WORKING WITH THE MEDIA--HOW IT'S DONE IN MILWAUKEE

I can empathize with the criticism snow fighters received from the media in Kentucky after the big snowstorms last winter. It is something we have all experienced. The 1978-79 winter in Milwaukee was the worst winter I have experienced over the last 20 years. Several back-to-back blizzards buried Milwaukee. That is the winter we made the national news for stacking abandoned cars on top of each other in lots so that we could clear buried streets with endloaders, snowblowers, and other special heavy equipment. The Wisconsin National Guard was called in to help us restore mobility. Schools closed and industry shut down. Residents and the media were highly critical of the snowplowing efforts.

I was working during one of the storms that year when a popular radio talk show host called to do a live radio interview and question and answer session with his audience. As a little warm up, he called about five minutes before the show was to air. He was extremely cordial, asked me how it was going, sympathized with the problems we were encountering and said something like, “I don’t know how you guys can keep it up. You have been working around the clock for days. My heart really goes out to you. I’ll do a little overview and then we’ll open it up for listener questions. Let’s see what we can do.”

I was feeling better about the interview. But when we went live, he opened the show by saying in a hostile, angry tone of voice that he had one of the managers responsible for the terrible conditions in the city on the line, that listeners could question him about why streets were buried, why schools were closed, why workers were stuck in their homes losing wages because their factories and businesses were shut down, and that maybe I could explain to everybody why the city of Milwaukee was in such deplorable shape.

Those types of ambushes are the exception to the rule but experiences like that tend to make you leery of the media. I know I was. Then several years ago, Debbie Young, the news director of WMIL-FM and WOKY-AM in Milwaukee approached me with the idea of “Stormwatch.” She wanted to station a reporter in sanitation headquarters during major weekday morning snowstorms to do live reports. I thought to myself, a spy! No way! But after much deliberation, we decided to give it a try. It has turned out to be one of the best decisions we ever made.

According to the station, Stormwatch programming is launched when “weather conditions have made normal life impossible. Generally,
this means an excess of six inches of snow, or an ice storm.” Reporters are stationed in the newsroom, at the sheriff’s department, the airport, at Sanitation, and in a Bronco to give actual road conditions.

The reporter at Sanitation makes live reports every half hour. The reports always include the percentage of main and side streets that have been plowed and salted, how long the plows have been working, what the operational plans are, and what problems are being encountered (icing, drifting, parked cars, etc.). They also include information that we want to get to the public—like explaining what a snow emergency means in Milwaukee; why parking regulations need to be obeyed; how illegally parked cars hamper plowing efforts; asking people to move their cars to plowed areas so that snow islands can be cleared; explaining plowing priorities; why certain street have not been plowed yet; telling motorists why they need to give working plows plenty of room; providing general winter driving tips; even snow shoveling tips. We never had this kind of access to the public before.

Stormwatch has really been a win-win-win situation for the radio station, Sanitation, and the public. The station has developed a reputation as the place to get the latest, most complete storm condition reporting, Sanitation is able to reach the public far more comprehensively than ever before, and the public benefits from all this information. This type of reporting is based on mutual trust and it took awhile for it to develop between the station and ourselves.

Perhaps the most important impact of Stormwatch for us was that it gave the station’s reporters and their listeners the opportunity to see that we are not faceless, uncaring bureaucrats, but real people trying our best to restore public safety under difficult conditions. Many positive things have been said about us on the air during and after storms because the reporter became part of our effort by being with us.

Media compliments are rare. The best compliment that snow fighters usually get is no mention at all. No news is good news. If you did a good job, you were mentioned at the bottom of the news, or you weren’t mentioned at all. If there is a perception that things were handled poorly, you are the news story. The media has incredible power when it comes to formulating public opinion. If the media says you did a good job, the public believes you did a good job. If you are criticized by the media, whether the criticism is justified or not, the public believes that also.

Coincidentally, WMIL has become the number one rated radio station in the Milwaukee metropolitan area over the last few years. We like to tell them it was because of those great plowing reports. Actually, I think it had more to do with Wynona than winter. WMIL is the only country station in Milwaukee. But services like Stormwatch certainly play a part. The format has been successful. Almost all the stations in Milwaukee now do special winter storm reporting.

Before allowing a reporter to set up shop in your office, make sure there is a clear understanding about the ground rules. We provide a desk
and a phone for the reporter and all the information and background needed for their reports. In return, the reporter respects our work areas and does not interfere with our work. We were afraid that we would have to run down to the rest room for operational discussions for fear of what might be overheard and reported but the reporters have respected our privacy. We also stipulated that the agreement could be ended by either party at any time. Both the station and Sanitation want Stormwatch to continue so we have developed a good working relationship.

When you are dealing with the media drive a hard bargain. We require that the reporter bring in at least a dozen donuts! The donut provision was written in the first Stormwatch manual and they have never let us down! In return, we provide all the strong coffee that they can stand!

Big snowstorms also bring out all the television stations. We have had a lot of success by decentralizing our television interviews. We try to make our field people the TV stars. A few years ago almost all TV reporters came downtown for interviews at sanitation headquarters. TV news is visual news. An office interview is not as good as an on-the-scene report. Location shots in the snow with equipment working in the background are the stuff TV news is made for. Remember, these are the folks who make a reporter stand on an expressway overhead huddled against the wind for all storm reporting.

We train all our supervisors on how to deal with the media, how to answer questions, how to speak, and how to act in front of the camera. Granted, not everyone is comfortable or good at it. So, don’t use those people who aren’t. You have plenty of folks who are. The field people do a great job for us. Late last winter during about the ninth plowing of the season, one of our district managers was being interviewed live on the 10 p.m. news from his district yard. An endloader was loading salt into a salt truck in the background, snow was swirling around him and it was literally piling up on his head and shoulders during the interview. After answering the usual operational questions, he said that everyone was getting tired but that we were going to keep plowing around the clock until all the streets were cleared. He finished with a tired smile and said, “It’s been a hell of a winter.” That very human response won everyone over. Back at the station, the anchors talked about what a rough winter it was for everyone and thanked the snowplow drivers for the great job they were doing to keep the streets open. It was great public relations for us, the kind that you can’t buy.

Coordinating locations shots and TV interviews for the reporting crews also pays off. TV camera crews are running from one assignment to the next, and that’s not easy to do that during snowstorms. We try to make it easy for them. When a TV newsroom contacts us for an interview or a story, we try to provide what they want, where they want it, at their convenience. We ensure that they get their information without
delay so they can move on to the next story or get back to the station. This helps them, and people appreciate it when someone helps make their job easier.

This procedure also benefits us because we get the opportunity to select individuals and locations for the story. We all have employees who make excellent representatives, and others who don’t. With some lead time we can control who is involved in the story. We also are able to discuss what the station is after with the supervisor on location so that he or she is comfortable with the situation and doesn’t go into the interview blind. Because of this coordination and cooperation TV crews don’t often show up unannounced.

The print medium presents different problems. When talking with a reporter in person or on the phone, one needs to remember that anything you say, any part of what you say, or the reporter’s paraphrasing of what he or she thinks you said can and will appear in the newspaper. Nothing you say is off the record. Be careful, think before you speak.

Last winter a reporter asked me about the high snowbanks and the narrowed streets caused by several back-to-back snowstorms. I tried to cover the problem in great detail. I explained how the snow banks harden and they can’t be pushed back further with plows. I said we couldn’t do anything about the narrowing conditions because the banks were so high that when we plowed, the snow rode back down the banks behind the plows. We couldn’t push the snow over the banks, because we would have to drive dangerously fast and we would bury the sidewalks to do so. I added that for the first time in ten years we were posting the streets where conditions were worst because of on-street parking and narrow roadways with temporary no-parking signs and widening them with endloaders to relieve conditions. The next day all that was in the paper was a quote from me saying that we couldn’t do anything about it. My mistake was using the phrase.

Remember too, that what you say looks different in print. Things said lightheartedly don’t come across that way in the paper. Watch what you say and don’t fake it. If you don’t know the answer say so. It is far better to tell a reporter that you don’t know, you don’t want to mislead, and that you will get the information and call him right back. When dealing with the press, a smart person knows what he or she doesn’t know.

Because media relations are so important, I strongly recommend that agencies consider hiring an in-house communications manager. Milwaukee’s Department of Public Works hired a full-time communications manager about two years ago with each DPW division paying a percentage of her salary. This professional has been invaluable. We were on our own before. Now, we have someone on our side who used to work for the media, who knows the local media people, knows their formats and deadlines. She prepares press releases, public service announcements, coordinates media interviews and even rehearses with us before
they take place. Her job includes responses to media requests and promoting DPW perspective.

The communications manager serves as our liaison person during times of crisis, and DPW has had several big ones over the last few years including the cryptosporidium outbreak in Milwaukee’s water supply and two tragic accidents involving DPW equipment or personnel. She took charge of DPW’s responses in all these situations by coordinating our response, arranging interviews, preparing managers and officials, and providing background information to the media. She routinely assists Sanitation during snowstorms so that we can spend more of our time concentrating on operations. Dealing with the media was much tougher for us before our communications specialist was on board.

Two outlines on media relations are attached. Preparing for and Managing a Public Relations Crisis by Rosalind Rouse, Milwaukee’s DPW Communication Manager and Communication Policy, A Framework for Decision Making by Jeff Fleming, a staff assistant to Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist and a former television reporter.
PREPARING FOR AND MANAGING A PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS

Be Prepared

- Know your organization
  - managers and employees
  - telephone numbers: office, fax, cellular, home
  - parameters of public contacts/customer service
  - processes, procedures, programs, records
  - visuals: charts, diagrams, photos

- Maintain news media relations
  - Devise a plan to coordinate news inquiries. Share it with employees.
  - Practice responses and interview situations with spokespersons
  - Maintain news media mail, telephone and fax lists
  - Establish rapport with editors, reporters

- Know the law
  - Open records, open meetings laws
  - Know your legal counsel, phone numbers
  - Establish a procedure to handle records requests

Managing a Crisis:

- Establish parameters of the crisis
  - What is the problem?
  - What led to the problem, what will solve the problem?
  - Keep the focus on processes, not people
  - Don’t be defensive, don’t take it personally.
  - Anticipate, cut red tape, act quickly, take time out.

- Communicate within your organization and with other agencies
  - Establish consensus on a plan of action with elected officials, managers of other affected departments, regulatory agencies, and outside experts who can offer information and assistance.
• Share the plan of action with employees.

• Meet regularly with other affected departments, outside agencies and experts as a group to exchange information, share decision making, plan.

- Communicate with your customers
  • Direct leaders to take leadership roles

  • Tell the news media where they can call for information—designate someone to route inquiries. Plan one news conference each day during the crisis period so news organizations and others have equal access to your information. Offer outside experts.

  • Prepare a daily briefing paper about your organization’s activities and findings during the crisis.

  • Keep messages simple. Repeat often.

  • The news media will conduct its own investigation. Be as open as possible. Know where to get records and make them accessible. Schedule time to investigate events that preceded the crisis.

  • Anticipate follow-up

  • Plan to move on.

Women in Communications, Inc.
Oct. 12, 1993
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Communications Policy  
A Framework for Decision Making

What is your objective?
Before you communicate you should know what you want to accomplish.

Common examples of Public Works communications goals include:
   Unveiling a new program or policy.
   Explaining to residents how a problem is being solved.
   Refuting misinformation that someone else has communicated.

To whom do you want to speak?
The audience for a message will never include everyone.

Once you identify the audience you want to reach, tailor your message specifically to that group.

How will the message be delivered?
List the possible media (not just mass media).

   In some cases, one phone call to one council member might be sufficient. In other situations, you will want to contact every newspaper, radio station, and television station.

   Be imaginative. Targeted flyers, meetings with community groups, piggybacking on someone else's message.

Clearly identify the individual who is responsible for delivering the message.

The timing may be almost as important as the content of a message.

What is the measure of success?
There are many institutions that churn out news releases and think that, alone, is sufficient. But if no one receives the message the communication effort has failed.
As you develop a communications plan, include a mechanism for measuring the effectiveness.

An example would be measuring the number of cars violating snow emergency parking restrictions. Or counting the number of times an important announcement is repeated on television news. Or simply comparing the number of complaint calls received by elected officials.

Without some measure of success there is no way to know whether you are accomplishing your goals.

Considerations for Press Contact

Tell the truth.

Sounds simple, but nothing will undermine your efforts more than dishonesty.

Consider the value of building good relationships with reporters.

Visualize the outcome of press contact

What will it look like, sound like; how will it read?

You probably have more influence/control than you think.

Get a clear understanding of the reporter's view of the topic before your interview formally starts.

Preparation

Anticipate questions or points of controversy.

Collect supporting documents.

Charts, summaries, and existing reports are likely to have a greater impact than a simple discussion.

Confer with others (your supervisor, co-workers, other appropriate departments, elected officials).

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The interview

Identify one or two “sound bites” you’d particularly like to appear.

Call attention to the sound bite with phrases like
...“Here’s the most important issue...” or “The
one thing I really want to point out is...”

If you have any doubts whether the message got through, repeat it.

Take the liberty of changing the subject if you must avoid a particu-
lar topic. Volunteer information when an important element needs
clarification.

Techniques

On television, speak directly to the reporter if it’s a taped
interview. Speak to the camera, if live.

Focus your attention, eliminate distractions, listen carefully.

Answer questions directly; keep to the point.

Give a print reporter the opportunity to take notes; speak slowly
and repeat if necessary.

Relax

Understand the media alternatives

Watch, listen, and read. Coordinate your message with the format of
the television station, radio station or newspaper with which you’re
working.

Identify how decisions to cover stories are made in the respective
newsrooms.

Who makes decisions? When are decisions made? What
factors go into the decisions?

Prepared for the 1994 APWA North American Snow Conference
By Jeff Fleming, Staff Assistant to Milwaukee Mayor John O. Norquist.

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