

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA IN TIMES OF CRISIS

When you are in the midst of a crisis, an interview should be handled a little differently. While many of the skills used in day-to-day media relations will come into play, there are additional considerations when a crisis is unfolding and the media is clamoring for quotes, sound bites and answers, many of which may not even be known at the time.

By its nature, a crisis is very fluid. Before you ever grant an interview with a member of the media, consider these things:

- What do I have to gain by accepting an interview? If there is nothing to gain, don't feel compelled to accept it right then. Explain instead that you will be accepting interviews at such and such a time, as your focus at the moment is on the crisis. Or let the reporter know that a press conference has been scheduled in lieu of individual interviews.
- Can you control the situation enough to give an interview at this time? The media may want to go around you while you're trying to control the message, but there's really no point in conducting an interview when you have no concrete answers to provide. All you end up doing is looking confused and unorganized.
- Can you effectively get your key messages across? If the answer is yes, make sure you have gone through these messages and stick with them. Don't be tempted to wing it and answer questions that aren't anticipated. Choose a maximum of three key messages and stick with them.
- Who is the audience? Does the medium that the reporter work for serve an audience that would be responsive to or even interested in your message?
- How will other audiences be affected, such as customers, suppliers, shareholder or employees by an interview?
- Is there a better strategy available? Can a Q&A, backgrounder or other prepared piece such as a read statement do the job at the moment.
- Is it really your fight? Don't feel a need to be drawn into a battle that is not yours.
- Are you comfortable handling spokesperson duties in a crisis? A crisis isn't the time for on-the-job training. In the midst of a crisis your words carry even more weight and what you say or don't say can greatly influence audience perception.
- Are you trying to control damage, influence opinion or calm fears? It is a delicate balancing act and you need to know what the purpose of the interview is before accepting it. Some members of the media are more willing to listen openly to you than others who are rushing to meet a deadline with any sound bites or quotes they can find.

The good news is that if you're used to handling media requests and interviews, moving into crisis interview mode isn't a huge jump. If you do your homework and prepare properly, you should be able to weather any crisis interview.

Following are some additional tips you will find helpful in handling crisis interviews:

1. Don't grant an interview if you're not willing to talk about the crisis. Avoiding the issue or being evasive will not do you any good, and in fact, can make matters worse.
2. Just because something is damaging your reputation or that of your product, service, organization or cause, it's not a good reason for a reporter to leave it out of the story.
3. Reporters don't answer to your various stakeholders. Their job is to get the best story they can within the allotted time and tell it in such a way that it gets the best ratings and circulation, in turn, generating additional revenue for their company. Never forget who they work for and it's not you.
4. While it's OK to reschedule an interview or do a general press conference instead, silence is never golden in a crisis. Silence won't make a crisis go away. It will only infer guilt where there may actually be none.
5. While there's no legal requirement to talk to the media, the media will talk about you, with or without your participation. Worse, they may go to secondary sources that don't have access to the information you do, including your competitors.
6. If you try to be evasive, the media will get you. They will portray you as wanting to hide something or accuse you of being evasive if you're not as candid and forthcoming as possible.
7. If you are the spokesperson in a crisis, be the only one to handle all media contacts. Don't share the responsibility or the message will become diluted.
8. If you are not the official spokesperson, keep your mouth shut. You may have to be the tough guy with the president of the company or anyone else who wants a moment in the limelight during a time of crisis. Close all channels of potential leaks of information that isn't coming directly from you.
9. Don't let lawyers speak for the company, unless you work for a law firm. Law and communications are very different disciplines and a lawyer's reluctance to say something because of possible litigation can make a crisis worse.
10. Don't ever panic. Eventually, the crisis will pass. How well you weather it depends largely on your ability to address the situation head on and communicate clearly and consistently with target audiences as the crisis enters its acute stage and finally, the post-crisis stage.
11. Craft your message to be as positive and truthful as possible. Then stick to the story.

12. If your organization made a mistake, admit to it. Then outline the steps you are taking to fix it. Don't act as if nothing is wrong. This is the quickest way to destroy any credibility you have.
13. Emphasize the solutions that are being explored or implemented, especially if you caused the crisis in the first place.
14. Though a crisis is by its nature stressful, don't lose your cool. Don't defend a position. Don't panic.
15. Sound enthusiastic when delivering your messages.
16. Control the message by being proactive rather than defensive.
17. Reporters are really good at feeding on emotions. If they sense you're dodging questions or not telling the truth, they will roast you.
18. Try to remain calm. Be pleasant to the media. Act as if this is just like every other day, even if you feel as if everything is crashing down all around you.
19. Because of the stress of any crisis, be sure you really rehearse your messaging or statement.
20. If a reporter asks a question based on misinformation or incorrect facts, correct them immediately in a positive way. Don't admonish the reporter because in the heat of the moment they got their information wrong.
21. If someone is at risk or has been injured or has died, be compassionate and place the needs of the victims and their families ahead of everything.
22. Be prepared for the fact that a call can come out of the blue at anytime, making you aware of a crisis before it has reached your own team. Be polite and let the reporter know that you will get back to them as soon as you've had a chance to review the facts.
23. Prepare a crisis plan ahead of time and have it in place. Rehearse it at least annually and update it regularly.
24. If the media suddenly shows up at your office or home, don't be confrontational. This only shows you're guilty, even if you're not.
25. Try to remain calm.
26. Don't put your hands over your face or suddenly excuse yourself and leave.
27. Don't ask that a camera be turned off or get in the face of a reporter.
28. Don't threaten to call the cops or your attorneys or order members of the media off your property.
29. Never look or act guilty. Be cordial, be friendly and never let the media see you sweat.
30. When you're ready for your interview or press conference, stick to your messages. Don't answer questions you don't really have an answer for. Never guess in a crisis.
31. If you don't have a particular piece of information handy, say so. Then promise to get back to the reporter with the information they requested. Be sure that you do.

32. If you've already established solid relationships with the media, they may be more willing to cut you some slack and even give you the benefit of the doubt in the midst of a crisis. That's why it's important to keep media relationships positive and stay in contact regularly.
33. If you haven't fostered good media relationships, don't expect any reporter to cut you any slack at all.
34. If there is bad news disclose it all at once. Don't let it out bit by bit. This will only keep the crisis in the news longer as new facts are uncovered.
35. Hope that a crisis doesn't strike on a slow news day. This could make you front page news when on any other day you'd be lucky to be in Section C of the newspaper or the last segment of the 11 o'clock news.
36. If the news is bad, be sure you're the one that releases it.
37. The best time to release bad news is Friday afternoon at 4:59 p.m. going into a holiday weekend. Yes, that's being idealistic, but it also demonstrates that the timing of a crisis can determine how much play it gets. You never want to be the lead story on the evening news program if you have any control at all over it.