

MEDIA RELATIONS INSIDER

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING TO INCREASE YOUR MEDIA COVERAGE

SUPPLEMENT TO BULLDOG REPORTER'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE EDITIONS

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Sago Disaster Teaches Crisis Planning Lessons for PR—Here are Starting Points to Consider

The many miscommunications that turned the Sago mining disaster into a global media tragedy in early January could have been prevented in large part had the crisis communications team for the **International Coal Group** (ICG) more effectively managed the crisis, according to experts. For example, regular media updates by a company spokesperson would have thwarted the rumors that spread inaccurate information about the dead miners.

Below, communications expert **TJ Walker**, president of **Media Training Worldwide**, and crisis expert **Mike Paul**, president and senior counselor for **MGP & Associates PR**, offer further insight into the disaster, as well as tips for deterring similar miscommunications that can often occur during a crisis:

1. Bring your corporate communications team onsite as soon as crisis strikes. “The bottom line is that [ICG CEO] Wilbur Ross knew the world was watching,” Paul says. “Yet he allowed others who had the least experience to take the lead during the disaster.”

Paul stresses that a crisis becomes corporate responsibility the minute it strikes—and a changing of the guard should take place immediately: “As soon as that mine collapsed, everything changed and it became a global story—and you need someone in charge who has global messaging experience,” Paul stresses. “That’s when you have your corporate people fly in and you tell the foreman, ‘John, you’re no longer in charge of the site. This is a corporate thing now.’ To be inexperienced and not realize that they were giving inaccurate information is irresponsible,” Paul sums.

2. Don’t let rumors swirl: be the first to deliver any and all news. “It’s always bad when it’s bad news,” Walker points out. “But it’s even worse when someone else delivers it. Therefore, you better be the first

to deliver bad news—and it should never come as a huge surprise to anyone.”

Walker says that you have to define yourself as the most reliable source of information during a crisis. “You can’t be relegated to a bit player,” he says. “Because the police are saying this and someone else on their cell phone is saying that, you must aggressively assert yourself as the spokesperson for the crisis. Reporters are starving for any snippets, and a cell phone call or speculation from a local police officer who might not know everything could be reported as fact.”

He advises stamping out rumors immediately by quickly tapping a spokesperson to talk to the media: “In times of crisis involving human life, it’s important to shoot down false positive rumors,” he says. “If stories are swirling around, you must have a spokesperson say, ‘We don’t have enough evidence at this time and we don’t want to give false hope.’ If you hide and don’t say anything, you create a vacuum where rumors swirl around and go through a gestation process, and some end up in mainstream media. It’s not good enough to make people wait several hours.”

3. Provide media updates every 15 minutes. “We’ve all watched ER,” Paul says. “You don’t have to be an expert in crisis communications to understand that there are times when you should be addressing family members—or the media—every 15 minutes. You come out and say, ‘I just want to let you know that we’re still working and we want to make sure everything we report is accurate, and I’ll let you know when I have absolute confirmation.’ Just doing that calms people down,” Paul says.

Additionally: “People fill the air with guesses and wishes and fears. But by simply coming out and saying, ‘We still don’t know’ and letting them know you respect them and that you’re putting yourself in their shoes by coming out every 15 minutes, that helps.”

On the other hand: “We’ve all seen the news reports where the reporters are standing out there and they’re not getting much help from the communications people,” he says. “They’re just waiting for an update, and then you

become the story because you're not doing your job. That was the case with the mining disaster, and because of pressure from a number of directions, someone took a guess and it spread like wildfire."

4. It's never too late to apologize. "Here's a message for those who make mistakes: it's never too late to apologize," Paul says. "Instead of putting your head back in the sand, go back over every step and do a communications audit," he suggests. "You have to say, 'We made some mistakes, let me tell you what they were.' If you fess up, people will appreciate that and it will alleviate some of the anger." ★

PRESS RELEASES

Tap into "Psycho-Demographic" Motivators: Use this Checklist to Craft More Targeted Messages

Today's media consumers are more segmented, savvy and suspicious than ever before, one guerilla PR expert argues, and your audience research methods must delve deeper into their psychological motivations and incentives in order to reach them. "You have to go beyond basic, conventional market research to validate who your target

consumers are these days," advises **Michael Leifer**, Founder and CEO of **Guerilla PR, Inc.**, a California-based PR firm that capitalizes on the power of word-of-mouth marketing, combined with comprehensive tracking and quantification.

His point: "It's no longer enough to break the population down into things like age, income, gender and geographic location. You now have to determine the psycho-demographic motivations and incentives that drive consumers' behaviors. Once you know the underbelly of what motivates them, you'll know their habits, the social networks they're involved in, and how to best reach them."

In other words: "You can't just take a new car or cell phone and make it appeal to all of Gen-Y," he says. "Gen-Y is too segmented. For example, the messages that appeal to extreme skateboarders will not appeal to urban hip-hop fans. You have to figure out which segments it makes sense to message to, and how to best appeal to them. If you're too broad and homogenized, your audience will tune you out."

To ensure that doesn't happen to your messaging, Leifer offers the following "audience litmus test." Use it to help evaluate and revisit your campaigns, speaking points, branding efforts and targeting efforts:

CRISIS RESPONSE

The Sago Mining Disaster: Why the Communications Breakdown Occurred



Much ink has been spilt over mistakes made by media outlets across the country when they inaccurately reported the death toll after the Sago mining disaster in January. But inaccurate reporting alone cannot be blamed for misinformation spread about the life status of miners from the **International Coal Group (ICG)**. A communications breakdown occurred within ICG that could have easily been avoided had they offered a better crisis response, experts suggest.

According to the company's official statement, exhausted workers were communicating by code on a spotty radio connection two miles into the earth's surface, and false information stating that 12 miners were alive was relayed through stray cell phone conversations. This information spread like wildfire and was reported in media outlets across the globe. But when ICG learned shortly after that this information was

not entirely accurate, they decided against releasing any statement until they knew all the facts.

This was their critical mistake. Hours later, 12 miners were found dead, and ICG had a lot of explaining to do.

Experts agree that the miscommunication would have been prevented had ICG immediately alerted the families and media that previous information was inaccurate, and offered periodic media updates throughout the night until all the facts came out.

"In a crisis where people are trapped in a mine, you must have a spokesperson available every 15 minutes stating exactly what the facts are and all the efforts undertaken to save the people," says **TJ Walker**, president of **Media Training Worldwide**. "In a crisis where people's lives are at stake, rumors circulate at a million miles per minute and your job is not only to state the facts, but also to shoot down rumors."

Additionally: "Anytime you think there's a chance that one of your employees has died, you better be 100 percent certain that no one gets the wrong impression, otherwise you have doomed your reputation for a generation," Walker warns.

1. Where do they hang out? “If I’m doing street distribution and messaging to soccer moms, I could go to the park or ballet studio and put door hangers on car doors,” Leifer says. “If I do that, I have to figure out what areas and neighborhoods will give me the biggest bang to hit the largest critical mass. Or if I’m messaging to women who play bingo, I have to know where the largest collections of bingo halls are in the top ten markets. And maybe I want to go after a younger audience, so I throw a two-for-one bingo, drink and dinner buffet at the Red Lobster. Or I’ll throw an event like a Grandma and daughter mixer at the bingo hall. If you have this kind of psychographic data about where your audience is most likely to be and respond to your messaging, your efforts will be much more successful,” he assures.

2. What websites do they visit? “Online, you have to find the websites that are visited most often by the largest collection of your audience, Leifer says. “A lot of kids, for example, don’t think Yahoo is cool at all. So a site like Myspace offers a much better medium to get your message across to that demographic. Or going back to the bingo example, I’d go to bingo message boards and webmasters and offer to host a digital bingo play-off. Or perhaps I’d create a new game called DJ Bingo to attract younger people, or create a new version of bingo where the characters play in swimsuits. Websites attract self-identified audiences, so it’s easy to find those websites and message boards that your key audiences visit. You want to get your message out on those kinds of targeted sites, as opposed to more general sites like Yahoo where you’re likely to be ignored.”

3. Which specific products are they most interested in? “When I did a campaign with Sony, we found a key insight into what motivated their buyers through a series of informational interviews,” says Leifer. “Out of all the Sony Walkman products, we found that the most interesting were the MiniDisc players because DJs actually use them onstage in the clubs. This is an extremely attractive selling point for Sony’s buyers. So we said, ‘Let’s get more DJs to use Sony’s MiniDisc players and then have pretty girls at the clubs giving away free MiniDisc mixes.’ Then we buzzed it up on online chat rooms and offered a coupon to redeem the actual MiniDisc players for 25 percent off for the people who had the mixes. This upped sales for Sony at a surprising rate that would not have been possible had we not known that the MiniDisc players were the hottest product.”

4. Which brands do they want to be associated with? “You must know the right brands associated with your audience or you’re not going to appeal to them,” Leifer says. “For example, Nike is not cool among the fashionista crowd, who like to keep a low

profile. But Puma is about being reserved, laidback and quietly stylish, so this is a better brand for them. Nike is about self-aggrandization and hyping yourself up. This kind of attitude appeals more to an urban hip-hop crowd.” His point: “Know the key differences between the brands and which brands appeal to your audience before you decide to do anything that involves another brand.”

5. What media do they consume? “Not many people watch just one show on TV,” Leifer says. “And whether it’s cable TV or network, any given show’s audience is segment-significant.” So any media relations effort you engage in should take into account the audience of the media you pitch. Selectively target media outlets that your audience is attracted to rather than taking a spaghetti-on-the-wall approach. “Single messaging across the board to all audiences does not work today,” Leifer confirms. ★

PR TRENDS

Look To PR Industry Practice in Europe to Bolster Your Own Efforts Here at Home: Pros Explain How

Want to know which trends PR can expect to see in coming months? One way to make that determination is to take a glance across the pond to see how the industry has been changing in Europe—and to incorporate those takeaways into your practice.

“Traditional media relations skills are going to be the same in coming months, but the media landscape has changed spectacularly,” offers **Peter Sawell**, president of the **Public Relations Global Network (PRGN)**. “Over the last 20 years, practitioners have been talking communication, but have been practicing info dissemination—blogs, for example, really open up true communication.”

“Consumers are getting more info, so they’re demanding,” adds **Sheena Campbell-Royce**, founder and president of **SCR**, with offices in Madrid and Barcelona. She is also president of the **British Chamber of Commerce** in Spain and vice president of the **Council of British Chambers of Commerce** in continental Europe, as well as a member of the PRGN. “It’s because of geography—we’re different countries, not different states. Companies are starting to want guaranteed results. Agencies are having to be much more flexible here.”

Which trends are Sawell and Campbell-Royce seeing in Europe? Several—and one key reason is the way the

PRGN operates. “PRGN used to be a North American network that became international a couple of years ago,” Sawell explains. “On one hand, you have multinational firms like **Hill & Knowlton, Burson**, etc. But there are also independent alliances, which is what we are. What differentiates us is: 1) all our companies are independent and also owner-run, and 2) unlike every other network, there is no compulsion to use your fellow network members. If you’re in a multinational firm, and the London office wins business, they have to use the office in Paris, Frankfurt, etc. Most of our firms are comparatively small—\$1-2 million annual income. We have 32 firms and 55 offices now, and later this year it will be about 40. We’re appointing more in places like China. My firm became involved two years ago. It’s still mostly North American firms in the alliance.”

Here are the main trends Sawell and Campbell-Royce see in place—ones which will likely be jumping the pond this year:

1. Media management. “One key trend is the emergence of personal media management,” says Sawell. “Podcasting will increase exponentially. Busy consumers will be downloading news, info and entertainment of their own choosing and watching at their convenience. They’ll be, in essence, creating their own personal media. Who knows how to target it, but it will be a reality of the marketplace within six months—if it picks up at the pace that things like blogging and chatrooms have.”

2. Reputation management. “Most biggish companies here have a reputation manager working alongside the PR team looking out for the company image and reputation,” Sawell reveals. “It’s a question of watching out for anything that could damage the reputations of these companies.”

3. Corporate social responsibilities management. “Environmental affairs have a higher profile on the corporate agenda in Europe than the U.S.,” he says. “They communicate to all the stakeholders about the good work the company is doing in reducing CO2 emissions, using vehicles that consume less gas, etc. Stakeholders are interested in these acts of goodwill.”

“Environmental PR is very serious in Europe,” adds Royce-Campbell. “For example, companies have to be careful about not fouling up the water—CEOs go to jail for this. Companies need to be seen as environmentally friendly. It’s getting tough here. We’re very into global warming, children’s futures, etc. We employ corporate social responsibility, with an emphasis on ‘social.’ Companies must be more responsible.”

4. Greater corporate transparency. “Transparency is a bigger deal in Europe—not necessarily

just financial transparency, but overall transparency,” says Campbell-Royce. “Many companies are going beyond established regulations and requirements because global competition is tougher here. Companies here can’t rely on domestic markets. If you do, you’re dead. It’s extremely important to focus on communicating the truth without the spin.”

5. The move toward project-specific contracts. “Companies are picking out specific skills rather than taking on a whole program,” says Campbell-Royce. “Five years ago, it was 80% contract work. Now it’s like 60%. Companies are demanding project work, not overall contracts from PR agencies. It comes down to demanding more results and how you get to them. They say, ‘This month, do this event for me. And I have this news to spread—can you get it in the press for me. Also, help me do this and this.’ It’s more specific. Companies are paying projects, not flat rates. Agencies can make more money. We all over-service our clients all the time. Project work is easier to control.”

Of course, other more universal trends are leaving their mark overseas. Sawell points out the following as the most impacting:

- **Integrated marketing.** “The line between direct marketing and PR is becoming blurred,” he says. “The whole thing overlaps—partly because departments are more integrated, but partly because of the way the use of the Web has developed—namely, the rise of bloggers.”

- **Newsroom reorganization.** “The BBC reorganized the way their journalists operate. Instead of having journalists servicing TV, radio and online separately, the same ones now operate more specifically on topics—but across media,” he says. “That means pitches to them must be short and to the point. There’s no time to read long pitches.”

- **More customized pitching.** “Spray and pray methods are really out the window, and targeting is now the king again, as it used to be,” he assures. “The emergence of new communications methods has forced us to go back to more fundamental skills.”

- **Better demographic targeting.** “The digital age is making traditional demographic targeting almost irrelevant,” he says. “Through ISPs, you can almost target at will. Those marketing skills are also changing. These ISPs can produce a very targeted audience for almost anything.” ★

—Frank Zeccola