

**Crisis Communications: Challenges For
The Waste-to-Energy Industry**

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COMMUNICATION FUNDAMENTALS

The communication process is comprised of four components: a sender, a message, a medium, and a receiver or audience. Effective communication requires us to understand the four components each time we communicate. We must understand ourselves--our bias, tone, even physical demeanor. We must understand the message--the words, pictures, and context. We must understand the medium--the bias of the written text or oral verse or video broadcast. Most of all, we must understand the receiver or audience--their bias, environment, experience, and education. Most of us take for granted that the meaning we give to our words will be accepted by the intended recipient. The existence of lawyers, counselors, and judges argues otherwise.

If you view communication as a process in which senders and receivers mutually influence each other by sending each other messages, you will strive to involve your audience before, during and after your interactions. with them in any one of the following communication situations:

- People in two person communication situations should be considered transceivers (transmitters/receivers) rather than communicator and communicatees. Each person simultaneously influences and is influenced by the other. We can also refer to those involved in this type of communication as both speaker/listener and listener/speaker because although the communication is going on simultaneously, one person usually initiated the contact.
- Three people can be called a small group. They get together and solve a problem, engage in a conflict, pursue common interests, or have a casual conversation. Our industry's organizations often engage in small group communication--in meetings with regulators, internal staff and colleagues, or community leaders. The uniqueness of the small group is that conflict occurs often in this relationship. Therefore, small group communication may demand more time to find common ground among the group if the goal is to build consensus or solve problems.
- The speaker-audience relationship demands the most preparation from those involved. The speaker who engages in formal presentations of issues must be prepared to research the issue, deliver the statement or speech, and attempt to make the audience feel and believe as she or he does. The audience, on the other hand, needs to develop good listening habits and be prepared to understand, if not agree with, the speaker's point of view.

During the course of any day, a public relations person engages in interpersonal (two persons, face-to-face) communication, small group (three or more), and speaker audience (formal presentations) situations. The importance of face-to-face communication is that feedback is immediate. Human communication, therefore, can be dynamic, with one communicative act influencing the next and change occurring in a continuous cycle as those involved strive to reach a common ground through immediate feedback.

Communication that is not face-to-face, does not have the luxury of immediate feedback. When sending our message by printed materials or through the electronic media, feedback most often is delayed. Interactive media in which feedback is delivered through a computer network strives to overcome the hurdle, but is as yet not as effective as face-to-face communication.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AS A TOOL

Crisis communications is the ability to convey clear, concise, believable and caring messages to your organization's various publics or stakeholders when the unexpected negative event occurs. The event is usually, but not always, something catastrophic or of an emergency nature that adversely affects an organization directly, and/or adversely affects one or more of that organization's publics.

Crisis communications is a skill, a tool, a resource base and professional discipline upon which individuals and organizations can draw when confronted with an unexpected and potentially damaging event. It is a resource to draw upon to maximize the opportunity for positive outcomes even in the worst of situations. At a minimum, it can help an organization keep a bad situation from getting worse.

Successful crisis communications will require the use of all three modes of communication (two-person, small group and speaker-audience), with the latter tending to be the most common and crucial during a crisis (the typical press conference or press release format). At the same time, it is the communication form most likely to present the greatest opportunity for failed communication precisely because of the phenomenon of distance and delayed feedback described earlier.

Every person with access to mass media, whether newspapers, radio, television or the Internet, regularly witnesses, participates in and/or judges how well or not crisis communication skills are exercised. Crises within the memories of most in this audience that have tested the abilities and fortitude of organizations include:

- the Exxon Valdez oil spill;
- the Oklahoma City bombing;
- the Three Mile Island accident;
- the Tylenol product tamperings;
- the space shuttle Challenger accident;
- the as yet unexplained explosion of TWA Flight 200.

Each of us saw or heard these events reported by the media and, based upon the impressions we had of what we heard and how and when the information was imparted, we drew conclusions in our minds about cause, culpability and consequences. If you know of any of these events, they undoubtedly hold lasting impressions for you--both of the event and of the organization at the center of it.

Communication is a tool for managing a situation, any situation. When the situation is a crisis, however, that tool becomes all the more important because how well or not it is used can directly and irrevocably affect the reputation of your organization.

Every public relations guru begins his or her lecture to a corporate client by stressing the importance of trust. "If the public trusts you," the consultant promises, "you will be accepted." Or, "I can help you because the public (or the regulator, or the politician) trusts me." The formula seems simple: trust equals approval. Indeed, there must be an underlying acceptance that the person or entity sending the message is worthy of our attention. Trust, however, is only the beginning of effective communication.

There are numerous reasons why communication may not be effective even if the recipient of the message trusts the sender. Assume you are the receiver. You may trust and respect the sender, yet not believe her statements because you think she was misled. You may not like the message because it is disturbing or disruptive to your beliefs. You may not believe the medium, such as television, in which the message is delivered. You may not feel confident in your own experience or knowledge to trust your reactions to what you are hearing, reading, or viewing. Clearly, effective communication requires more than a simple formula.

Communication is most effective when trust, which is derived from the image of the sender, is combined with both empathy or rapport with the audience, and a message that seems logical to the receiver. To most communication professionals, image means developing "trust" and "credibility."

An important, although not exclusive, measure of successful crisis communications then is the degree of trust that you are able to instill in your audience. How well or not you are trusted, i.e., believed, can ultimately dictate not only the duration of the crisis but also whether you are judged by your publics to have brought it to a fair and responsible conclusion.

CRISES IN THE WASTE-TO-ENERGY INDUSTRY

- Environmental protests.
- Regulatory non-compliance.
- Fire.
- Corpse delivered to the pit.
- Shredder or boiler explosion.

These are just some of the kinds of crises that have been faced within the waste-to-energy industry. The more tragic events--those where there was loss of life--while fewer, leave an indelible memory. Whether they leave an indelible scar has been a function of how the crisis was managed at the time.

Because the public and private sectors are involved in the waste to energy industry, the audiences are diverse. Critical to weathering any of these crises is to know your audience.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

Many of us make the mistake of thinking of the media as our exclusive audience. That is understandable because, when a crisis strikes, reporters often are the external people with whom we have the most contact.

But the media is not your only or ultimate audience. It is the vehicle through which your messages can be conveyed to your audience, but it is NOT in and of itself your sole audience.

Because the media can control or manipulate your message, they clearly are one audience. But also among your audiences are the various publics you serve or represent--employees, shareholders, authority board members, elected officials, clients, customers and the public at large. These are the people who are directly or indirectly impacted by the event and by how you manage that event.

Certainly, the media can influence the impressions of all of these publics. But if you know and understand all of your audiences, including the media, you can exercise a good degree of control over your message and how it is received. Properly performed, good media relations can provide the organization in crisis with infinitely more control than poor or no media handling skills.

It is important to remember that "The Media" as we call it, really is not one great monolith. It also is not the enemy. It is made up of competing organizations (most often, for-profit corporations) that are themselves made up of highly competitive people with as diverse backgrounds and predilections as those found in any other organization. The media have a job to do. They must tell **your** story to **your** publics. And it behooves you to help them do it well, because they can very easily and even unwittingly turn what should be your story into someone else's, if not their own. It is critical to understand whose story it is and to whom the story must be told before the crisis occurs.

WHOSE JOB IS IT ANYWAY?

Imagine that you are on the front lines of a major crisis being experienced by your organization. Who are you?

- A. The chief executive?
- B. The PR professional?
- C. The General Counsel?
- D. The Technical Expert?
- E. All of the Above?

The Answer is "E," All of the above.

Crises are best managed by a team with clearly established roles and responsibilities that have been planned and rehearsed in advance. Depending upon the nature of the event, your team might include all of the above people as well as others. Crisis communication is not, however, the exclusive domain of the communications professionals in your organization. Some of the most critical decisions with potentially lasting consequences will be made during a crisis. It is at this time, like no other, that the best and broadest thinking minds of your organization will be needed. But the higher up in the organization the manager, and the further away from the communications function, the more likely they are to be on the front lines of a crisis. So in addition to being smart and resourceful, those who are most apt to be your team leaders, also need to be trained.

It is rare that the communications professional will be the decisionmaker or team leader in a crisis. But they can, and should, be among the best and broadest thinking minds on your team. In the end, every decision made as to how the crisis will be managed and how those decisions are implemented will determine how well you weather the storm.

GETTING "IT" DONE

The "it" is ensuring that your reputation and credibility are intact after the smoke clears. There are some basic tools and guidelines that most communicators agree are fundamental to achieving that goal.

Which of the following tools do you think would be most critical to you in managing a crisis? (you may chose only 1)

- A. A PR Professional?
- B. A PR Firm Expert in Crisis Communications?
- C. An internal team knowledgeable and rehearsed in your organization's crisis plan and procedures?
- D. A plan tailor-made for your organization.
- E. A "How To" Manual

If you said "C," you are way ahead of the game. But why not the other answers?

In truth, if you have any desire to manage your reputation, not to mention crises, ideally you will have a combination of these resources, and a PR professional would tie or rank a close second. But, you were asked to chose only one.

What about answer "A?" Certainly a strong communications staff is a must in this industry. But staff without the guidance of a well thought out plan, rehearsed procedures and a team that works shoulder to shoulder for the common good of the organization will be of only minimal value to you. Because even if they (and you) come through that first crisis well enough, left without the right tools, they will eventually burnout.

Why not outside consultants? Again, as a supplement to your crisis management team, consultants can be helpful. But do you really want--more importantly, would you trust-- the exclusive advice of outside experts on how to do the right thing and preserve your organization's reputation? Probably not.

These are the people you want to call on before you have a crisis, when you and they have time to study and analyze your organization, its audiences, the kinds of crises you might confront, and sit down with you to develop your plan. It is the extraordinary executive who, in the throes of a crisis, will rely on what are probably never before heard principles of crisis communication which are being conveyed (perhaps for the first time, but for certain over and over again) by any PR expert worth their fee. This is especially true for industries like ours that are so often already under public

scrutiny. How many of you have been skeptical about the intuitive reasoning behind "getting out in front" of the issues, especially if it means publicity? Well, you are not alone.

Many of our public sector colleagues follow these principles of crisis communication either out of a commitment to and comfort with public disclosure or because in the past they've felt the wrath of political officials and public constituencies who have felt misled, uninformed or worse, lied to. Some, however, don't. And they too are excoriated in the press just as we in the private sector are for "mishandling, incompetence and bungling" of communications with their publics about the crisis. Oftentimes, public officials face even more immediate and dire consequences for botching crisis communications than does the private sector--after all, they are more directly accountable to their publics.

I chose "C" because, time and time again, experience has shown that the most valuable tool that your organization can have is a plan and a team that is well versed in and ready to implement that plan at a moment's notice.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS BASICS: THE PLAN

One can never over plan for a crisis. Because the most challenging test of public relations skills--and the fortitude of an organization--arises in times of crisis, preparedness is essential.

When an unexpected development that has the potential to alarm the public occurs, the credibility and decency of the organization experiencing the crisis come under intense scrutiny. Often the media is in hot pursuit of the facts surrounding the incident and as a consequence, the pressure on the organization's executives can be severe.

There are three general courses that organizations may choose in times of crisis. First, some organizations "stonewall," denying the crisis' existence. Inquiries are not answered and a "public-be-damned" image emerges.

Second, many organizations choose to "manage" the news by releasing partial or delayed information while concealing unfavorable facts. Ultimately, the facts slip out through insider "leaks" or government inquiries, and the disclosure shatters the organization's reputation. (How many of us wonder to this day whether there is any truth to the missile theory proffered by Pierre Salinger as the cause of the Flight 200 explosion? If we all trusted the U.S. Government based on its past performance and reputation, would there be such questioning and doubt? Probably not.) In either case, the media and the public learn not to trust the organization and subsequent communication--in crisis or day-to-day situations--grows ineffective.

The third and best course of action requires an open dissemination of information that explains the crisis while keeping the situation in perspective by providing background facts. This policy is the safest bet to preserve credibility.

The open door method of handling a crisis may offer the highest rewards, but it also requires the most extensive coordination and trust. In a crisis, your organization will not be the only source of information and therefore must keep abreast and keep others abreast of current events. Others both inside and outside of your organization may be called by an anxious media or community to learn more about what is happening at the facility. All of these sources, whether the public sector client, the regulatory body or those internal staff assigned as spokespersons, must be kept informed and know in advance how to coordinate the flow of information. A structured and rehearsed procedure translates into less risk of surprises and inconsistencies.

The goal of a crisis communication plan is assurance that all sources speak in one voice as they explain the full story within context. Implementation of a good plan means the public and the players remain calm. After the crisis is over, all parties better trust the other to tell the truth and tell it in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the following principles are key to successfully managing crisis communications.

First and foremost, **BE PREPARED**. There is no such thing as “it can’t happen to me.” While unexpected in its timing, the event can be anticipated and planned for. Here are some general preparedness tools:

- prepare and update a crisis communications plan, including designating your team;
- have the team rehearse and rely on the plan (and their common sense);
- designate (and train) a spokesperson (and an alternate) in both presentation skills and media handling;
- have on-hand factual information on your organization, your facility, and any other general materials that will provide a context and background for your audience.

Second, remember your audience and decide in advance what they will want and need to know and tailor your messages accordingly.

Third, treat the media as both an audience and a resource, a means of accomplishing your goal to maintain your credibility and reputation. When dealing with the media, whether through oral or written statements, abide by the following:

- don’t be defensive (they want a story, not your head);
- be clear and concise;
- be helpful (otherwise they might want your head);
- be honest and forthcoming: tell the truth about what happened and why without speculating, while acknowledging problems or mistakes;
- show you care;
- be calm and sober;
- avoid favoritism (TV vs. Radio vs. Print).

A badly managed crisis can cost you, dearly. What is at stake?

- 1) Your reputation--for honesty, acceptance of responsibility and caring.
- 2) The loyalty of your clients/customers/shareholders/employees--all of your various publics or constituencies. That loyalty is linked to your past performance and reputation, but also to each of your stakeholders’ perceptions of whether you can be trusted in this particular moment while the current crisis is underway.
- 3) Money.

and, of course,

- 4) Time.

Thank you. I would be glad to respond to any questions.

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