

# Strategic Communications

## Ten Rules for Communicating in a Crisis

Let's face it: When the press wants controversy, they inevitably find it. The question is whether your organization is prepared to communicate effectively when the public eye turns to you. The most innovative organizations do more than just win in the court of law—they win in the court of public opinion. So how do you do it? What follows are ten tested rules for communicating before, during, and after a crisis. Consider each of them and ask yourself: Are you prepared?

### 1. Tell the truth.

Warren Buffet said it best: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." Reporters have an uncanny ability to uncover the truth in a crisis, so it better come from you. Deliberately spreading false information is the easiest way to damage—perhaps permanently—your company's reputation with the press and the public.

### 2. Define your audience.

Ask yourself whose opinion truly matters in a given crisis. Perhaps opinion leaders at major news organizations are your target audience. In other instances, it may be shareholders, city council members, or small-town community leaders. Identify the audience that matters to you, and make them your priority.

### 3. Sharpen your message.

Few things are as ineffective as a rambling spokesperson or a long-winded press release. Before communicating publicly, develop a simple yet compelling message that speaks directly to your target audience and repeat it relentlessly.

### 4. Make news on your terms.

Far too many organizations go silent when a crisis hits. Doing so virtually guarantees your reputation will be defined by critics. When a crisis emerges that will test your reputation, respond quickly and decisively on your own terms.

### 5. Be sympathetic.

Organizations that appear poised and concerned about the public welfare generally succeed; those that appear impatient or indifferent to the concerns of the public generally do not.

### 6. Mind your own ranks.

Internal communications can be the difference when communicating in a crisis. Your employees represent your company at home and in the community. Keeping them informed during challenging times demonstrates leadership, maintains morale, and eliminates confusion and uncertainty.

## 7. Bring in reinforcements.

Feel like you're getting beat up in the press? Help your cause by recruiting reputable, outside voices to defend your company. A public statement from a respected elected official, statesman, community leader, or even a local celebrity can help temper the rhetoric of your critics.

## 8. Don't take it personally.

Reporters aren't paid to give you good press or to be your friend. They are paid to ask tough questions and to be fair in their coverage. If you think a reporter's coverage has been inaccurate or unfair, let that media outlet know. But don't lose your composure just because they ask hard questions and report hard facts.

## 9. Know your ground rules.

Always assume your conversations with a reporter are on-the-record—whether in your office or at a restaurant. Off-the-record discussions can be useful, but make sure you and the reporter are clear about what is fit for print.

## 10. Don't simply respond to crises—plan for them.

Forward-thinking companies identify their vulnerabilities ahead of time, anticipate challenges to their reputation, and plan accordingly. A strategic crisis planning exercise—one that designates spokespersons and identifies stakeholders in advance of a crisis—can be the single-most effective means for mitigating a crisis.

For information about the Strategic Communications practice at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, PLLC visit [www.wcsr.com/strategiccommunications](http://www.wcsr.com/strategiccommunications).

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