

Public Relations versus Crisis Communications

Over the last decade, most law enforcement agencies have come to realize the importance of communicating with the public. The majority of police departments work with the media, have their own websites, and many are utilizing social media to get their messages out.

However, when crisis hits ... like Winston Churchill said, “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on” ... immediate, concise, and truthful communication becomes vital. That crisis can be anything from a natural disaster or officer malfeasance allegation, to terrorism concerns or a crime wave, like the arsons experienced by Los Angeles County right around New Year’s.

The most obvious difference between day-to-day public relations and crisis communications is the level of interest. There will be an exaggerated response by the media and the public to a crisis. Your job may be to quell rumor, calm a panicked public, and explain a complex situation all at once. It’s important to remember that crises are “money stories” for the media ... interest will be intense, pressure will be severe, and the need to “feed the beast” overwhelming. In today’s ‘no news cycle’ world, the pressure on your agency for information will be never-ending. Be prepared to think on your feet.

During a crisis if you are indeed the lead agency, keep in mind your job is to “keep the main thing, the main thing.” After an F-2 tornado ravaged downtown Atlanta in 2008, the media ran the story non-stop for 72 hours. While the media were asking premature questions about the amount of damage and cost to the city, it was the Atlanta Police Department’s job to keep the media on-point – messaging about public safety, traffic issues, and clean-up.

That leads to the second job of an agency at the head of a crisis: keep messages timely. At the onset of an incident, you may have to provide 15, 30, or 60 minute updates. Take control of the message right away by using your department’s social media site as the go-to place for new information. If you don’t provide a constant stream of information when it becomes available, and is releasable to the public, the media and your community will go elsewhere for information – and there’s a good chance you will then be spending your limited energy correcting misconceptions and rumors. Even if there is no update, letting the public know “we have nothing more to add right now, but we will have another update for you in 15 minutes” is a great strategy that lets the media and public know you respect their need for information and are doing everything possible to provide it in a timely fashion.

Third, keep messages simple. Twitter has both pros and cons ... but it forces one to think in 140 character ‘sound bites’ – this actually helps departments create simple and easy to follow messages. Remember, during crisis, the media and public experience tunnel vision, just as officers may when involved in a shooting. Simple, active-voice, positive messages such as: “stay inside”, “stay home”, or “give blood” resonate. Messages that tell people what NOT to do, can sometimes be confusing, and leave the public asking, “OK, what SHOULD I do?”

While “inform, engage, empower” is the basis for a strong communication strategy, in crisis it is key. People feel helpless in crisis, and look to the authorities for information and what they can do. The LA County Sheriff did a terrific job during the arsons around the New Year – telling people to “keep your lights on outside at night” and “if you see something, say something”. Simple messages of diligence led to the speedy arrest of a suspect and the calming of an entire county that was reassured their police were on the job and that the community was not helpless.

With all this said, these rules of communicating in crisis won’t work if your agency has not developed a level of trust with your community. If you haven’t laid the ground-work of trust before a crisis, it will be difficult to be seen as a credible source for information during one. There are numerous steps you can

take before, during, and after a crisis to build trust in a community. Take those steps now to help prepare for that day ... because whether you prepare or not, "that day" will come!

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.