

Dealing with the media during a spill emergency

Crisis communications planning and openness with the press can help you keep your reputation untarnished

By Tom Moses, Spill Center President

GOOD PR DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN, especially in a crisis situation. But that's when you need it most. Truck accidents are big news when they tie up traffic for hours while emergency crews deal with diesel fuel and hazardous chemicals leaking from the vehicle. The public relations challenges of such an environmental release should be considered an important part of the spill generator's response to the incident. Advance crisis communications planning can go a long way toward keeping your company from coming off as the bad guy after a spill. To help in your planning, the Spill Center® has developed these guidelines for dealing with the media during spill emergencies that occur on the road or at one of your facilities.

Organize crisis communications team. Appoint a company spokesperson whose job will be to gather all available information (who, what, where, when, how, and what's next) on each incident and handle news media inquiries. The Spill Center will notify this person in addition to other key company officials when it activates the company's Emergency Spill Contingency Plan during a spill emergency.

The spokesperson should be accessible around the clock and be prepared to go to the scene of an incident involving a company truck, facility or employee as quickly as possible when required. All media calls for information should be directed to the spokesperson. Additional team members should be assigned the task of notifying the company's other stakeholders, including employees, customers, community leaders and the families of any victims, about the incident.

General information about the company should be prepared in the form of a backgrounder that can be kept on file and distributed to reporters at the time of an incident. Include details about the size of the fleet, the company's good safety record, community service and other positive information that helps position the company as a responsible and upstanding corporate citizen.

Control information by becoming the primary provider. What if your company spokesperson arrives on the scene before media people? He should first offer assistance and company resources to the fire chief or other authority in charge. As soon as he has assessed the situation and gathered the facts, he should call the local broadcast news stations and newspapers to advise them that he is available to provide information. That establishes him as the company contact and presents the company as willing to cooperate with the media. The spokesperson should promise to keep the media updated – by phone or fax – whenever he receives new information about the incident. He should keep the following guidelines in mind when dealing with the press:

- **Honesty is the best policy.** Attempts to cover up an incident or provide incomplete or incorrect information can come back and bite you if a reporter finds out the full story from another source. By being open and responsive, you control the information, since the reporter doesn't feel the need to look for other sources to learn about your company sources that might provide inaccurate or slanted information.
- **Prepare for interviews.** Make notes listing points you want to make during interviews, and volunteer them, even if the reporter does not ask the right questions. Speak slowly and in short sentences, allowing the reporter to take notes. Avoid using industry jargon that the reporter might not fully understand or could misinterpret.
- **Keep your promises.** When you don't know the answer to a reporter's question, admit that you don't know and promise to find out and get back to him. Just make sure you do. Nothing irritates a reporter more than waiting for someone who has promised to call back, then doesn't.
- **Return all calls quickly.** Newscasts and press runs don't wait. Return calls as soon as you can. First priority should be to radio and TV reporters, since they typically are working under tighter deadline pressures for updates than newspaper reporters.
- **Two words to avoid.** Never say "No Comment" to a reporter. That can be interpreted in several ways (all negative), namely, that you have something to hide, that you're not interested in being cooperative, or that you are not concerned.
- **Do not speculate.** Avoid making off-the-cuff or off-the-record remarks to a reporter. Do not speculate about the cause of the accident or who is to blame. Do not estimate monetary damages or provide information on insurance coverages. Explain that it is company policy not to divulge those kinds of details.
- **Caution on victims.** Do not release the names of people who died or were injured as a result of the incident until their next of kin have been notified, preferably in person.
- **Keep it positive.** Inform the press if your driver has a long accident-free record and about any efforts the driver took to contain the spill and stop the leak before emergency response personnel arrived on the scene. Acknowledge any negative information that might have emerged about your company and provide details on what is being done to remedy the problem or situation.
- **Put people first.** Spare no expense in providing for victims of the incident - paying for hotel rooms, meals, transportation and picking up other costs. Your actions in this regard will not go unnoticed by the press and will show that your company puts people before property. Let the press know about your acts of goodwill and the efforts you made on behalf of victims and their families.
- **Environmental concern.** Inform the press about the actions taken to clean up and restore the spill site to its original condition. That portrays your company as a good corporate citizen who is concerned about the environment.

Your spokesperson should communicate a consistent and positive image about your company, acting truthfully, quickly and responsibly in all contacts with the media. Being open and willing to cooperate with the press shows that your company has nothing to hide.

Keep the situation in proper perspective. Your spokesperson should not minimize the importance of an incident involving a spill, regardless of how minor, since people are naturally defensive when it comes to safeguarding the environment and their own welfare. But neither should he make more of a situation than it warrants. He should always explain the situation fully to reporters so that the incident does not get blown out of proportion. When appropriate, explain the non-volatile nature of the spilled materials or other mitigating factors that lessen the incident's impact on the environment and public safety.

The Spill Center's 24-hour Hotline can be an excellent resource when an authoritative explanation or information about the spill is needed. In addition, CMA's CHEMTREC®, the Chemical Transportation Emergency Center, can be contacted for technical information about hazardous materials. Keep the phone numbers of these expert sources listed in your Crisis Communications Plan. By having a strategy and by following these media guidelines, your company will be in a better position to keep its good name from being tarnished as the result of bad press reports based on incomplete or incorrect information.

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