due to the fact this source is in a transitional phase from entertainment news

to a reputable major news entity and resource. For this paper, the term “media” is used as it relates to the definition of reputable media above.

When working with the mass media, one must be aware of the three primary units of mass communication which are: message; medium; and audiences. In any mass communication plan, these elements and their interactivity must be considered and planned for.

## THE MEDIA

It is important to understand that the media reacts in stages they do not “jump first and ask questions later.” The report of an accident or incident will reach a media bureau, and the bureau chief will assign someone to confirm the event as quickly as possible. Once confirmed (or during the process of confirming) a reporter and photographer will be dispatched to the location in an effort to arrive before the site is closed or restricted to the media and general public.

Within five to ten minutes after an accident (incident) is confirmed local, regional, and national reporters and photographers will be headed to scene. In addition, the local bureau chief will organize his/her people and assign them to various locations. Besides the accident site, reporters will be dispatched to locations where more information can be gained such as hospitals, hotels where relatives are located, and morgues. The bureau will also assign staff to “shadow” people from organizations involved in the investigation and recovery efforts such as the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), airport personnel, and airline personnel. No matter what their location assignment, each reporter is looking for stories related to the crisis. Reporters will also attempt to gain access to survivors, family members, and eyewitness to gain information as quickly as possible.

The news bureau closest to the accident will provide information to the Associated Press (AP) for national and international distribution. The AP has five major obligations concerning the dissemination of information: 1) to continue each state’s newspaper wire with other stories; 2) to continue the broadcast wire, script for electronic broadcast (different than for print media); 3) to file AP network news, broadcast over national news radio via satellite; 4) to continue the local AP network audio portion which will remain separate from national AP network; and 5) to provide photographs for transmission on AP’s regional, national, and international photo networks related to the crisis.

Transportation incident / accident stories are built around fatalities and environmental destruction therefore the media will focus on the elements that relate to these areas. They will look for and interview survivors, eyewitnesses, and industry specialists, and will create side-stories (tangents) that may or may not be related to the actual event. These side-stories create a challenge for an organization because they will detract from the factual presentation of information by creating new, emotional and speculative issues that need to be addressed.

## MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

As with public relations theories, it is important to understand the mass communication theories that will effect the development of an organization’s crisis communication plan. There are twelve

mass communication theories, however only three of these are relevant to crisis communication planning and the establishment of media partnerships. The three theories most relevant for crisis communication plans are agenda setting, functional approach to mass communication, and the media equation.

The Agenda-Setting Theory states that the media (primarily the news media) are not always successful at telling the public what to think, but they are quite successful at telling the public what to think about. Due to the media's desire to present information to the public as soon as possible, they will go off on tangents that distract from the event and actions of the organizations involved. An organization must have processes (plans) to counter this development and strategies on how to address the concerns raised in these side-stories in an effort to return the media's focus to the actual occurrences and activities taking place. An organization cannot control the side-stories that develop, but contingency plans and strategies must be developed to minimize the public's interest and demand for information in these tangential areas.

The Functional Approach to Mass Communication Theory states that there are five functional approaches the media serves related to users of the media: surveillance; correlation; transmission; entertainment; and mobilization. Surveillance is the means by which the media presents the information given. Correlation is where the media presents the information to the public after they select, interpret, and criticize it. Transmission refers to how the media reflects the public's beliefs, values, and norms. Entertainment provides an escape from everyday life, and mobilization refers to promoting a society's interest. For crisis communication planning the only function that does not need to be addressed is the entertainment function. It is important for crisis communication planners to adapt elements of surveillance, correlation, transmission, and mobilization into any and all communication plans. When these items are addressed in the appropriate manner, an organization will be able to maintain a positive image by promoting understanding and cooperation concerning the coverage of the crisis.

The Media Equation Theory attempts to predict why people respond unconsciously and automatically to a communication medium as if it were human. The public will react to the media presentation as if they were talking to a person one-on-one. This tends to make the public an active participant in the event that is unfolding instead of an inactive observer. They want information, and the media is their venue for receiving it. This element must be addressed in order to assist the media in organizing the knowledge base required for the public to make informed decisions and to influence the action(s) the public might take, for example patience versus aggression, or evacuation versus remaining in the area.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations is generally viewed as a professional or organizational activity that deals with persuasion, organizational image, problems, and image repair. The four main public relations models are publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical. For the purposes of this paper the term public relations will be used, however it is important to note that the term "communication management" is becoming more prevalent in the communication field, which is the premise of the formation of a crisis communication plan.

To develop an effective crisis communication plan, one must understand the basic communication models which entail either one-way communication or two-way communication. One-way (asymmetrical) believes communication and public relations is something that is done to – rather than with – people (van Ruler, 2004, p. 126). Two-way (symmetrical) communication states that each participant in communication process is equally able to influence the other (van Ruler, 2004, p. 126). However, there is a mix of the one-way and two-way elements of communication in the model for two-way asymmetrical communication which incorporates the one-way aspects of communication for both parties involved in the communication process.

It is important to note that in the current environment of public relations, the concept of communication is not only concerned with the way in which a message is expressed, but also with what happens at the receiving end (the response from the public related to the information presented) (van Ruler, 2004, p. 126). For crisis communication a mixture of one-way and two-way communication must be used to be effective. The challenge for crisis communication planning is the emotional element concerning the public and the media involved. General and promotional public relations plans do not address the highly emotional and personal issues that are present during a crisis therefore they cannot be directly applied to a crisis communication model. The adaptation of the emotional and personal elements involved in a crisis to the current communication theories presented must be done by an organization to be effective during a crisis situation.

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION

From the outside, crisis communication appears to be the “glamorous” element of public relations (due to high visibility), however it is important to remember that the way in which an organization deals with a crisis will effect the public’s perception of an organization for years to come. For historic reference, all one needs to do is review crisis events that occurred for Tylenol, NASA, and Exxon to see how the public reacted to an organization’s handling of a crisis situation and the image fall-out after the event. Organizations that handled the event quickly, honestly and openly with the media and the public were viewed as successfully handling a difficult and tragic situation, and were able to maintain a positive, helpful image with the public. However, organizations that did not handle an event quickly and honestly experienced negative image fall-out from the public for years. An example of this negative fall-out is the TWA 800 tragedy. After the accident occurred, members of TWA’s top management did not become involved in the communication process with the media and public for more than 24-hours. This was not a malicious or evasive act on the part of TWA’s management, just poor judgment. However, the lack of initial response by top management created the perception of a cover-up and organizational disinterest which caused bad relations to develop between the media and air carrier as the crisis continued, leading to an adversarial situation. While this negative response by the media may not have been warranted, the basic fact remains that the public and media want to know what is going on as quickly and efficiently as possible, any attempt to delay dissemination is viewed as adversarial.

Crisis communication encompasses one-way and two-way asymmetrical communication. The sole use of two-way symmetrical communication is not effective due to the fact that the receiver

of the information (media and public) has very little influence on the crisis communication process. The important element in any crisis communication plan is the design and implementation of the two-way asymmetrical, which is actually “controlled one-way” communication. The use of two-way asymmetrical communication allows for questions to be asked by the media and public, however the organization will “control” the responses, limiting “off-the-cuff” and speculative responses by organizational representatives.

The media and public are looking for meaning related to what has occurred, and it is important that a crisis communication plan addresses this need for meaning. Meaning can be explained as the “way in which we understand, explain, feel about and react towards a given phenomenon” (van Ruler, 2004, p. 127), and during a crisis this need for meaning becomes paramount for the media and public. There is a strong emotional need to establish a reason (explanation) as to “why” the crisis occurred that must be addressed, plus there is a need to create the feeling of safety for those watching the events unfold.

## TRADITIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Traditional organizational public relations focuses primarily on the delivery of the message, persuasion (advertising), preservation of image, and facilitation of open dialogue. Most of these elements are used in crisis communication with the exception of persuasion. Any attempt to use persuasion during a crisis is viewed negatively by the media and public. Additionally, attempts at persuasion will hurt an organization’s image and trustworthiness in reference to the media’s and public’s perception of the organization’s willingness to help.

As with traditional public relations, a crisis communication professional needs to know what the message is, how to deliver it quickly and concisely, and who will transmit it to the media and public. The challenge for an organization in a crisis situation is to provide a balance of information. Too much information will cause speculation and side-stories to run wild. Too little information and the phrase “cover-up” will be used to describe an organization’s response to the event. In a disaster (crisis) situation an organization must be prepared to be truthful and provide accurate disclosure on the events that occur. Hiding facts and other elements of the investigation and recovery efforts being taken only succeeds in hurting the organization as these efforts progress. A key component for any effective crisis communication plan is the professional an organization has “up-front” and / or coordinating the communication process, and information dissemination to the media, public and stakeholders related to the occurrence. This individual must be confident, calm, and have an ability to communicate effectively and empathically with various types of individuals and groups.

For crisis communication planning, the preservation of an organization’s image is not about promoting the latest product (service) or promotional image, but is related to handling the dissemination of information in a timely and effective manner. Truth, honesty, and competence, are the elements that preserve an organization’s image in a time of crisis. The ability for the media and the public to receive accurate information from a reliable source (the organization involved) provides them with a positive feeling that the organization is in control and will keep the channels of communication open. Also, the personnel presenting the information need to

remain professional and empathic to the media, the situation, the victims, and the victims' families in order to establish trust and cooperation from the various parties involved in the crisis.

The facilitation of open dialogue is essential in keeping communication channels open. In traditional, public relations this open dialogue format provides an opportunity for building consensus or establishing an opinion related to a specific topic of interest to the organization. When open dialogue is used in crisis communication it is not to gain consensus, but to provide information related to public safety and the various issues the media, victims, and victim's families have brought up as important. While to some the issues raised by the media, victims, and victims' families might seem mundane and unimportant, they must be addressed effectively and empathically due to the emotional nature of crisis communication. Avoiding these items or "brushing" them off, creates the impression of an uncaring organization that is non-responsive to their customers, employees, the media, and the public.

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION PERSONNEL TRAINING

An organization needs to develop training to address the specific needs and skills related to crisis communication planning. Through an informal survey with air carriers that have family assistance plans, communication professionals and instructors, and crisis management professionals, the following five items were cited as key components for crisis communication personnel training.

1. Planning skills
2. Public speaking skills (experience)
3. Interpersonal communication skills
4. Media relations skills
5. Organizational skills (multi-tasking)

An individual must possess effective planning skills in order to present a competent and caring image, plus provide accurate information for dissemination by the media. Failure to have defined elements ready for use in the event of a crisis was listed as a major failure in crisis communication planning. Persons who will be responsible for or involved in the actual communication process during a crisis, need to establish plans outlining who will address the media on what topic areas related to the event, frequency and location for addressing the media, victims, and victims' families, plus determine the necessary facilities and equipment to have available to the media for filing reports. Making the media or the public wait and search out information hurts the communication process by portraying a disorganized and uncaring image on the part of the organization. This negative perception is translated subconsciously by persons outside the organization to be the reason why the event occurred – disorganization and apathy on the part of the organization involved.

Public relations professionals are trained in public speaking however they are most familiar with the traditional public speaking style which is delivery of a specific message which may or may not include a question / answer section after the message is delivered. In times of crisis, the normal situation of the audience waiting patiently for the delivery of the message is gone. Generally, the professional entering the room to address the audience is bombarded with



questions and photographers, there is little or no time to take a breath and present a message interruption free. The crisis communication professional is trained to enter the “press room” in the midst of chaos and gain control of the room with a simple, confident introduction and brief update (opening) statement. In addition, they are taught to present the information in a clear, concise manner and control the questions asked by setting forth a “game plan” to the members of the media and others present for these information sessions.

Traditional interpersonal skills are stressed in crisis communication training due to the highly emotional and personal aspects involved in dealing with the outcomes of disaster (loss of life, destruction of property). The crisis communication professional will have interaction with victims and their family members; therefore they must be trained in skills such as active listening and empathic response. People cannot be taught to “fake” emotional responses therefore it is essential for persons involved to be genuine. If the media or public detects false (non-genuine) emotion, the organization will be viewed poorly concerning their treatment of the accident and those involved.

Crisis communication training also involves media relations through role plays. One of the trickiest aspects for any public relations plan is the press conference. A person is in front of a room of media professionals each of whom has their own agenda, and each wants to discover the cause or solution for the situation before anyone else. Examples of political press conferences are reviewed due to the effective way in which these press conferences present a public relations professional’s response to the media under various conditions. The person’s treatment of the media and their responses to questions and statements made by the media demonstrate key components for success and failure. In addition, the training teaches crisis communicators to respond to questions with simple and direct answers, and stresses that a person should not expand their responses with more information. The courtroom “ask-and-answered” model is used for this portion of the training. Providing factual information and / or an update on the activities related to the crisis are the main elements of a press conference (and family / press briefing), allowing or creating movement to side-stories and tangents creates uncertainty and speculation.

Organizational skills and the ability to multi-task are essential for a professional in crisis communication. Most crises will occur without warning therefore the individual(s) must be able to mobilize a plan and the other people involved within a matter of hours (less for the first press statement). Students learn how to move from their normal, daily routine to full implementation of a crisis communication plan, including preparation of press / family briefing area, and delivery of press packet materials. Timelines are addressed in order to demonstrate efficient and supportive response by the organization. Items such as press packets, technical and organizational information sheets, and personnel information are addressed as pre-crisis preparation activities, so dissemination of the information is timely when a crisis occurs.

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION - MEDIA PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Organizational - media relationships are similar to other types of relationships. One cannot expect a helpful and trusting relationship to exist if there is no effort to establish and maintain a relationship prior to a time of crisis. The majority of organizations have a “love-hate”

relationship with the media. The media has the ability to be a great friend and ally, but in the blink of an eye they can become a formidable enemy.

The key to building a relationship with the media is to work with them on a regular basis during times of normal operations. Establishing an organization as cooperative and an industry resource has led many journalists to assist and support an organization in a time of crisis. An organization cannot rely on this goodwill relationship to prevent side-stories or “tough” questions, but without it journalists tend to be more adversarial than helpful.

According to media professionals (journalists) the best way to establish a positive relationship is to work with the journalist(s) on various topics prior to a crisis. This includes regular meetings with the journalist(s) (monthly or bi-monthly) to establish a level of trust and understanding. Also, a willingness to assist the journalist(s) in areas of interest to their audience related to the organization and / or their industry establishes a cooperative link. For example, an air carrier may provide a journalist with information concerning the purchase of new aircraft including technical, environmental, and enhanced public service information.

Journalists surveyed also stated that when organizations provide a “disaster handbook” or guide they are more likely to disseminate the information presented to them by the organization rather than use the information gathered from outside sources. Information from the organization is preferred to outside “expert” information, but a journalist will use whatever information they can find to provide information to the public related to the event. This handbook should have detailed information concerning the route of flight (with departure and arrival times), technical information on the aircraft involved, a listing of the number of persons involved (no names), the organization’s safety and training program, and other information such as briefing schedules.

## CONCLUSION

The 24-hour news cycle creates many challenges for transportation professionals, but the situation is not hopeless if an organization takes the time to plan and prepare for crisis situations by developing effective media relations (partnerships).

How an organization handles a crisis and disseminates the information to the media and public is key to maintaining a positive corporate image. Failure to respond with confidence and empathy is an invitation for failure. Crisis communication professionals need to be developed within transportation organizations to provide the unity an organization will need during times of crisis and disaster.

Establishing a positive, working relationship with the media is one of the most important elements in any crisis communication plan. The media at first look may seem like the enemy, but research and existing media relations programs demonstrate the power the media has to assist organizations in times of crisis and trouble. Reputable media sources want to provide the public with truthful and factual information, they prefer to work with organizations directly in order to reduce the amount of bad and speculative information released to the public.

An organization's development of a crisis communication plan and strong media partnerships prior to needing either can be equated to buying an insurance policy. Like an insurance policy a crisis communication plan and media partnerships are put in place with the hope that they will not be needed, however should the need arise, having them in place is reassuring and comforting during a difficult time.

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