

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
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What to Think About before You Write an Emergency Public Information Plan

by Dr. David W. Bell

October 1982 — a 12-year-old Chicago girl dies after taking cyanide-laced *Extra-Strength Tylenol* for her headache. The subsequent alarm prompts the manufacturer Johnson & Johnson, to remove hundreds of thousands of suspect bottles from store shelves across North America.

December 12, 1985. An Arrow Air DC-8 carrying American soldiers crashes at Gander International Airport, killing all 256 people on board. Within hours, the Newfoundland airport becomes a major North American media focal point.

Two very different emergencies and yet both required an effective emergency public information response. Whether you represent a private corporation or government agency, chances are you'll be faced with some type of crisis or disaster during your career. And when it happens, you're going to need an effective emergency public information plan.

The time to start thinking about your plan is now. Once a disaster/crisis hits you, it's too late. Such a plan will help you relay timely information and messages to your various publics, allay fears and rumours, and give your officials a chance to assess the crisis and start recovery operations.

Here are 12 factors — based on experience — to think about before you start to write your emergency public information plan.

What Emergencies Can Affect Your Organization?

Emergencies can arise from civil disorders, labour unrest, accidents, terrorism, government actions, and natural disasters, to name but a few. In nearly every case, a public information plan/response is necessary. Think about the types of emergencies your organization might face.

Risk Analysis

Any emergency, real or potential, involves risk to your organization, and you have to decide what risks are acceptable. Three factors should be considered:

- the likelihood of a certain type of emergency affecting your organization, or exposing it to public scrutiny
- magnitude, or the cost of dealing with the crisis
- and, the consequences if you don't react to the emergency.

After making this evaluation, you might choose to eliminate several potential emergencies on the grounds that there is little chance they will ever happen, or that their effects would be minimal. Consider a priority list of your most likely emergencies to give yourself an idea of which plans to develop and test first.

Where Are You Vulnerable?

Once you have completed a risk analysis, look at your organization's vulnerabilities. Decide how a particular crisis will affect your organization. Will its effects be devastating or just marginal? Finding your weaknesses will help determine the structure of your emergency public information plan.

Public Information Objectives

Determine the objectives of your public information plan. Do you want to inform and educate people? Do you want to reduce uncertainty in people's minds? Do you want to build credibility for your organization? Perhaps you'll want to derive positive advantages from the emergency — create allies, win plaudits for how you handle the crisis, and so on. These objectives and their respective audiences will vary depending on the organization and the type of emergency.

Identify Your Audiences

In terms of strategy, this means thinking of all the audiences that must be addressed. For government, an important audience is the public at large. For a company, the most important audiences might be specialized shippers, employees, and consumers of your product. Make sure you identify all your audiences, both external and internal, who have a vested interest in your organization. In my experience, audiences tend to

fall into five basic categories, each with different public information needs:

- Those who must respond to the incident itself. In a disaster such as a major fire, this could be police, fire and emergency personnel. These are the people trying to control and manage the emergency. Their need for operational and situational information is paramount. The emergency public information team is often the provider of some of this information. The team must also interface with the public and media to free the responders to manage the emergency.
- Those who must comment. These are the political or private sector authorities (government or company spokesperson, senior management, etc.) perceived to be responsible for, or reacting to, the emergency. Though not hands-on emergency responders, they will come under intense media and public pressure to comment in an accurate and responsible manner. They therefore need up-to-the-minute information provided by the public information team.
- Those with a special need to know. They can be the families of victims of disasters such as an air crash, flood, or forest fire. How are you going to tell them and when? How long should you wait to get accurate, reliable information on casualties? How are you going to handle obituaries? In the case of the *Tylenol* scare, the distributors, retailers and purchasers of a potentially contaminated product had a special need to know.
- The news media. They are your information multiplier, able to transmit information quickly to large audiences. They play a key role in informing people of appropriate actions and therefore have a pressing need for up-to-the-minute information. Work with them and they can

be your greatest ally. Work against them and they can compound your problems.

- The general public. This audience can be local, regional, national, even international depending on the issue.

Once you have determined your audiences, place them in order of priority for each type of emergency. Then identify the messages for each one. But remember that priority may change according to the crisis.

In my experience, those who must respond, and those with a special need to know, always tend to head the priority list. The responders have an immediate, operational role to reduce potential risk to health and public safety by bringing the crisis under control. To do this effectively, they need time and information. This means the public information team must take on the tasks of providing media interviews, controlling media access to the disaster site, etc., to free up the operational responders.

Tactical Planning

Once the strategy is determined, start thinking about tactics. A good place to start is with a policy statement outlining the organization's overall emergency public information objective. There are several advantages to a policy statement: it assigns responsibility for emergency public information planning within your organization. It provides a mandate to develop emergency public information plans and focusses management attention on the subject. Most importantly, it commits your organization to allocating resources to your planning efforts.

The Public Information Team

The makeup of your team will be critical to the success of your public information planning. Take time now to make a careful selection of staff. There are many roles to be played during a crisis: command and control,

security, safety, legal, financial, personnel, support and advice, and data processing. To fill these positions, you will have to decide whether you want operational or support staff. You will also have to decide the level of person required (president, director, etc.).

Remember, the public will tend to equate the importance of your spokesperson with the severity of the emergency. So, if you want to downplay the crisis, don't have the chief executive officer or minister as your spokesperson(s). If necessary, they can always be brought in later.

List, in sequence, all the actions you are going to take. Assign responsibility for each action to a participant, define procedures as clearly as possible, and then identify the opportunities and pitfalls for each activity. This process must be thought through carefully. An example would be access to corporate information. If done properly, clients and shareholders are protected. If done poorly, valuable company data may fall into the hands of competitors.

Remember, in an emergency, the public information team does not operate alone. It needs a good support structure. Think about management continuity on the team, emergency financial procedures, emergency data processing, word processing and, perhaps most important of all, communications equipment such as phones, Telexes, radios, TV, etc. Aside from communications equipment for your team, you will also need extra call-in/call-out equipment, usually telephones, so the media can file stories. By providing this facility, you keep the media close to the centre of operations, and ensure they are available when you want to relay information. Other factors that should be considered are transportation, accommodation, office space, food supplies, and records management during the crisis. Records are essential for post-crisis evaluation.

Access

Another issue to think about is access to an emergency site and to information. If an incident or emergency has a specific geographical location (crash site, failed bank, etc.), this usually means perimeter fencing and security arrangements, basically to protect the evidence and property, and to keep

out unauthorized persons and the curious. Three fairly simple levels of access are:

- no access for anyone
- access limited to those who need to be there
- and, free or unlimited access.

Similarly, information access, as the name suggests, means deciding what information you are going to release, to whom and when, in a given situation. This could be anything from names of the dead in an air crash, to confidential company financial data.

Proper control of physical and information access will give you a tighter, though not necessarily more restrictive rein, over public information aspects of the crisis.

Rumour Control Is Important

Despite your best planning efforts, misinformation invariably appears during a crisis. Inaccurate rumours are the enemy of controlled, responsible emergency public information planning. In my experience, the intensity of a rumour is a function of its importance, multiplied by its ambiguity. Therefore the most effective way to destroy a rumour is to eliminate the ambiguity.

The first, most important action you can take is to refute inaccurate rumours with fact. The most obvious reason for this is that people may be acting on incorrect information and thereby endangering themselves, as well as emergency response efforts. Think now about how you will deal with rumours. One approach is to classify them. Be ready to ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it an old rumour? Has it already been dealt with?
- Is it plausible?
- How large is the impact; local or widespread?
- How fast is the rumour moving?
- What is the source and is it credible?
- Who or what is the target of the rumour?
- Does the rumour create emotion?

This is just a small sample of the type of questions that can help you define and understand a rumour.

Remember that if an information gap exists, a rumour will rush to fill it. The media, searching for any scrap of information they can lay their hands on, may use a rumour and amplify it, possibly with disastrous or tragic consequences.

Here is a list of do's and don'ts for dealing with rumours.

DO

- Refute the rumour with fact.
- Use outside opinion to refute the rumour. (Clearly an unbiased third-party expert will be more credible than a member of your own organization.)
- Ensure when you refute the rumour, you discredit rather than validate it. In other words, be careful how you refute it.

DON'T

- Refute a rumour with another rumour.
- Refute a rumour with incomplete facts.
- Overstate when you refute the rumour. If you do, you may run into "the lady doth protest too much, methinks" syndrome.
- Joke when you are refuting even the wildest rumour. It is serious business and should be perceived as such.

Working with the News Media

The media can be a great advantage or disadvantage during a crisis, depending on how you treat them. To work with them effectively, you must first understand how they operate.

There are many types of media; various types of print, radio and TV, and they all have different requirements.

Radio and TV need a statement immediately, as they are on-air continuously. TV has tight time frames and requires good film footage, usually 10 – 30 seconds long. Print media tend to have longer time frames, and specialized print media such as trade journals, even longer.

The media operate 24 hours a day. Recent U.S. surveys show that 98 per cent of all households have a TV, and 95 per cent have a radio. This allows the media to reach huge audiences almost immediately.

Remember that media coverage is generally predictable, and the issues fairly standard. The media, when selecting stories, look for "newsworthiness." Does the story have death and destruction in it? Are important people involved? Would it be an interesting story to watch? Is good film footage available? The media also select items to have some geographical balance in their presentation (i.e. a mixture of local, regional, national and international items). There is also the question of timeliness. Getting the news on time is a constant battle with the clock. The media must spend money to get information (e.g. the cost of sending a reporter to a remote location) and will balance expense against the newsworthiness of a story before deciding to cover it.

News media respond to emergencies quickly. They monitor official communications channels such as police, fire, and air traffic control frequencies, and are often at the scene of an emergency at the same time, or shortly after, the response agencies. Once they find a story, they use their own sources and background files to fill in missing information. Depending on the subject, they will respond with anything from a shared single reporter to a complete news reporting team comprising experienced journalists,

investigative reporters, and support facilities (transmission equipment, cameras, etc.). Depending on the type of emergency a variety of journalists could arrive.

These journalists will report what you tell them, so structure your remarks accordingly and remember that there is no such thing as an "off the record" comment in an emergency. The media try to put news into a framework, and news conferences are popular as they provide that structure. It shows an official source commenting on the situation. How that comment is translated into a news story depends on the way a reporter shapes it to suit his or her individual style. Remember that most media have real difficulty with complex technical matters, especially during a crisis when there is little time for background briefing. The rule to remember is to keep your statements and information simple.

It is vital to establish a rapport with the media before a crisis strikes. This will give you an appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses and how they can affect your emergency public information plan. Get to know the media in your area, how they work, and what's important to them. Build up working relationships for the day you'll really need them. The media should be part of your plan. They should participate when possible in the development, testing and updating of your plan.

Understanding Human Behaviour

Your public information planning should also take into account the way people behave in an emergency. According to disaster literature, in the absence of reliable information, the general public will heed a warning by the authorities only if it meets certain criteria. To be credible, the official warning must convey an understanding of the problem, extent of the

risk, and protective measures people can take to guarantee their own safety and that of their families. This last item is most important. If a parent cannot account for a daughter or a son, the parent will, in all likelihood, go looking for them in the midst of the emergency. However, if in your warning you state, for example, that all school children have been taken to a safe place, then the child is accounted for and the parents will probably be reassured, heed the warning, and take the requested action.

Another aspect of human behaviour to consider is the four reaction phases that people go through during and after a major disaster:

- *Heroic*, when people are buoyed up by events and work unfolding around them.
- *Honeymoon*, when help and sympathy for victims pour in, and the full shock of the disaster has not yet made itself felt to either victims or responders, including the public information participants.
- *Disillusionment*, when the shock of what has happened sets in, along with realization of the full extent of the damage or loss caused by the disaster.
- *Reconstruction*, when people start to bring themselves back to an even keel and return to a normal mode of operation.

It is important to remember that these phases affect victims, responders, media, and your emergency public information team alike, though not always to the same degree. Keep this in mind when you are thinking about selecting staff and resources for your communication centres.

Evaluate and Practise

Decide what criteria you are going to use to evaluate your emergency public information plan. When the plan is exercised in a real or simulated situation, you will want to know how effective it was. A debriefing with all involved parties immediately after the crisis should examine what went well and what went poorly. List the problems, discuss remedial action, and then modify your plan accordingly. In deciding how to make modifications, consider factors such as: have you got the personnel to carry them out? will you do it unilaterally, or as a team effort? etc. This process is crucial to improving your plan for the next time you need it.

Equally crucial is the need to practise your plan. Regular testing, coupled with post-test evaluation, will help eliminate flaws in your plan and keep it geared to your emergency public information needs. It will also keep team members prepared and up-to-date.

Given all the elements I have described here, it should be apparent that considerable time and effort are required to think about your approach before drawing up an emergency public information plan. However, when weighed against the possible consequences of facing an emergency without a plan, the time and effort are worthwhile. A little thought now will save you much embarrassment, confusion, money and possibly, a tragedy in the future. ■

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