

# Quick Response Communications

## Reacting to Media Opportunities and Threats



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## Quick Response Policy and Protocol

*"How people react to crisis and/or extreme events provides one of the most powerful windows, if not the most powerful window, into the souls of the people and their institutions."*

—Ian Mitroff, *We're So Big & Powerful Nothing Bad Can Happen To Us* (1990)

While an emerging, fast-breaking or "crisis"\* news event can obviously create problems, it may also create opportunities. The opportunities include the potential to increase public awareness of UW-Extension programs, generate public support, and get positive information on the table. Remember—only dull or irrelevant organizations never attract media attention.

What are the chances that University of Wisconsin-Extension will have to deal with a crisis communication situation? Research\*\* indicates that organizations like UW-Extension are at "medium" to "high" risk for adverse publicity, especially considering the sometimes controversial public issues in which we are involved. Our own experience and the experiences of other UW System institutions substantiate the potential we face.

UW-Extension has a responsibility—to its employees, to its students and other customers, to the communities in which it operates, and to its partners and stakeholders—to anticipate fast-breaking issues and concerns and to handle them honestly. This policy and protocol have been developed to deliver on this commitment and to help insure effective communications with both internal and external audiences, especially in potentially negative or damaging news situations.

This policy and protocol are not etched in stone. Rather, they provide a context within which reasonable people can initiate discussion and take action. The intent is to help all UW-Extension colleagues avoid major mistakes and to minimize any potential damage to UW-Extension's credibility. As Lynne Doll, of Rogers & Associates, a corporate public relations firm, observes: "Organizations that run their operations in an ethical manner and consider the way their actions will be perceived by their various audiences actually will avoid crisis."

Putting forward a crisis communications protocol involves more than simply defining what is, or is not, a crisis. It identifies what should be done, who should do it, and who should be informed. According to crisis guru Steven Fink, it helps for "...everyone to know where the flashlights are kept."

\*Crisis news can be defined as stories that are potentially adverse, negative, politically or legally sensitive, reputation-threatening, scandalous or otherwise damaging. It's "bad news."

\*\* "Risk associated with the Product or Service," in *Crisis in Organizations: Managing and Communicating in the Heat of Chaos* by Laurence Barton, 1993, College Division, South Western Publishing Co., Cincinnati.

# Policy Considerations

The UW-Extension Media Communications Policy shall:

- Be consistent with and reinforce the overall missions of UW System and UWEX;
- Encourage units to operate in an anticipatory manner, and to create and maintain a good name for UWEX;
- Require timely and truthful responses to media and public inquiries;
- Require that the appropriate parties are promptly informed of and involved in handling an emerging situation, and that these responses be shared with UWEX employees, stakeholders and others, as appropriate;
- Balance the rights of individuals in the organization to privacy, and the right of the public to know what is going on with a publicly funded institution.

The UWEX Media Communications Protocol is based upon these policy considerations.

## Essential Concepts for a Media Communications Protocol

Maintaining a good name for UW-Extension and its units over the long term is the best preparation for weathering a public storm when something goes wrong. Part of this strategy is maintaining an ongoing, positive rapport with the media. Reporters, editors and news directors are powerful gatekeepers. A crisis is not the time to begin cultivating positive rapport with the media. That should be done beforehand.

Communicating internally in an effective and timely manner is a must for dealing with any crisis news situation. Internal communications can go in many different directions, depending on who gets the initial media inquiry (e.g., secretary, dean, chancellor), who is most knowledgeable about the situation, and who should be the official spokesperson on a particular issue.

Anticipating when a program, action, decision, individual's behavior, statement, published work or event is likely to spark public controversy or negative media coverage is key to turning a potentially adverse situation around. Questions by both the media and the public should be anticipated, and answers should be developed that include the key points we want to get across. Of course, many things cannot be anticipated, but it is far better to be prepared for what we can anticipate.

Understanding what constitutes a crisis is essential. Whether it's responding to a public controversy surrounding a program, division or employee, or responding in the wake of a natural disaster, UWEX communicators should be prepared to go into "crisis mode" in order to handle any media inquiries that go beyond the routine. Any story that is potentially adverse,

negative, politically or legally sensitive, reputation-threatening, scandalous or otherwise damaging should trigger “crisis thinking”.

Being prepared is critical. Being prepared means acting in advance to deal with an expected difficulty. This can be accomplished by developing “message points” that reflect the institution or unit’s position on an issue. Being prepared also means training frontline staff to respond promptly and effectively to initial media inquiries; setting in motion a fail-safe method of informing the proper spokespersons about a fast-breaking situation; and identifying a Situation Team with designated spokespersons to deal with the issue. When people anticipate and prepare to respond to questions, their critics have less chance to control the debate.

Being timely is important if we want to get our side of a story across. If we are not prepared to respond to media inquiries for today’s news, our critics’ comments may be the only versions reported. By tomorrow, the issue is yesterday’s news, and it may be too late to comment on or correct the previous day’s story.

Acknowledging and responding promptly to reporters’ inquiries is vital because it builds credibility and establishes, to the reporter, the sense that you respect who they are and understand their deadlines. When we handle a reporter’s inquiry with tact, promptness and honesty, he or she will be more likely to extend us the same courtesy when we look for media coverage of our “good news” stories. Responding to inquiries promptly also avoids such negative statements as “So and So did not return repeated phone calls requesting comment”.

Being truthful at all times is essential. Misleading, false or half-true statements to the media invariably injure the UWEX reputation. The truth can sometimes be painful, but lies are deadly. “I don’t have enough information to comment at this time,” or “This is a personnel matter and I can’t comment on that aspect of the story,” or “I don’t know, but I will find out,” are sometimes appropriate responses. But stonewalling or lying to reporters will guarantee that they will actively seek out and emphasize the negative. Any fair policy must balance the right to privacy of individuals within the organization against the right of the public to know what is going on with a publicly funded institution. Of course, if you make a promise to a reporter to provide additional information for a story, follow through promptly.

## Media Communications Protocol

### *1. When a Reporter Makes an Inquiry*

When a secretary, staff person, dean or chancellor is contacted by a reporter, he or she may be the first person to become aware of a developing issue or fast-breaking news situation. Make sure everyone at all levels understands what to do when a reporter calls. Be sure that staff is clear on whom to inform and when to involve them. The checklist includes:

- Identify early the appropriate spokesperson. Let everyone who may potentially receive phone calls from a reporter know who the spokesperson is. Let the reporter know who the spokesperson is, and that he or she will return the call.
- Inform all relevant individuals who will need to know so that they may respond appropriately to an emerging situation.

- Form a Situation Team to consider strategies, monitor the situation, and prepare a prompt and accurate response to the issue.
- Decide key message points for a public response.

Many reporters' inquiries are about ongoing programs, events or dates. These should be handled as a routine part of the job. However, when a potentially sensitive situation arises, involving the right people early is critical. (NOTE: legal concerns may be involved in some situations, especially when they involve personnel issues, so the advice of human resources and legal staff should always be considered.)

### Developing a Situation Team

When a crisis is brewing, the chancellor, dean, director or designee should identify a Situation Team immediately. This team is responsible for:

- Monitoring the situation
- Paying attention to media queries and coverage.
- Working with the appropriate administrators to develop message points and a response strategy.
- Making the official spokesperson available to the media to respond to questions.
- Keeping administrators and others, as appropriate, within the organization informed.

The Situation Team is responsible for communications—not for making policy or decisions about resolving the problem. However, the Situation Team will be most effective when it works closely with the administrators who are involved in solving the problem.

A team may need no more than two or three members. One should be an administrator with decision-making authority. This administrator may also serve as the official spokesperson. Another member should have a good working knowledge of the media and the principles of public information. In some cases, the public information or communications expert from the team should include the dean's or Chancellor's staff or from another UW institution, legal counsel, a personnel director and/or others. At the county level in Cooperative Extension, the Situation Team might be designated by the office chair or appointed by the CE district director. At a campus with Extension faculty and programs, the team would work at the campus level and would be appointed and approved by the appropriate campus and Extension dean.

In all cases, however, it is critical that the Situation Team make sure that their next level supervisor or supervisory unit is kept informed of what is going on. A small problem at a local or campus level can swiftly turn into a wider issue, requiring involvement by a dean, the Chancellor, or others.

## *2. Who Should Respond?*

Response to issues should come from a person at the appropriate level. This may vary among divisions and units. Whatever can be handled locally or by those closest to the situation should be handled there. However, in sensitive or "crisis" cases, the appropriate dean/director and Chancellor's staff should be notified and consulted immediately so they are not caught off guard by a media question directed to them.

Keep the number of designated spokespersons down to the one or two people who can provide the most accurate and consistent information. Make sure that everyone who may receive a phone call from a reporter is aware of whom the spokesperson is. All phone calls from media representatives should be referred to that person, with the appropriate phone number. If you are not the designated spokesperson, don't comment.

When responding to or anticipating a media inquiry about a potentially sensitive situation, create a two- or three-person Situation Team to deal with fast-breaking news, as well as a Need-to-Know list to inform others. This list of who needs to be informed about an emerging issue will vary greatly, depending on the nature, location and degree of seriousness of the situation. Make sure everyone on your unit's Need-to-Know list is informed promptly of the situation or inquiry.

### Developing a Need-to-Know List

For every kind of crisis there is a core group of people inside the organization who should be kept informed. As with considerations about the composition of the Situation Team, the list of who needs to be informed about potentially sensitive situations or emergencies (that may or may not engage the interest of the media) will vary greatly depending on the nature, location and degree of seriousness of the event or situation.

Remember that internal communications will need to go in many directions. It may not be enough to inform your own supervisor and wait for direction. In general, people throughout the organization should consider carefully how and when to share communications, who the appropriate spokesperson for a given issue should be, and how much to tell. It can be a difficult judgment call to decide how to share information internally. In the case of personnel problems, the circle should be quite small. In other kinds of events, it may be best to be very open. Keep people informed of whom the designated spokesperson will be. This is the person to whom they should refer all media inquiries.

Think about people you supervise and your peers and their "need to know" as well. In addition to the organizational hierarchy, think about the functions people serve. For example, the names that probably belong at the very top on any Need-to-Know list are the people who answer the telephone and greet visitors in your office. They are a first point of contact—they answer initial questions, direct calls and make the first impression. They definitely need to know: 1) the general context of the issue so they can refer calls properly, 2) who the designated spokesperson will be, 3) the necessity for a prompt, courteous response.

### *3. How to Respond*

The kind of response required will vary depending on the situation. With input from your unit's communications specialist, decide whether a one-on-one response, a news release, or a news conference is appropriate. (Note: A news conference in a crisis situation is an extraordinary step. It should not normally be undertaken without assistance from communications staff at the Division or Chancellor's office.)

#### Message Building

Call a meeting of your Situation Team members. They need to agree on the response and develop key message points. A news story can convey, at most, two or three points effectively.

Prepare a single communications objective and two or three secondary points you would like to make, and then make them. Follow these tips:

- 1) Keep the message simple.
- 2) Make the message easy to remember and articulate.
- 3) Develop core message points.

Organize your statement. Make a list of the facts in a case and rank these facts, listing the most important fact first. Reporters are driven by deadlines and will search for the heart of the matter. They often don't have the time for drawn-out explanations. Provide the written statement and any other necessary documents to reporters as background. They may assist a reporter in writing a more accurate story.

## Media Interviews

If someone from your office will be speaking with reporters, identify an articulate, informed spokesperson. Anticipate tough questions, formulate answers and rehearse them. If time permits, place the spokesperson in an interview location over which you have control and in which the person feels comfortable and confident. Encourage the person to answer all questions in a straightforward fashion and to stay away from evasive answers. In other words, the spokesperson needs to concentrate on the question asked, answer it directly and avoid providing a lot of additional unnecessary information. Remember, if you don't know the answer to a question, simply say so. And, if you promise to call a reporter back with additional information, make sure that you do so promptly.

(Please review the "Media Interviews – Do's and Don'ts" section of this protocol for guidance.)

## *4. Internal Communication*

The crisis communications effort is not necessarily finished after the initial interview has been completed. The same reporter may call again with additional questions, or perhaps to a different staff person. Other media may pick up on the issue. In all cases, the information given must be clear and consistent, and all affected staff members must be kept informed.

Share clippings and news reports with everyone on your Need-to-Know list as quickly as possible, especially in volatile situations. Maintain a record of media contacts as reporters' inquiries come in. Advise other offices or individuals if information you release to media might generate calls to them.

## *5. Follow up*

When the issues have passed or been resolved, caucus with your Situation Team and prepare a brief summary to share with your UWEX unit colleagues and your program's stakeholders, as appropriate. Include audio, video and print clips, if you can. Point out what worked well and what didn't, and offer suggestions for improving response in the event of continuing interest in this or another fast-breaking news situation. Be as specific as you can regarding incidents, people and issues that merit attention. This review may prevent or mitigate future problems.

When a reporter writes or broadcasts a well-presented story, let him or her know about it. (Journalists define a well-presented story as a balanced one, with both your views and opposing views included.) If an error appears in a press report, let the reporter know—but not in an angry way. If you don't offer a correction, the error may be repeated.

If you or your spokesperson is misquoted, try to contact the reporter instead of the editor. Don't over-react, especially if the error is minor or not quite the choice of words you would have used. Remember that journalists are often pressed for time. While they do not intentionally misquote or misrepresent an issue or position, mistakes can happen, particularly when deadlines are tight. Keep in mind that, in print media, the reporter is rarely responsible for the way a story's headline is written.

## Legal Concerns

### *Libel and Slander*

The law affects what should be said and what should be avoided in a crisis communications setting. Often in the heat of a crisis, people may be angry and thus eager to place blame. The following should be reviewed by anyone who meets the press in a crisis situation:

Libel is the written defamation of character; slander is the spoken defamation. When a spokesperson makes a statement about another, in the case of libel that person could be sued for defamation of character if it can be proved that the statement 1) was published, including broadcast; 2) identified another party; and 3) defamed the other party. To avoid a defamation charge, spokespersons should be especially careful that what they say about another person or organization is accurate, and that they can substantiate everything they say. The failure to do so places them at substantial risk, as the alleged defamed party can sue and claim substantial losses in terms of potential lost income (and possible customers) from irreparable damage to the individual's or organization's reputation.

Do not comment on specific allegations. Do not convict a person of something before they have been tried in court.

### *Open Records*

Wisconsin's open records and open meetings laws are among the strongest in the nation. The UW System and UW-Extension are fully committed to complying with those statutes. (The statutes and policies are found in the UWEX Employees Handbook.)

### *Personnel Matters*

Personnel matters always call for a delicate balance between an individual's right to privacy and the public's right to know what's going on with a tax-supported institution. In personnel matters, say nothing until you have consulted with your Situation Team, human resources and legal staff.

# Media Interviews — Do's and Don'ts

If you are designated as the spokesperson to respond to media inquiries about a given issue, here are some tips for responding effectively to reporters and others:

## *Media Interview Do's*

- Tell the truth. Stick to the facts and don't misrepresent the facts. Admit when you don't know the answer. Offer to find the answer or someone else who does who will call the reporter back and make sure they do it. Keep your answers brief and try to avoid expanding explanations beyond the question. Do not offer more information than has been requested.
- Whenever possible, state your position in positive terms.
- Release all facts as quickly as possible. Getting the whole story out early enhances your credibility.
- Use simple language rather than technical terms, and speak in short sentences. Formulate responses for the public, who is your real audience. In other words, use terms and phrases that are the same language you would use to explain the matter to your non-UW-Extension friends and family.
- Be aware of the type of medium your questioner is representing. Newspaper reporters can take more time in their interviews and present more information than can reporters from radio or TV. Nine seconds is the average length of a radio or TV "soundbite".
- Encourage a reporter's follow-up phone call for further information or clarification if you fear that a point has not been fully understood. Offer to give him or her your business card or leave you phone or pager number where you may be reached immediately. Understand that most reporters are required to cover a variety of subject material and may not understand any one area in great detail.
- Always assume that everything you tell a reporter will be quoted and on the record. If you don't want to see it in print or on TV, don't say it—not before, during, or even after an interview!
- The crisis may be an opportunity to educate people about your unit's role as an essential educational arm of UW-Extension. This does not mean, however, that you have the right to evade a reporter's appropriate, direct questions. Remember, when emotions are running high that a reporter is just doing his or her job by asking questions. Don't be offended by his or her presence or interest in an issue.
- Be patient if questioning becomes repetitive. Just answer it again. Avoid saying, "As I've already told you..."
- Be knowledgeable, sincere, compassionate and energetic. Maintaining eye contact with your questioner helps build credibility and fosters a positive relationship.

## *Media Interview Don'ts*

- Never lie, mislead or cover up. Do NOT repeat information from unofficial sources to media representatives. Avoid speculation. Stick to the facts. Don't try to give an answer you're unsure of. Guessing can get you into trouble. If you don't know the answer, tell the reporter you'll try to find out and get back to him or her. Then do it.
- Avoid long-winded answers and explanations. Stay with the message point facts.
- Never go off the record, regardless of your relationship with a reporter.
- Never speculate or play favorites among reporters or media.
- Do not repeat inflammatory or negative words suggested by a reporter. Hostile questions do not require hostile answers. Don't be defensive or show anger when responding to media inquiries.
- Don't use jargon and acronyms that are not widely understood.
- Never give a "No comment" answer. It suggests you are trying to hide something or are avoiding the question. Explain why you cannot make a comment.
- Don't let reporters put words in your mouth. Some reporters have a tendency to say, "So, in other words..."
- Don't let false statements or misperceptions stand. Refute them by communicating a positive message. Don't call anyone a liar.
- Don't expect to review a story before publication or broadcast. This conflicts with news gatherers' ethics and professionalism.
- Do NOT speculate on others' motives or possible outcomes.
- Don't give a personal opinion unless the reporter understands that you are speaking for yourself, not for your colleagues or UWEX or division administrators.