

**PRNews<sup>®</sup>**

**MEDIA  
TRAINING  
GUIDEBOOK**

**2009 EDITION**

 **Access  
Intelligence**

Published by PR News Press • [www.prnewsonline.com](http://www.prnewsonline.com)

# FIRST, STOP THE BLEEDING: HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE MEDIA DURING A COMPANY CRISIS

BY PRISS BENBOW, PRESIDENT, BENBOW INTERNATIONAL PR

**W**hen a company crisis captures the media's attention, the CEO is placed in an unenviable position of having to manage the crisis—and communicate to the media about it—simultaneously. Many CEOs are skilled in the former but not the latter. This article presents a checklist of the most important actions to take when a company crisis demands a CEO communicate with the media.

Imagine the following scenario: It is Tuesday morning at 8:27 am. You arrive at your office building to find it in flames. There has been an unexplained explosion and you are unsure if all of your employees are safe. Television crews are reporting live in front of your burning building. The reporters are asking to interview the CEO immediately.

As CEO, you are painfully aware that negative press coverage can create a devastating chain reaction, damaging company credibility, sales, customer loyalty, market share, profits, and—for publicly-held companies—its stock price. Your company's good name has tremendous value—how are you going to protect it?

What are the steps you take to save your company and possibly your job? You have one hour to prepare before you make a public statement to the media.

**1. Identify the crisis team.** The crisis team must include the CEO, PR advisor, and legal counsel, all of whom have expertise to help assess and solve the current problem and avoid creating new ones. Although there may be other C-level executives involved (for example, the CTO), this group of three should form the core team.

Create a list with all crisis team members' contact information (names, telephone numbers, faxes, and e-mails), and distribute it to them and their administrative staff. This ensures valuable time is not lost searching for contact information.

**2. Assemble the crisis team.** The CEO holds a meeting or conference call with the crisis team to achieve two goals: to define the problem and to create a plan.

To define the problem, the crisis team:

- Identifies and defines the issue. They determine the nature and scope of the problem, as well as tangential issues that can sidetrack the conversation with the media.
- Determines if the problem constitutes a crisis. If yes, why? If no, why not? They gather and confirm facts, determine what information is missing and who will research it.

To create a plan, the crisis team:

- Discusses response options. Specifically: 1) Who should receive information; 2) in what format; 3) in what order; and 4) by what time?
- Assigns roles. Roles are assigned to each individual that relate to their expertise. Typically the CEO is the company spokesperson, the PR advisor handles all media inquiries and all three of the crisis team members approve materials before they are released publicly.

**3. Agree on a course of action.** The crisis team must agree to and finalize the tactics, timeframes, and responsibilities for each person to complete during the crisis.

**4. Create a war room.** Designate one location to manage all calls and questions related to the crisis. This demonstrates who is in charge and where they are located. Review the company in-house media list and contact the journalists on this list to update them of events.

Designate times to release updated information to the public. Post updated information to the company website.

The media is driven by deadlines. Create a matrix with media requests. The purpose is to create a master list of all deadlines and deliverables that is visible for the crisis team to execute against.

**5. Speak in one voice — truthfully and consistently.** Designate only one spokesperson. This builds credibility and decreases errors and contradictions.

Compose key messages to include in all public statements and materials which: outline the history of the crisis, are factual, short, and list next steps. Lying about, omitting, or obscuring the truth only damages the company's reputation.

**6. Require an internal sign off for all public information.** To ensure accuracy and consistency, require a formal sign-off by the crisis team before any information is released publicly. The PR advisor is responsible for securing all sign offs.

**7. Inform employees.** If possible, assemble employees and read them the statement that is scheduled to be released publicly. The purpose is to inform the employees of the facts and reduce rumors. In addition, use this opportunity to explain that only the CEO speaks for the company, to refrain from giving statements to the media, and the purpose and location of the War Room.

**8. Create a call log.** The call log serves as a written record of all inquiries and has two purposes. First, the PR advisor uses it to confirm that all media questions have been answered. Second, the legal counsel may refer to it in the future, if needed. For every call received, obtain the inquirer's name, media outlet or business, information requested, and way to respond (i.e., telephone number, e-mail, or website).

**9. Monitor media flow, reflect, and revise responses.** The media cannot be managed. Be available to them and respect their deadlines. Monitor media coverage and correct speculative or inaccurate statements immediately with facts.

Meet during the day with the crisis team to discuss questions from journalists and media coverage. If media coverage is contrary to your interpretation of events, counter the media assertions with facts and revise your responses to be more persuasive.

**10. Track and clip media coverage.** Use a clipping service to track media coverage, or at the least, google alerts. This allows you to analyze the consistency of the message, whether the press coverage is positive or negative, and column inches.

Most crises are unexpected. The checklist outlined above can help CEOs mitigate their impact. **PRN**

---

*Before founding Benbow International PR ([www.benbowpr.com](http://www.benbowpr.com)), Priss Benbow worked in The White House press office, and later as a consultant for Bain & Company.*