

# *What to Say When the News is Bad*

*Managing Negative Events & Reputation Nightmares*

*presented by  
Irving Stackpole*

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**Subject: What to Say...**



[www.johnparlock.com](http://www.johnparlock.com)

## The Myths of Exceptionalism

- It'll NEVER happen here
- We have a great reputation
- We know what to do
- My team can handle it
- What, me worry?

# The Plan

At 3:00 AM

- The Team
- Probable crises
  - Death
  - Fire
  - Assault
- Channels – Who says what to whom?
- Messages – The “sandwich”



# What We'll Talk About

- Defining the issue
- Things that can go wrong
- Preparation
- Crisis – before, during and after
- Conclusion

# Crisis definition

- Any unexpected or expected event which has or can have an adverse impact on the organization, its customers, consumers, employees and/or its products or services.
  - Deaths & Injuries
  - Violence in, or around the property / service
  - Fires, floods and other “events”
  - Closures

## Two crises / two outcomes

- Exxon Valdez
- Ashland Oil



- Why is Exxon remembered?
- Why was Ashland forgotten?

# What can go wrong?

- Communication failure
- Unimaginable
- Piling on/overload
- Misjudge reaction
- Quit too soon
- Errant remark
- Human nature
- People are wacky
- Legal shutdown
- Unintended consequences

# Communication Failure

*Most common problem: leaving the communication to others.*

- Rule: Get up, get it out; get it over
- Wrong: Blame game
- Wrong: Obfuscation
- Wrong: Failure to respond
- Wrong: No prioritization among audiences



## Piling on / Overload

*What happens when you have more than one negative event at a time?*

- Rule: Imagine the unimaginable
- Rule: Rely on experts/additional resources
- Wrong: Buried in operational response
- Wrong: Unbalanced workload among response team

# What are the probabilities?



# The unimaginable - really?

- Hurricane Irma – Hollywood Nursing Home
  - 12 patients died
  - A letter to Congress by the SNFs attorney
  - “The onset of heatstroke is impossible to predict...
- You can say what’s (technically) correct, and be very wrong

## Quit Too soon

*Make sure consequences are considered.*

- Rule: It's not over until it's over
- Wrong: It's done; let's go home
- Wrong: Breakdown of internal communication
- Wrong: Inadequate feedback

## Errant Remark

*With the media, assume that nothing is “off the record.”*

- Rule: If you don't want to see it in the press; don't say it.
- Wrong: Failure to understand communications protocols
- Wrong: Speaking before thinking

# Human nature

*Nobody likes to admit to a mistake, especially to the outside world.*

- Rule: Take responsibility for **something**
- Wrong: Hide behind others
- Wrong: Delay response



# Responsibility



## People are wacky

*Never underestimate the ability of someone to do something unexpected under stress.*

- Rule: Be flexible; respond to all new actions and information
- Wrong: Fail to take it seriously
- Wrong: Fail to understand communication needs



## Legal shutdown

*In some situations, we need to negotiate communications with legal counsel.*

- Rule: Open lines of communication
- Rule: Find something to say to key audiences
- Rule: Saying something *HAPPENED* is not accepting blame or legal responsibility
- Wrong: Fail to understand business needs
- Wrong: Don't listen to feedback

**PREPARATION  
PREPARATION  
PREPARATION**



# The Plan - BEFORE

- Who says what, and to whom
- Where are the phone numbers?
  - Close to every phone
  - Every shift
  - Every location

- The scripts

“Thank you for calling. I am unable to comment, please give me your contact details and I will be sure to pass them on to Mrs. Flynn who will be in touch with you as soon as possible.” AND

“Thank you for your patience”

## The Plan - BEFORE

- List of local media
  - Radio
  - Press – don't forget the freebies
  - eNewsletters
  - Social Media
  - Google Alerts
- Build relationships BEFORE

## The Plan - During

- Vet every media inquiry  
“What paper / radio station did you say you were with?”
- Reply to every media inquiry
  - Failure to reply invites speculation of the worst

## The Plan - During

- Create EXTERNAL talking points
- Never say “I” (This is NOT about you!)
  - “The Sandwich”
    1. “At [NAME] our 1<sup>st</sup> responsibility is the safety & well-being of our residents and staff...
    2. “We are deeply concerned about [INCIDENT] and are [investigating / cooperating / exploring]...
    3. “[NAME] remains committed to the safety and well-being of our residents and staff, and we want to thank [FAMILIES / STAFF / FIRE OFFICIALS / LAW ENFORCEMENT] for their dedication and assistance at this challenging time

## The Plan - During

- Create INTERNAL statement
    - Write it - for Staff & the Board – “The Club Sandwich”
- “Our first concern is...
- “This occurred [INCIDENT]
- “We are [INVESTIGATING / COOPERATING /] etc....
- “During this difficult time, please go to [POINT OF CONTACT]
- “Refrain from commenting because of its nature...
- “Thank you for your cooperation & patience...
- “Our first concern is...
- “Call / email me at any time...”

## After the crisis

- Determine the extent of damage
- Develop a repair plan
- Get feedback from key audiences
- Correct misinformation
- Execute repair plan
- Say “Thank you”



# Are you prepared? The Audit

- Do you have a designated crisis team?
- Is there a clear team leader and backup?
- Do you know who is responsible for communications?
- Do you have a notification process?
- Is there a clear policy for communications between operations and communications?
- Have you considered which staff members “own” relationships with certain audiences?
- Does everyone know what to do?

# Conclusion

- Anticipate
- Prepare
- Execute
- Listen

## Conclusion

*“Always do right. This will gratify  
some people and astonish the rest.”*

-- Mark Twain

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