Crisis Communication

Prepare Clear and Concise Messages: Developing a Message Map

A key step in effective media communication is to develop clear and concise messages that address stakeholder questions and concerns. In addition to generating a large number of questions and concerns, controversies and crises are also likely to generate strong feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration, fear and outrage. Messages that address stakeholder concerns should therefore be based on what the target audience most needs to know or most wants to know.

One way to develop clear messages is to brainstorm with a message-development team consisting of a subject-matter expert, communication specialist, policy/legal/management expert and a facilitator. Such sessions typically produce a set of talking points and key messages.

A message map helps in the development of messages. It also serves as a “port in a storm” when questioning by journalists or others becomes intense or aggressive. Message maps allow organizations to develop messages in advance of emergencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Five-Step Model for Preparing Messages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Answers should:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Express empathy, listening, caring or</td>
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<tr>
<td>compassion as a first statement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. State the key messages.</td>
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<td>4. Repeat the key messages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Message map template.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>By:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using personal pronouns, such as “I”, “we”, “our” or “us”</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Indicating through actions, body language and words that you share the concerns of those affected by events;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Acknowledging the legitimacy of fear and emotion;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using a personal story- if appropriate (for example, “My family...”), and</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Bridging to the key messages</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Limiting the total number of words to no more than 27;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Limiting the total length to no more than 9 seconds;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using positive, constructive and solution-oriented words as appropriate; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Setting messages apart with introductory words, pauses, and inflections.</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using three additional facts;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using well thought out and tested visual material, including graphics, maps, pictures, video clips, animation, photographs and analogies;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Using a personal story;</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Citing credible third parties or other credible sources of information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Summarizing or emphasizing the key messages.</td>
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<td>□ Listing specific next steps; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Providing contact information for obtaining additional information, if appropriate.</td>
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The top section of the message map identifies the stakeholder or audience for whom the messages are intended as well as the specific question or concern being addressed. The next layer of the message map contains the three (3) key messages that can function individually or collectively as a response to a stakeholder question or concern. These key messages are intended to address the information needs of a wide variety of audiences. Remember the rule of threes. It’s often important to have three main points you want to make.

The final section of the message map contains supporting information arranged in blocks of three under each key message. This supporting information amplifies the key messages by providing additional facts or details. Supporting information can also take the form of visuals, analogies, personal stories or citations of credible information sources.

A message map provides multiple benefits. It provides a handy reference for leaders and spokespersons who must respond swiftly to questions on topics where timeliness and accuracy are critical. It minimizes the chance of “speaker’s regret” at saying something inappropriate or not saying something that should have been said. A printed copy of the message map allows a spokesperson during interview to “check off” the talking points they want to make in order of their importance.

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Making Your Point: A Media Relations Checklist

☐ Do you know whom you are talking to?
   Ask the reporter questions to determine whom you’re talking to and what he or she needs. Get the name, employer and phone number. Clarify what information the reporter wants from you.

☐ Does the reporter need the information right away?
   Ask the reporter when his or her deadline is. Can you call back later, at a time that’s more convenient for you? Can you buy yourself some time to compose your thoughts into talking points and anticipate questions? If you promise to call back, do so by the agreed upon time.

☐ Are you knowledgeable enough to provide an expert opinion?
   If so, gather your thoughts and respond. If not, don’t be afraid to say so – and point the reporter to an individual (preferably within Extension) who might be able to help. Always avoid personal views or speculation.

☐ Have you clearly identified yourself?
   Does the reporter have your name, your title and your company or agency name?

☐ Have you made your three key points?
   If you have time to prepare to respond, identify three main points you want to make and, during the interview, make sure you emphasize those points. It will help if you’ve prepared key points that are 20 seconds or less.

☐ Can you provide anything in writing that will help the reporter understand your points?
   If possible, try following up with a brief email restating your main talking points or pass along an appropriate fact sheet or publication.
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Media Basics: When a Reporter Calls
Preparation is the key to becoming comfortable with media calls and interviews. These tips should help you prepare to work effectively with reporters.

☐ **Tell the truth.** Never lie. Always tell the truth. If you don’t know or aren’t sure, say so and don’t guess. Your credibility is at stake. Being truthful does not mean telling all you know. Use good judgment.

☐ **For the record.** Anything you say to a reporter is fair game for a story. If you don’t want it reported, don’t say it. Asking a reporter to go “off the record” is not appropriate. Don’t ask reporters not to print something after you say it.

☐ **Avoid no comment.** “No comment” sounds suspicious. If you really can’t comment, explain why. “We’re gathering that information and will provide it when it’s finalized.” Or “Our policy doesn’t allow us to comment on personnel matters.” It’s OK to say you don’t know and offer to find out.

☐ **The media’s role.** Objectively telling all sides of a story is the media’s job, even if views are unpopular. Don’t expect reporters to present only your perspective and never tell a reporter how to report a story. Don’t expect a reporter to make you look good; make yourself look good by providing clear, concise information.

☐ **Be prepared.** Doing your homework makes you a better source and less nervous. Before an interview, anticipate possible questions and think through answers. Ask yourself: Is this a controversial or sensitive topic? How will my answers be perceived? How can I best explain this? Gather background materials for the reporter that help reinforce details.

☐ **Key points.** Before interviews, identify the three main points you want to make. For each point, develop three responses that support or help communicate that point. Work on making key points in 20 seconds or less. Come up with a couple of 10-second or under responses.

☐ **Respect deadlines.** Reporters live by unbending deadlines. If a reporter calls for immediate comment, try to help or point them to someone who can. But beware of giving a “quickie” response if you have inadequate information.

☐ **Know who’s calling.** When a reporter calls, ask some questions to determine whom you’re talking to and what they need. If you don’t know a reporter, get his/her name, employer and phone number. Clarify what information he/she is seeking from you.

☐ **Respond promptly.** Return media calls promptly. If a reporter catches you unprepared, find out what he/she is looking for and offer to call back in a few minutes. Gather your thoughts, anticipate questions, plan your response and call back quickly. If you have an appointment for an interview, be there. Dodging a reporter won’t make the story disappear; it just will be reported without your perspective.

☐ **Lead with the bottom line.** Remember to provide key facts or points first. Add details if time allows. Your key message can get lost in too much detail and technical information.
Talk slowly. Reporters will write furiously as you talk. Some will use tape recorders. Talk slowly and be clear. Leave nothing to chance.

Short, sweet, stop. Keep your answers brief. Your main message gets lost unless you discipline yourself to provide concise answers. Radio or TV reporters often must tell an entire story in 20 seconds to a minute. Answer the question and stop talking. Don’t keep talking to fill the silence.

Don’t babble. Listen to questions and think about your answers before you start talking. Don’t ramble. It’s OK to pause briefly to gather your thoughts before answering.

Dump the jargon. Technical terms and acronyms are confusing or meaningless to the public. Be a translator by using everyday language and examples. Relate your information in ways everyday folks can appreciate – why is this important and what does it mean to their lives, community, families or livelihoods?

Be proactive. Answer reporters’ questions and volunteer information to make key points. Reporters may welcome another angle or idea, but offer ideas as suggestions, not directives. Reporters aren’t likely to let you see a story before it appears, but always invite them to call back for help or clarification.

Summarize thoughts. After discussing the subject, concisely summarize key points in everyday language. “My major points are: 1. … 2. … 3. …” This may plant the idea of a story outline in the reporter’s mind.

Potential pitfalls. Always have the facts before commenting. Stick to what you know even if this disappoints a reporter. If you are unprepared or unqualified to answer, refer reporters to someone who can help. Avoid personal views or speculation. Don’t let reporters put words in your mouth.
  • Reporter: “So you’re saying …”
  • You: “No, let me clarify …” Do not repeat inaccuracies, even to correct them.

Identify yourself. Don’t assume a reporter knows who you are or what you do just because they’ve called. Provide your name, title, company or agency name and names of other people or programs you’re discussing.

Feedback. It’s OK to tell reporters when they do a good job. If they make a mistake, weigh what’s at stake. If it’s a major error in fact, tell the reporter or editor, but don’t quibble over minor misunderstandings. Remember, you’re building long-term relationships.

Don’t assume reporter knowledge. Don’t assume that a reporter is knowledgeable just because he/she is covering the story. Most reporters are generalists who cover diverse topics and have little time to background themselves on breaking stories before reporting them. Provide simple information to help out.

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Eight Questions the Media Always Ask
1. What happened?
2. Who is in charge?
3. Has this been contained?
4. Are victims being helped?
5. What can we expect?
6. What should we do?
7. Why did this happen?
8. Did you have forewarning?

Questions the Crisis Team Must Ask Itself
1. What happened?
2. How do we know?
3. Who is responsible?
4. Why did it happen?
5. Who is affected?
6. What should we do?
7. Who can we trust?
8. Who needs to hear from us?
9. What should we say?
10. How should we say it?

Source: Eight Questions the Media Always Ask from University of Iowa Study. Questions the Crisis Team Must Ask Itself from Eric Mower & Associates Workshop, June 2008.