

The Positives and Perils of Communicating with the Public

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Abstract

In today's age of 24/7/365 news cycles, the pace, outlets and breadth of news is faster and more comprehensive than ever before. Every citizen with a cell phone is a reporter, social media is beginning to dominate traditional news sources, and time has become an even more critical factor. There is an old maxim that you don't want to be exchanging business cards in the middle of a crisis—and in today's world of instant communications that is valuable time lost.

We have also seen the impact of poor media communications when both the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon are featured in public relations classrooms as textbook cases of poor management (notwithstanding that the Deepwater Horizon was the largest marine spill in US history by a factor of 20 times, was politically charged, and had a continuous release with related imagery for 60+ days). The Exxon Corporation's reputation was bound to suffer after the Exxon Valdez ran aground off Alaska and dumped 250,000 barrels of oil into Prince William Sound. But experts in public relations say that Exxon seriously worsened the damage to its public standing by failing to seize control of developments after the spill and establish itself as a company concerned about the problems it had caused (1). In the case of the Deepwater Horizon, people familiar with the inside of BP's crisis control effort and outside experts say early on, BP didn't have a public relations strategy. It failed to communicate the three key messages the public needed to hear: That BP was accountable for the disaster, was deeply concerned

about the harm it caused and had a plan for what to do. Experts also agree that Hayward's propensity to say the wrong thing made him the wrong choice to be the face of the crisis, and BP's board took too long to figure that out. (2)

In a world that is increasingly “wired”, it is imperative to address the public in a responsible, prepared, professional and comprehensive fashion. Every posting is a permanent record of the narrative, if not the events themselves. It is critical to be in control of the narrative to take advantage of positive community engagement, and avoid community backlash, which could lead to interference, or at least a distraction, from the mission at hand, which is to manage an effective response and minimize the impact on lives, the environment, and property.

One of the most important, and lingering, aspects of a successful spill response is managing the public and the press. In the Deepwater Horizon, these aspects proved to be an enormous distraction to the responders, sucking valuable time and energy away from the response itself.

This paper covers the importance of addressing the public, fundamentals of the maritime industry, tools for addressing crisis media management in advance of an event, as well as community building activities that companies can deploy on a regional basis which will bolster a company's reputation in the region, as well as build a sense of trust with communities that may be affected by an incident.

Significant features of the paper include:

Importance of engaging with the public

Overview of the maritime industry

- Size
- Role in global trade
- Regulatory framework and enforcement
- Environmental efficiency
- Safety at sea
- Challenges to its image
- Strategies for change

Media Management

- Plan ahead of time and create your own crisis communication plan
- Put your crisis communications team in place
- Manage the message and the media
- Communicate early and often
- Prioritize your audiences and cater the message

Community Relations:

- Identify key stakeholders within the region (environmental groups, regional planning bodies, etc.)
- Identify strengths within the organization to seize opportunities
- Identify resources that will facilitate community involvement
- Plan a strategy for deploying resources into the community

Importance of Addressing the Public- the Social License to Operate

We live in a 24/7/365 news cycle that is accessible by most of society. Gone are the days when an event in one region was held discreetly in that region or country. Today, managing the dissemination of information is critical, and demanded by the public in order to honor our social license to operate.

The Social License is rooted in the beliefs, perceptions and opinions held by the population and other stakeholders about the project. It is therefore granted by the community. It is also intangible, unless effort is made to measure these beliefs, opinions and perceptions. Finally, it is dynamic and non-permanent because beliefs, opinions and perceptions are subject to change as new information is acquired. Hence the Social License must be earned and then maintained. (1)

The public has a right to know what has transpired, why it occurred, and what is being done to mitigate the impacts. To successfully manage this information, and work to develop a collaborative relationship with the community rather than an adversarial one, it is important to engage early and often. The court of public opinion is a mighty one.

Overview of the Maritime Industry

The value proposition of this industry is not well understood by the general public, many of whom believe that it is a lawless industry that just dumps oil into the water. It is helpful to understand its fundamentals so that messaging can get into the public's awareness.

There are over 90,000 merchant ships trading internationally, transporting every kind of cargo. The world fleet is registered in over 170 nations, and manned by over a million seafarers of virtually every nationality. Our marine transportation system delivers nearly **90%** of all global trade. In 2008, for example, it was estimated that the industry transported a total volume of world trade by sea of over 32 trillion tonne-miles and nearly 50 trillion tonne-miles in 2014- an increase of 50% (Source: UNCTAD)

The shipping industry is principally regulated by the [International Maritime Organization \(IMO\)](#), which is the London based United Nations agency responsible for the safety of life at sea and the protection of the marine environment. The principal responsibility for enforcing IMO regulations concerning ship safety and environmental protection rests with the flag states (i.e. the countries in which merchant ships are registered - which may be different than the country in which they are owned).

Flag states enforce IMO requirements through inspections of ships conducted by a network of international surveyors. Much of this work is delegated to bodies called classification societies. Flag state enforcement is supplemented by what is known as Port State Control, whereby officials in any country which a ship may visit can inspect foreign flag ships to ensure that they comply with international requirements. Port State Control officers have the power to detain foreign ships in port if they do not conform to international standards. Consequently, most IMO regulations are enforced on a more or less global basis.

Sea transport is one of the least environmentally damaging modes of transport and, when compared with land based industry, is a comparatively minor contributor to marine pollution

from human activities. This efficiency has been further strengthened by recent action by the IMO's Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) which approved a .5% global sulphur cap by 2020, development of a roadmap and strategy for a GHG reduction program, mandatory reporting of fuel consumption in 2019 with expectation of reduction agreement by 2023, a NECA (Nitrous Oxide Emission Control Area) proposal for Baltic and North Seas (which already exists in North America), consideration of the use of heavy fuel oil in the Arctic (currently being evaluated by the Arctic Council. Bans exist in Antarctic) and ratification of the Ballast Water Convention which will be implemented September, 2017 (US framework is different and more stringent).

Shipping also has an excellent safety record with global conventions which are continually reviewed and updated which provide safer ships, better trained and cared for crew, resulting in fewer casualties. SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea, ship safety standards) whose first version was in response to the Titanic; STCW (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping- seafarer requirements); and MLC 2006 (Maritime Labour Convention- well-being of the mariner on board ships. (4)

Despite its importance to global society, the maritime industry has the lowest public profile and the least representative public image. Some would say it is invisible, as most of the activity occurs out at sea. Some additional challenges to shipping's image include its being highly fragmented, so lacking in political power; it lacks the ability to collaborate on shared challenges; and despite an excellent safety record, accidents at sea, especially ones that include damage to the environment, create news.

But perception is reality. The only time the public thinks of the maritime industry is when there is oil in the water and dead birds. The maritime industry does bear some responsibility for this lack of awareness. The tradition has been to keep its activities from the public's view and not broadcast its value proposition. Also, the industry is a complex construct of international law, domestic law, and maritime law overlay creating a dense corporate veil. There is a need for an integration with globalization efforts to build greater awareness and value, which may help the public understand the value proposition of the industry.

The industry needs to accept responsibility; accidents do happen. How industry coordinates and communicates the response will make the difference in how it is perceived. It is important to ensure compliance with domestic and international regulations; zero tolerance should be the norm. The industry is only as strong as its weakest link; it cannot accept substandard shipping or shipping practices.

It also needs to be a better steward of its image. With only one image to lose, it needs to promote the positive, including shifting the way it articulates its business (Flags of Commerce, Flag State Administration, etc.); become an advocate for industry (Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, Lions, etc.); and share its efforts with other stakeholders.

Media Management

Accidents do happen. The response, and how it is shared with the public, will determine the measurement of success or failure of the systems and protocols that have been designed to mitigate damage to the environment, and to the reputation of the shipping industry. The faulty

performance during the Exxon Valdez spill underscored the importance of crises communication as an integrally important element of spill response. The ICS (Incident Command System- a management system designed to enable effective and efficient incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure). recognizes its importance in the establishment of the JIC (Joint Information Center), and the participants in a response are well aware of the distractions created by satisfying the media beast. The public has a right to know what is going on during an event—good media management will ensure that this need is satisfied while allowing the responders to do their jobs.

One of the most important keys to successful media management lies in advanced preparation; owners and facilities need to plan ahead of time and create their crisis communications plan. Having boilerplate materials about the company and its background ready will save precious time during a crisis. Another action step is to develop company policies and procedures, and keep updating them, as well as training office staff on protocols for crisis communications response.

A company needs to put its crisis communications team in place. At a minimum, the team should consist of CEO/President, Public Relations representatives, Vice President (or other suitable backup to the CEO/President), IT personnel and legal counsel. Of this group, it is important to identify a spokesperson(s) who should be part of senior leadership, but also the most appropriate for the situation at hand. An example would be that in the early days of Deepwater Horizon, BP appropriately had its CEO, Tony Hayward, as the “face” of BP, but the company would have been better served if they had quickly transferred to Bob Dudley, an

American. Not only could they have avoided Hayward's significant gaffes ("I want my life back"), but also the statement by a news organization of Hayward as "the most hated man in America" (5). It is also important to ensure the team is trained in crisis media response and practiced.

Inherent in crisis media management is managing the message and the press itself; identify the problem and issues. Important to the effort is developing the message and keeping it clear and consistent, as well as verifying facts- do NOT speculate! Because of adequate preparation, it is turnkey to incorporate boilerplate on company values, personnel and safety record. In today's world, it is imperative that the corporate website, social media outlets and any other public-facing material match the information being provided.

The media are voracious beasts that need to be fed frequently; it is important to be proactive, transparent, accurate and FAST. The team needs to determine a strategy for deploying the communication channels that will be used (traditional, digital, press conferences, etc.); be able to distribute prepared statements to the media and make spokespersons available for interviews as well as designate someone to monitor and respond to social media formats (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Further, a website needs to be created which contains information on the incident on a near real-time basis. It is also helpful for the company to develop a multimedia/channel list (local, national, international outlets) which includes all its stakeholder groups, including community groups and government entities (local, regional, state and national).

It would be remiss to not underscore the importance of this element. One of the best examples of its importance is the Cosco Busan, a container ship which allided with a span of the San Francisco- Oakland Bridge in 2007. Many recognize that the retrieval of the released bunker fuels was extraordinarily successful. However, political leaders and other stakeholders did not feel they had been appropriately informed which overshadowed the success of the clean-up.

Communications are needed for external and internal uses. Address your audiences with specific information regarding the crisis and the plan of action that is being deployed, and always remember the order of priority in your statements: life, environment, property.

While the primary purpose of crisis media management is to inform the public, it is also about reputational management. Make sure you reach your employees, shareholders and others important to your company's future that you are engaged in actively addressing the crises. In the words of award winning journalist and crisis management professional Andy Gilman: "The secret of crisis management is not 'good' versus 'bad', it is preventing the bad from getting worse."(6).

When a Crisis Happens

The "unthinkable" has happened, and there is a casualty. The Coast Guard is notified as is the shipowner, triggering the response structure to engage. The ICS (Incident Command System) is established which includes the Public Information Officer (PIO). It is the PIO's responsibility to gather information, write press releases, answer media and community calls and responses.

This is an active, not passive, role and involves the many stakeholders in the response. The first hours of the incident response are critical to communicating that the relevant parties are on

scene assessing and addressing the incident. The trained communications professionals participate fully, creating, negotiating, and issuing responses in a carefully coordinated, and timely, fashion. Accuracy, and not speculation, are critical.

There is no such thing as a “good” oil spill, but there are examples of a “good” media response. The Plains All American Pipeline event in 2015, where an inland pipeline breached and oil spilled into the Pacific Ocean at the Refugio State Beach, provides examples of coordinated and well-constructed statements from responders resulting in a rational public reaction. The company took responsibility and apologized for the incident, demonstrated it was involved in the response process, the culvert was blocked to stop the flow, resources were seen to be on-scene cleaning up the spill, and state and Federal officials issued statements about the response, including "An aggressive and effective cleanup response to the spill is underway," said Mark Crossland with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "It will go on as long as necessary...Every effort will be made to minimize the damage to the environment, including taking care of oiled wildlife," said Crossland. (7)

Community Relations

Before a crisis, a company has the opportunity to build its reputation and awareness within its community(ies). As stated, the public doesn't know a great deal about the shipping industry, so

it is important to educate the public about what the industry does and why. A company can engage with the public in its area (or areas) to raise awareness and build a sense of trust; it can support local events, and communicate its pride in its work, and its professionalism, as well as the opportunities for employment that are available.

Some of the vehicles for community engagement include:

- Chambers of Commerce
- Rotary Clubs
- Environmental groups
- Regional planning bodies
- International Coastal Cleanup (beach cleanup through the Ocean Conservancy)
- River/Sea Keeper groups
- Audubon Society
- Earth Day (April 22nd)
- World Oceans Day (June 6th)
- Local schools and universities

Identify the resources you have available within your organization to access these vehicles. A Community Outreach coordinator who has strong speaking and networking skills is ideal.

Resources that may be helpful to building a program can be found on the NOAA

(<https://marinedebris.noaa.gov>), Ocean Conservancy (<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/our-work/international-coastal-cleanup>) and NAMEPA (www.namepa.net) websites. It is important

to have a strategy in place for deploying resources into the community as the effort needs to be consistent and reliable.

Summary

In conclusion, communicating with the public isn't a choice, but a requisite. In an age where information is transmitted globally in the matter of seconds (or less), the demand for a sophisticated, multichanneled, coordinated communications response will enable the spill responders to get on with their jobs—saving lives, the environment and property.

Footnotes:

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/21/business/exxon-s-public-relations-problem.html>
2. <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135575238/bp-a-textbook-example-of-how-not-to-handle-pr>
3. <http://sociallicense.com/definition.html>
4. <http://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/ListOfConventions/Pages/Default.aspx>
5. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/bp-ceo-tony-hayward-hated-man-america-oil-spill-mixed-reaction-home-uk-article-1.180653>
6. <http://www.business2community.com/social-media/8-great-crisis-management-quotes-from-the-pros-0215375#OTOemloAhOtXLmw8.97>
7. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/us/california-oil-spill/index.html>