

MARITIME CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS



You've got to be ready to face the media

By MATTHEW WATSON*

Ask anyone else who's been at the pointy end of a big maritime crisis what the worst part was, and their response will typically be "Dealing with the media!"

After reliving the terrors of standing before packs of demanding journalists and camera's, the recount usually takes this course: "Things happened so quickly. We just felt so exposed and unprepared. If only we'd put more work into our crisis planning."

Or, as former BP global boss Tony Hayward explained after the infamous BP Deep Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010: "The reality is we were completely over-run and just not prepared to deal with the intensity of media scrutiny."

Crises in the maritime sector are usually first-grade media fodder. If we're

talking about a big vessel or piece of infrastructure, a big mess created, big environmental, social and economic costs and powerful, striking or damning visual opportunities, we're talking about the ingredients for a media feeding frenzy.

Australia has had its fair share of these in recent times - the Pasha Bulker Coal Carrier grounding on Newcastle's Nobby's Beach in 2007, the West Atlas Oil Rig explosion in the Timor Sea in 2009, and the Shen Neng 1 Coal Carrier grounding on the Great Barrier Reef in 2010. Across the Tasman, the Rena Container Carrier grounding in New Zealand's Bay of Plenty in 2011 was a spectacle worthy of global attention.

It's critical to understand how fast and ferocious the media can be when chasing information during a crisis, particularly during the opening hours. Information travels so much quicker today compared to only a few years ago. Anyone with a mobile phone is a Johnny-on-the-spot journalist and photographer. Pictures and accounts of big incidents usually zap around social media sites before mainstream media have even blinked, sometimes influencing how mainstream media will follow up. It's more likely that organisations will learn about a crisis - and subsequent developments - through media channels ahead of internal channels. Misinformation can tumble quickly through frantic news cycles and become accepted fact. Whilst handling crisis communications on-location during the Rena grounding, I lost count of how many times anxious journalists rang

(often in the middle of the night) wanting comment on the Rena 'sinking' (i.e. before it had actually sunk).

"A social media rumour..." I'd explain.

"Yeah, but it's gotta be true, right?"



An on-location media briefing



After the salvage

“Wrong...”

One national media outlet even ‘broke’ the story of the ‘sinking’ that hadn’t happened (before retracting).

People and organisation’s in the thick of a crisis usually forget it’s not so much the crisis, per se, that’s the challenge – it’s how you communicate. The media and the public can usually accept accidents and human folly. What usually compounds things is silence, evasiveness, obfuscation and a lack of empathy or remorse. Lies and cover up’s are unforgivable.

If you fail to handle the media, chances are you’ll soon have many other problems on your hands. Such as a political crisis. What politician’s would back you if you’ve become villain number one in the media’s eyes? Chances are they’ll follow media cues and start throwing punches too. Your clients and other stakeholders – particularly your employees – will hardly have faith in you if you are being publicly bludgeoned, which can send morale into free-fall. And, once a pariah, it’s easy for broader questions and accusations to be raised about a whole range of things – maybe your ‘poor safety form’ or your ‘questionable corporate culture’. It’s sometimes staggering how matters totally unrelated to the crisis at hand, creep from the woods like exhumed zombies to haunt you in full public view.

More often than not, the smartest way forward is to take control by stepping up to the mark quickly (VERY quickly) and talking honestly about what’s going on. If you’re in the wrong admit it, or, at the least, acknowledge it. Provide factual clarity and context about what’s happened and, more importantly, what will happen moving forward. Show that you have grabbed the problem with both hands. If you don’t communicate quickly during a crisis you are leaving information in the wind, leaving yourself exposed to whatever may come.

Here are some practical rules and tips accrued over several years of crisis comms management in the maritime sector.

1. Have a crisis communications plan.

That means an easy-to-follow document that is updated every three months. It should clearly articulate who does and says what, when and where if a crisis occurs. It needs to be understood by a core crisis management team who will follow it when the big one goes off. It must explain contingencies such as who will take control if the top boss is indisposed, or where your crisis management room will be if there is a power outage at your head office, or where you will gather (and how you will get there) if the crisis is in a remote location. Updated mobile and home numbers are essential.

2. Know where your plan is and put it to the test

I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve received panicked calls from companies wanting crisis counsel, only to arrive and hear management say ‘we’ve got a crisis plan somewhere... but can’t quite find it...’ Keep multiple copies in accessible places. The only way to learn how to move quickly



is to have practice exercises. It’s funny how only those who have been through the red-hot hell of a crisis truly understand this.

3. Consistent messaging

Don’t tell the media one thing, Government something else and your employees something else again. It will catch up with you. Remain on-message with everyone.

4. Undertake media training

Do media training regularly - twice a year. It will pay staggering dividends during a crisis (and also help with routine media engagement). If you are sure footed, easy to understand and know how to exude a sense of honesty and cooperation, you are setting the scene for journalists to swing in behind you.

5. Get external crisis comms help

You must have enough experienced hands on deck to keep journalists briefed and provide running strategic counsel. A senior comms expert needs to be in the crisis room or on location (not making occasional check-in phone calls from another town, city or country).

6. If you are at fault, acknowledge it

If it’s your vessel stuck on rocks and spewing diesel oil into the pristine waters, it’s best to plainly acknowledge what’s happening – quickly. Then focus on what’s being done to rectify the problem. Acknowledgements (and apologies) days or weeks after the event don’t work.

7. Feed the media

If media scrutiny is unavoidable, stay engaged with the media. Sate their hunger. Feed them information. Give them interviews and picture opportunities. This gives you control and builds rapport.

8. Don’t over-optimise

Resist the temptation to say ‘everything will be fixed up quickly’. Don’t express that the maritime disaster is a ‘minor incident’. Call things as they are. If you think things will get worse, say it. This manages expectations. Never set time-frames or speculate on outcomes if you don’t know what’s going to happen. If you specify ‘the vessel should be re-floated by 0900 hours’ and it doesn’t happen, get ready for ‘failure’ headlines.

9. Accept that ‘everyone’s an expert’

‘Experts’ have a habit of popping up and telling the media the ‘simple way’ to fix everything in five minutes. Don’t be too distracted by such commentary. The main thing is that you are cutting through first with your own messages.

10. Don’t lie.

You are gone if you are caught lying. Just don’t do it.

11. Get close to the Government

There is often a lot to be gained by making quick contact with political figures. Assure that you will work with them and front-up publicly to explain. Offer to appear beside Minister’s and bureaucrats at media conferences, if possible. It’s harder to be attacked politically if you are genuinely taking responsibility and showing remorse.

12. Legal advice

It is ESSENTIAL to have an on-call lawyer as part of your crisis management team. The lawyer must be experienced at, and understand crisis communications. The ‘no comment for fear of incrimination’ cop-out doesn’t work. Neither does nebulous ‘legalese’. Some lawyers have a habit of filling decision makers with fear when the heat is on, advising that nothing should be said to anyone. Remember this: you get cut down harder and faster in the court of public opinion than any court of law.

13. Staff and contractor social media policy

One to watch. Staff and contractors working on a maritime crisis can be tempted to post up-close pictures of the spectacle and commentary on social media sites. It’s also easy for such unauthorised material to cut right across the broader comms strategy. Make it clear to staff and contractors from the outset that no one should be posting pictures or comments.

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