



Crisis Communications Guidelines for Dealing with the Media

Introduction

By their nature, crisis situations may involve emergencies, hysteria, confusion, misunderstandings, tragedy and highly-charged emotions. During these times, comments made to the media have to be carefully measured and clearly articulated. Before you speak to the media, be sure to ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What do I hope to accomplish by speaking with the media at this time?**
- 2) If it's important to speak, should it be in a written statement or an interview?**
- 3) Am I qualified and prepared to answer questions on this topic?**

Remember, you have no obligation to speak with the media. If after asking yourself these questions, you still feel that you would like to address the media, then it is necessary to have a “communication response strategy” in mind. The answers to the above questions will guide your specific approach.

However in general, the following tips should be considered as positions to avoid:

- Do not accept or assign blame for an event/situation until all of the facts have been reviewed. When emotions are high (and newspapers need to be sold), people try to demand immediate answers but cooler heads prevail by not speculating or pre-empting the results of the official investigation.

- Avoid being forced into a defensive posture. Be polite and sensitive to the issue at hand (especially if it involves the injury or suffering of a resident), while clearly articulating your position with even-tempered professionalism.
- Never guess if you do not know the answer to a question posed by the media. Kindly inform the reporter that you will have to confirm that information to ensure an accurate response and/or wait for the completion of an investigation.
- Do not give more information than necessary. Articulate the thoughts required to achieve your objectives, and only answer questions that are appropriate.

In every media scenario, you can choose to do one of three things. Choosing the right option from the list below is the first key to effectively dealing with the situation.

Option 1: Ignore media and do not offer any comment on the topic, or offer a brief statement that defers your comment to a later time.

Remember, you are never forced to speak to the media. The media has no official authority for conducting investigations. The upside to this option is that it is easy to execute and you avoid spilling additional fuel on the fire. If the media has few details to report, then the story may be stopped, or at least limited to one brief airing. By reducing the amount of time your story is in the media, the less people will see and/or remember it.

The downside to this option is that in today's society, saying "no comment" is often perceived as saying "I'm guilty." Think about how you feel when you hear someone on the news say "no comment" (usually covering their face with their jacket as they climb the courthouse steps). If you choose not to comment, try to use less defensive phrases such as: "I'm not at liberty to address that question at this time" or "We are looking into that situation right now and will address that when more facts become available."

Option 2: Release a written statement to all media inquiries on the topic and refrain from further comment.

The advantage of this option is that it allows you to provide an official response that has been clearly planned and reflected upon (even pre-approved by your attorney in serious situations) without the risk of saying something you might regret later. The disadvantage of this option is that such statements can sometimes appear cold, insensitive and/or defensive.

Option 3: Grant an interview with the media.

This interview could take many forms: an open press conference, an interview at your office with a reporter, or even a conversation via telephone. The advantage to this option is that you can help frame the story angle in the media, articulate the strongest case for you while projecting a warm and caring position. The downside is that in a crisis, a spokesperson really needs to be trained and prepared to maximize the sought benefit and minimize the chances of “blowing the interview” and exacerbating the situation. Once you say something to the media, you cannot take it back. Unlike with the written statement, the spokesperson will be required to perform “on the spot.” Also, if a spokesperson looks nervous or uncomfortable in a TV interview, the audience may decide that the information is not credible or the thoughts expressed are less than sincere.

One of the most valuable tools for crisis-situations is preparing a list of possible scenarios that may be encountered along with general response strategies for each. The following scenarios will provide some valuable guidelines. You are encouraged to generate and maintain a list of your own scenarios -- things that could possibly go wrong at your facility and how you would respond. Having this information beforehand can help guide your response during a difficult time, BUT REMEMBER, it is impossible for theoretical scenarios to predict all of the specific details of a future crisis. These examples should therefore be used as a general reference as you plan your own communication response strategies.

Case Study 1 (Citations received during recent inspection of care facility)

Situation: A care facility receives several “minor” citations during a recent inspection, but a local newspaper decides to run a story regarding the discovered shortcomings and contacts the facility for comment.

Analysis: While reporters may be investigating a story to get to the truth, newspaper publishers are still in business, and as such, must be able to sell newspapers. There is an out adage in the industry: “If it bleeds, it leads.” The reason for this is that negative stories attract larger audiences than positive stories. It may not be a very flattering commentary for our society, but it is a reality. If children at a local elementary school are having a bake sale to raise money for the homeless, and across the street there is a fatal rollover car accident, which event do you think will draw more attention from people passing by? It is important to understand that the media is not “the enemy” it is simply giving the people what history has shown they want. If the bake sale story could sell more newspapers than the car accident, it would certainly appear on the front page. It can’t, so the car accident is the leading story of the day.

How does this knowledge apply to our case study? Well, knowing the above will prepare you to expect that the angle of the story to be negative, it is likely to be an article designed to scare and alarm the readers (which sells more newspapers). Because the citations have indeed been received, they will serve as the reporters “facts” and the launching point of their investigative story. If you can openly acknowledge the citations and convey that they are not that negative (or newsworthy), you might succeed in “taking the wind out of the sails” of this story.

Response Strategy: *Option 3: Grant an interview with the media.* If the citations are truly minor, granting an interview could actually result in stopping the story or creating a positive image for you in the media. Have the reporter come to your office or facility for a 15 minute discussion and then provide a short tour of your facility. Make sure to put your

best foot forward with an office and facility that look very professional and presentable. Your talking points might be designed to: 1) educate reporter on importance of inspection system, 2) explain your process for providing the best care possible, and 3) reinforce your commitment to transparent and accountable care. Regardless of the specific questions by the reporter, your comments might go something like this:

“One of the most valuable tools the State of Arizona employs to ensure quality care is the regular inspection of licensed facilities. Contrary to popular belief, these are not adversarial situations. Leading care centers like ours, actually embrace the process to confirm that we are providing the finest care possible and to identify areas where we can continue to improve. In our industry, it is rare for a facility not to receive any citations as there is always room for improvement somewhere. While we take these issues seriously, we also believe that the community should be encouraged with our report. It confirms that the system is working, that inspections are taking place, and we are continually improving our operations to ensure the finest quality care for our residents.”

If the citations received are more serious in nature or if you are not comfortable doing interviews or having the media at your facility, then a written statement could be substituted. If you suspect that you are dealing with a disingenuous reporter or a media outlet of questionable reputation, it may be best not to offer any comment at all, as they may simply be searching for more controversy to expand their coverage of the event.

Case Study 2 (Allegations of sexual misconduct by a care giver)

Situation: Family members of a resident have made allegations regarding sexual misconduct by one of the caregivers at your facility. In their outrage, they have leaked the story to an investigative reporter who is calling to request an interview.

Analysis: Unlike Case Study 1 where the citations received are documented as fact, Case Study 2 involves “allegations.” Sometimes allegations are true, and sometimes they are false. In this type of situation, you do not want to submit to the pressure of jumping to conclusions before all the facts are reviewed. You don’t want to promote or perpetuate the story in the media and you don’t want to appear guilty by silence.

Response Strategy: *Option 1: ... offer a brief statement that defers your comment to a later time.* In a case like this, the response should be concise (avoid giving more details to fuel the fire) and defer your comments until after the investigation is completed:

“On November 19th, we received a complaint regarding possible inappropriate conduct by one of our care givers. An investigation is now underway to determine what may or may not have taken place. The staff member in question is on an administrative leave pending the results of the investigation. That is all the information available at this time.”

Be sure to note that the statement in no way preempts the results of the investigation by speculating on the results. It does not provide any details contained in the complaint. It also does not go into a long paragraph about employees all being prescreened for this type of record and how this could never happen at our facility, which could make you look: 1) defensive, 2) insensitive to the resident and family, and 3) close-minded/unfair. What the statement does is convey your professionalism, assure the media/audience that you are aware of and are handling the allegation and there is no news to report at this time.

Case Study 3 (Resident death following situation at care center)

Situation: During your facility’s annual holiday party, a resident slips and knocks over a Christmas tree which lands on another resident and breaks her neck. An ambulance responds but she is pronounced dead upon her arrival at the emergency room.

Analysis: This is obviously the most severe crisis of our 3 Case Studies. It is important not to confuse Crisis Management with Crisis Communication. Your first priority should always be to handle the crisis and support the victim(s). From a Crisis Communication standpoint, you must realize that waiting too long to provide sincere information to inquiring reporters can be very costly as well ... in the way of losing the trust and confidence of your community and possible future residents. A reporter may be interested in gathering sensational details, but you should refrain from providing more information than necessary. What the public needs to know is that it was an isolated incident and you are running a facility that is safe. People understand that accidents happen, but they want to know that you were not negligent and that you are working to support those affected.

Response Strategy: *Option 2: Release a written statement to all media inquiries on the topic and refrain from further comment.* Our purpose is to acknowledge what happened, express our grief, confirm that it was an isolated incident and convey our condolences and support.

“Last night, our care center lost one of our most beloved residents in a sad accident. During our annual holiday celebration, a Christmas tree was knocked over and it struck Thelma May, who later died at XYZ Hospital. Thelma had been a resident for 3 years and she will be dearly missed by our community. Our thoughts and prayers are with Thelma’s family, and we are working to support them through this difficult time.”

The above message provides the facts so that the public does not have to guess or rely on rumors to understand what happened. The message also sets a warm tone and conveys the facility’s commitment to supporting the family. It does not assign blame for the incident, convey a defense posture or provide any gory details.

If the tragedy involves a number of people (for example, a fire in the facility and many residents are injured and/or killed), a live interview or press conference would be

appropriate. When only one family is affected, a written statement provides more control of the communication and respects that family's privacy.

Conclusion

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan is a prudent step for every business. Emergencies can arise at anytime and are usually accompanied by stress, surprise and emotion. It is best to be prepared. Having a designated spokesperson(s) is necessary. This ensures that information is only disseminated to the media by authorized personnel. Be sure that your staff understands who is authorized to speak with the media and how to reach that person in the event of an emergency or media inquiry.

A trained spokesperson with accurate facts and a clear communication plan is the most effective way to manage the media and public information during times of crisis.

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** This information is provided to you courtesy of the Arizona Health Care Association. It is meant to encourage crisis communication planning, but it cannot replace public relations or legal advisers. In any crisis, be sure to consult the appropriate professionals as part of your communication plan.*