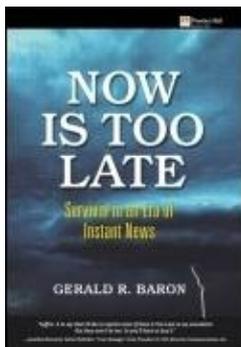


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- Now Is Too Late: Survival in an Era of Instant News**
By [Gerald R. Barone](#)

Publisher : Financial Times Prentice Hall
 Pub Date : September 20, 2002
 ISBN : 0-13-046139-3
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Now your reputation can be attacked by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Now Is Too Late delivers a blueprint for 21st-century crisis management that reflects your constituents' new demands for instant, accurate answers direct from you, not the media. Crisis management expert Gerald R. Baron shows why you're a target even if you've done nothing wrong, identifies powerful new crisis preparation techniques, and helps you think clearly and act effectively to protect your reputation no matter what happens.



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Dedication

I gratefully dedicate this to my family. To my beautiful wife and helper Lynne, who chose willingly to walk this life with me. To Chris, Geoff, Amy, and Ashley, who are the great blessings of that walk together. Above all to Him, to whom all honor is due.

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Praise for Now Is Too Late

"Gerald Baron's new book is a must-read by Academe, voters, news consumers, marketers, business leaders, and politicians. Baron provides a cogent, insightful snapshot of today's media landscape. Ignore this book's lessons at your own peril. McLuhan's Global Village is

here to stay, and how!"

Tim O'Leary, Manager, Media and External Affairs, Shell Oil Company

"Having lived in Europe at the time of the Erika oil spill off the coast of France, as well as the Concorde crash outside of Paris, and then returning to the United States just prior to the September 11 disaster all this within just two years there's no doubt that my personal life has been impacted by 'real time' news distribution. But as Executive Vice President of a global communications agency, my professional impact is even greater as clients are forever in a heightened state of paranoia about whether they, and more so their global customers, can survive the fury of being heard amid a world in turmoil. Gerald R. Baron eloquently captures the essence of this dilemma in *Now Is Too Late*, and through thoughtful analysis, he provides a clear vision of how communicators can strategically plan for, and effectively manage, '24/7' soundbyte streams. A must-read for anyone in the media delivery business ... a should-read for those on the receiving end!"

Barron T. Evans, Chicago

"Suffice it to say that I'd like to reprint most of *Now Is Too Late* in my newsletter. But they won't let me. So you'll have to buy it."

Jonathan Bernstein, Editor/Publisher, "Crisis Manager" Ezine, President & CEO, Bernstein Communications, Inc.

"Gerald R. Baron takes his readers to the front lines of crisis management in public relations. This useful book will help executives, PR professionals, entrepreneurs, and anyone who wants to know how to better navigate a changing media environment."

Jon Talton, Business Columnist, The Arizona Republic

"Gerald R. Baron has authored an absolutely essential guide for understanding and surviving the 'Instant News World.' This book is essential for any executive or communications leader wishing to protect the reputation of their products and organizations."

Kevin G. Sawatsky, Dean, School of Business at Trinity Western University

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Introduction

">A lie is halfway around the world before you can get your pants on."

Winston Churchill

In a heart's beat of a faster and faster pace, it's suddenly becoming a more dangerous world. Although much attention has been focused on security—personal, national, transportation, and business—in the months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, this book focuses on another type of security risk, the new risk to reputations.

Corporate and organizational reputations are more at risk than ever, not because of a cataclysmic event such as the al-Qaeda offensive, but because of the significant changes in how the news industry operates and how the public gets its information. To compete in an increasingly crowded media environment, news organizations have turned increasingly to "infotainment." Activists have learned how to exploit old and new media to push their agendas. The news public is becoming increasingly cynical. Digital, satellite, and other technologies are increasing the rush toward "breaking news," meaning that reputations can be severely impacted before a communication team can be assembled. Primarily, the news and public information world is changing because of the Internet. If a lie could travel halfway around the world before the prime minister could get his pants on before, in the early days of the new century that lie can travel around the multiple times world, causing irreparable damage before the great gentleman would have time to put down his cigar before pulling on his pants.

Many public relations professionals, communication managers, and business and organization leaders are becoming aware of these escalating risks. The average tenure of CEOs has been declining and a review of news headlines shows a strong correlation between a public reputation problem and a short career for a CEO. In the weeks following September 11, 2001, executives were asked if they felt their organizations were prepared to handle a large-scale crisis, and the overwhelming majority said no. Crisis communication professionals are reporting that more company leaders are expressing interest in communication plans. Public relations and communication managers are struggling with the variety of issues involved in protecting their organization's brand value and reputations in a world of increasing risk.

This book is essentially about the need for leadership in reputation management. CEOs and executive directors are the ones who fall when the public turns against a company and the organization loses its public franchise. Leadership at this level is critical if an enterprise is to survive a rapid and voracious attack on everything that it is and does. Innovative and aggressive communication managers are taking a higher profile in companies and organizations when they demonstrate they can provide concrete solutions to reputation protection. There is a strong need for leadership from both the executive level and the communication leaders.

To address this new "instant news" environment, communicators and leaders must have an understanding of the conditions that create the risk and a clear picture of what can be done to protect against the threats. That is what is offered here: an analysis of the new public information environment and the strategies needed to protect reputations and enhance brand value while operating in this new environment.

While the war on terror was waged in far corners of the world, Americans were "entertained" with stories about the demise of several giants in the world of business. Two of the country's largest bankruptcies occurred when Enron, and then Global Crossing, needed protection from creditors. Although the greed, dishonesty, and shady internal politics revealed by both news media and a Congressional investigation of Enron should have provided sufficient diversion, attention was soon focused on the respected global accounting firm, Arthur Andersen. First, there was concern about Andersen's role in potentially illegal accounting practices. Then the news broke that an Andersen partner was shredding documents and destroying evidence that investigators were seeking concerning Enron's financial dealings. A reputation crisis of the first order took over the headlines, the attention of the business world, and the global news audience.

Although many reputation crises are played out on the national or international media stage, a far greater number involve smaller companies in local or regional markets. Not all companies have the reach of Firestone, ValuJet, or Exxon. But for these less prominent companies, the impact on their futures is just as great, even though the audience may be smaller. Local newspaper articles, local television broadcasts, and localized activist attacks are every bit as significant. Manufacturing companies, oil and chemical companies, health organizations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, politicians, and other individuals whose public stature is vital to their future are at risk in the new environment of instant news.

However, it is not all bad news. Along with the new risks come new opportunities. In the Internet-connected global village, everyone has the potential of being a broadcaster or publisher. This is being demonstrated every day. Today, new voices on the Internet are gathering audiences that rival those of some daily newspapers. Some of them are doing it from their spare bedrooms with almost no investment except their own time, ideas, and energy. Activists and corporate opponents are clearly demonstrating the power of the new media tools to forge opinion and create public and political action: It's one of the significant risks. However, these same tools and methods are available to companies and organizations needing to build their enterprise and protect their investment. The question is whether or not they will be as quick to learn, adapt, change policies, invest in needed technologies, and meet the challenge.

With all the new voices, the acceleration of news delivery, and the growing importance of public information in policy making around the world, the noise level is rising. From this cacophony a key question emerges: Who is to be believed? Credibility has always been an essential element for people and organizations operating in the public sphere, but in the instant news world, when everyone is shouting to be heard, credibility takes on a new urgency. Protecting the organization's voice and public franchise becomes the real role of executive and communication leadership. Today, there are so many ways to lose believability that anything remotely resembling a cover-up is certain to destroy a solid reputation. Yet another way to lose credibility in this news era is simply to be too slow. Crisis communication case studies of the last few years, Andersen's prominent among them, offer one example after another of providing too little, too late.

Speed, direct communication, and credibility are the keys to survival in this risky public information environment. Understanding these needs thoroughly and doing what it takes to prepare to meet the challenges these demands pose is the only real protection against the frightening discovery that now is too late.

For more information about crisis communication trends and updated information about crisis communication technologies, please visit www.nowistoolate.com. Make sure you register on the mailing list to receive the latest tips and updates.

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Chapter 1. Discovering the New World of Instant News

Mid-June in the far upper corner of the Pacific Northwest is a time of anticipation. Long spells of dreary rain begin to give way to the piercingly bright blue of summer and, when the sun does emerge, the days are long with the sun setting shortly before 9 p.m.

June 10, 1999 was one of those promising days. Two 10-year-old boys were playing in the park right below their homes. Not like most city parks, this park is a typical Northwest rain forest, although right near the heart of a city of almost 70,000 people. Trails cut narrow swaths through a dense and dark forest. Whatcom Creek runs through the center of the park and immediately after it exits the park it flows through downtown Bellingham: past the big car dealership, past a number of office buildings, right below the jail windows, right past City Hall, and past the Whatcom County Courthouse. The stream starts at Lake Whatcom, a 12-mile lake at the eastern edge of the city. After plunging down a beautiful waterfall with a drop of about 30 feet, the 50-foot-wide creek meanders through towering firs and hemlocks, finally exiting into Bellingham Bay right near the Georgia-Pacific pulp and chemical plant.

The downtown stream was a favorite of fishermen as well. Around 4 p.m., an 18-year-old who had just graduated from a local high school the week before was enjoying early summer by fly fishing on the creek. He was about a half-mile upstream from where the boys were playing.

What happened next began a series of events that changed my understanding of what was happening in the world, much as September 11, 2001 changed the understanding of many others around the world.

Returning from a speaking engagement in Spokane, a six-hour drive east along Interstate 90 from Bellingham, I received a phone call at about 5 p.m. My wife was frantic. "What was that?" she shouted in my ear. My wife is a remarkably calm and strong woman. Hearing the fear and uncertainty in her voice immediately put me on high alert.

"What do you mean, 'What was that?'" I asked.

"It looks like half the town has blown up!" she said.

From her point of view, it was not an exaggeration. From the front yard of our house she saw a wall of black smoke a mile and a half long that would quickly tower to 30,000 feet. I asked if it was Mount Baker. The nearly 11,000-foot mountain was a semiactive volcano and after Mount St. Helens, everyone in the region is aware of the risk of sudden volcanic activity. She didn't know. She had to check on the kids and so she was gone off the phone.

My kids there were three of them were my main concern, and I took a mental inventory. One was safely in college in Chicago. My second son was in an apartment about a half-mile north of us right in the direction of the plume. My daughter was safely at home.

"Turn on the radio," I snapped at my young employee who was driving the car. We tried to get a Seattle station that might have some news, but we were on the edge of their coverage area. Not long after the aborted phone call we picked up a breaking news story on the radio: A pipeline explosion in downtown Bellingham. A huge plume of black smoke. No more details.

In our area there are four oil refineries. It's a natural location for them given the enclosed waters of northern Puget Sound and the proximity to the Alaska North Slope oil fields. The millions of gallons of fuel produced by these four refineries flowed primarily through a fuel products pipeline. All the jet fuel used by the busy SeaTac airport came directly from the refineries to the airport via pipeline.

The pipeline was built in 1965 and ran from the Cherry Point area about 10 miles northwest of Bellingham where two refineries were located, through what was then the outskirts of Bellingham, south toward Mount Vernon, where the lines from the two refineries near Anacortes connected with it at a point called Bayview.

I had become quite familiar with one of those Anacortes refineries because it had become a major client of mine. The refinery had experienced a devastating accident and I was assisting with rebuilding community relationships and assisting with ongoing media coverage.

Shortly after hearing from the scratchy radio about some enormous explosion just a mile or so from my house, and trying to keep myself calm while I repeatedly tried to get my wife on her cell phone, which was now continually busy, I received another call from Houston. On the phone was a communication manager who was a contact point for my work with the refinery. He calmly informed me that the "Away Team," a group of professionals designated to deal with major incidents for their company and related companies, was on the way to Bellingham. "Why?" I asked. It was then I found out that two major oil companies owning refineries in the area, including the one I worked with, were involved in ownership of the pipeline.

Until I received that call, I was a member of the audience, affected by the events and with a high demand for information, so high that I was presumptuous enough to call the manager of the local radio station on the phone to get more information because I was still too far away to get the local radio signal. However, with that phone call from Houston, my position changed. I was no longer an audience member impatient for any bit of information. I became part of the team that tried to meet that demand—a team that faced innumerable obstacles to getting the right information to the right people when they wanted it. The realities of the new world of instant news were about to make themselves evident.

The two 10-year-olds were good friends. Both were active in sports, particularly baseball. They played together a lot and a favorite place was the creek, which dropped down a deep gully behind their homes. Something must have seemed strange to them that day: a strong smell, an overpowering smell like gasoline. As strong as it was, it didn't deter them from playing near the stream and playing with a barbecue lighter they carried with them.

Upstream from them, a little below the city's water treatment facility, stood the 18-year-old fly fisherman. He too must have noticed the smell. Quickly it became overpowering. As he started to try to get away from it, it overwhelmed him. Before he could climb out of the fast-flowing stream, now flowing not just with water but with some of the 229,000 gallons of gasoline spilling from a 27-inch wide gash in the underground pipeline, he fell into the gasoline and water mixture and drowned.

Fumes were now rising from the stream into the canopy of heavy trees that covered both sides of the stream and the steep sides of the canyon through which it flowed. The barbecue lighter, just an interesting toy to the boys, lit off the gasoline choking the stream, and a rolling explosion began in two directions at once. It thundered downstream to the point where it meets the Interstate 5 bridge that crosses the creek just before entering downtown. It also rolled a half-mile upstream, flashing up Hannah Creek, a small tributary, until it reached the point of the leak just yards below the city's water treatment facility.

The boys, with horrific burns over 90 percent of their bodies, managed to climb up the steep bank to be met by horrified friends and family members. They were rushed to the local hospital, then to a burn center, but their lives ended early the next day.

On a larger scale of events, this might not rank with major, earth-shattering news events such as September 11 or even major industrial disasters, such as Exxon Valdez or Bhopal. However, to Bellingham citizens, and

particularly to those directly affected by this event, it marks a milestone by which time, history, and lives are measured. "Where were you June 10?" makes as much sense in our town as it does asking where you were November 22, December 7, or September 11. Almost everyone in the area has personal stories about where they were, what they were doing, and how they heard. How they first heard, and how they got subsequent information that was important to them, is the relevant question we are dealing with here.

We could take any event like this and look at how the information about it would flow in various times and cultures. For most of human history, information about life-changing events would be personal and direct: You tell me what you know and I tell the next person or perhaps a group. That is definitely not mass media. The written word made possible some extension of this, but the fact that each document needed to be handwritten represented definite limitations. It could not be considered mass media. The first thing that might be considered close to mass media was the town crier. As villages and towns emerged, news and commercial announcements were conveyed by a person with a loud voice calling out from a tower. This method could get the word out to perhaps a small village or at least a large group. A small village might stretch the definition of mass audience, but the crier was definitely a medium – an intermediary who carried the message from the person or event serving as the source to an audience presumably hungry for the story.

Gutenberg's printing press led to ever faster and cheaper production of the written word. Newspapers emerged and made it possible for a great many people to get essentially the same information relatively quickly. Mass media was born. It took on a greater immediacy with radio, and achieved an even greater impact with the immediacy combined with the real-time visual images of television.

For the past 300 years, people have been living in a world of expanding public information dominated by the media: a "media world." In a media world there are two sources of information: direct and indirect. Direct information is still very much limited to personal observation or talking directly to someone else by phone or personal, face-to-face conversation. Indirect information via media is provided by those who control the means of distribution – the printing presses or broadcast transmitters. This is the way things have worked for a long time, and most people have been pretty content with this arrangement. However, things are no longer quite so simple, because now there is a new way of communicating that blends the personal with the impersonal, and at the same time destroys the monopoly that media have held on mass public information. The Internet provides the immediacy, visual impact, and information content of the best of other media, but it delivers that content directly to individual members of the audience. This immediacy, directness, and depth result in profound changes in expectations. This change – the adoption of the Internet – is but one of several significant technological and cultural changes that has altered how the world gets its information. That change represents new risks and new opportunities for businesses and organizations that may find themselves, willingly or not, in the news.

When the ground beneath us moves, when sea changes occur, the reaction is not necessarily immediate. On June 10, 1999 I was living in the instant news world but didn't know it or comprehend it. As a result, my behavior and actions, as well as those of my colleagues working hard on the information response to the pipeline tragedy, was a response to a world that had changed. Only in looking back on the things we did well and those things that could have been improved did I begin to more thoroughly understand that we are living in a fundamentally different era.

The Gatling gun – a rudimentary machine gun – was introduced during the U.S. Civil War. Close formation charges against overwhelming artillery or machine gun firepower made absolutely no sense, but tactics do not change readily. The tried and the true methods in most things are relied on until they are clearly and unquestionably proven to no longer be useful. The battle of English longbowmen against the massed glory of French knights is another example. Agincourt would have been an easy victory for the French if they had more thoroughly understood how the strong arms and powerful bows of the English peasantry could defeat their formerly undefeatable armor.

Providing public information is not exactly a war, although for those on the front lines it can feel uncannily like a genuine battle. The consequences can be quite serious – for the reputation of the company or

organization, as well as for the impact on a great many lives. Certainly, the September 11 events and their aftermath have made clear that providing the right amount of accurate public information at the right time is a fundamentally strategic issue as far as national security and national welfare are concerned. The point here is that tactics need to change when there has been a fundamental shift in the ground rules. The ground rules of public information have changed forever. The way the media gathers, prepares, and distributes the news has changed. Perhaps more important, the role of the media as the sole provider of mass public information is no more. We will not return to the days when soldiers marching in lockstep toward a well-entrenched enemy who has the firepower to wipe them all out is the strategy of choice. Nor will we return to the days when corporate and organization executives and their communication staffs and experts can focus exclusively on their work with the media to convey the facts, information, and priorities of a news story or an item of pressing public interest.

That the media continue to be a primary means of public information is beyond question. However, the traditional media are changing as well, in part to meet the new challenges represented by the Internet. The changes in traditional media combined with the use of the Internet as a direct means of public information require substantial change in policies, people, and technology for those concerned about reputation protection in this new news era.

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Information Response

Early on the morning of June 11, 1999, the basement of the Whatcom County Courthouse was quickly turned into a response command post. The Bellingham Fire Department was in command during the immediate response, and during the night they closely monitored the progress of fumes throughout the city's sewer system. As the afternoon turned into uneasy night in the small city, most residents were unaware that a citywide evacuation was actively considered but eventually determined to be unnecessary.

The Sheriff's Search and Rescue team began conducting a thorough search of the "hot zone" while the ground near the rupture site still flamed. It was then they discovered the body of the 18-year-old fly fisherman. At that time it was unknown if there were more fatalities or injuries.

Responders began arriving from all over. Soon there were more than 40 response agencies and more than 300 people crowding into the small offices and corridors of the courthouse basement. An information team was loosely organized and we began to develop the information needed for the press of media standing outside the door of the command center and calling by phone. While the response commanders got themselves organized, the Bellingham Fire Department spokesperson continued to speak for the response. Company officials, along with the response commanders, decided to hold a press conference at 11:00 a.m. on the morning of June 11. The top company official on scene, the vice president in charge of operations for the pipeline, would be the one to face the cameras and reporters.

Earlier, a sheriff's department helicopter attempted to land near the city water treatment plant about an hour after the explosion occurred. As it was seeking a clear place to land, another helicopter swooped in and landed. The sheriff's department helicopter landed nearby. Furious with the intrusion, the sheriff's deputy strode up to the people exiting the other chopper: the executive team arriving from the pipeline company's offices in Renton, Washington, near Seattle. The deputy recalled later how the helicopter's passengers emerged, tears streaming down their faces. His intention to issue his complaint disappeared. He realized, as he recounted later, that there was tragedy all around that day. The company had operated for 34 years without so much as a serious injury before this.

At 11:00 a.m. the company executive stood before the press in front of a large mahogany dais where the Bellingham City Council normally met. Satellite trucks lined the street outside City Hall. Perhaps two dozen reporters waited inside with about six television crews. The executive started out, "This is the blackest day in

our history." That quotation provided the headline for the next day's local daily. He hadn't slept during the night; he was visibly shaken and shocked. The press conference did not go well. The Fire Department and Bellingham Police officials gave solid summaries specific to the search and rescue efforts, the damage to the creek, the extent of the fire and explosion, and the current state of the hot zone. The executive received questions about cause, what the company could have done to prevent it, whether or not the company was accepting responsibility, and why in the world the pipeline was crossing a creek that flowed right into downtown.

An enduring image I have of that day is the lead public relations manager for the company with his arms around his friend, the company vice president, as they walked from City Hall following the difficult press conference back to the emergency operation center or command post in the basement of the county courthouse. The PR manager had been brought out of retirement to help with the response, and through his long history and extensive contacts in the oil industry, had gotten this manager his job a number of years earlier. The two were old friends, now brought together again under circumstances that probably seemed unimaginable when, years earlier, they celebrated this executive landing his new job.

For the next three weeks, the emergency operation center, or EOC as it came to be called, was the center of my life. Fortunately, I was in my own hometown and could go home at night after a long day in the EOC, unlike my compatriots who called one of the local hotels home. A routine slowly emerged:

- Collect the facts by attending the Unified Command briefings or going around to the key players in the fire department, sheriff's office, or Department of Emergency Management to find out what was going on.
- Assemble the facts into the next version of the fact sheet being prepared for issue to the media. Get a sign-off from the commanders on the fact sheet.
- Coordinate with the various agencies such as the Department of Ecology, Environmental Protection Agency, police, fire and sheriff's office for the next press conference.
- Always, constantly, attempt to stem the tide of reporters calling by phone, collecting outside the door, and attempting to catch anyone who might emerge from the safety of the EOC.

As the long, long days turned into weeks, the focus expanded to include the various people in the community who wanted to know and had a right to know what was going on. Phone calls, meetings, broadcast faxes, mailings, and public meetings were all used to get information out about the response, the unfolding story of the horrific damage to the park and the environment, and the very limited information emerging about how this sort of thing could have happened.

It was in reflecting on the experience in dealing with the pipeline incident, along with several other situations of high public interest, that my realization grew that we are living in a very different world. The new era of instant news has created very different expectations from the news media and the audiences' expectations about speed and directness of information. Reviewing the coverage in the newspapers and television reports demonstrated something I had been increasingly aware of: News is often designed to fit a predetermined formula that is not dictated by the information, but by the media's understanding of the audience's need to be entertained. It is a blending of information and entertainment that results in public information being packaged in a way that resembles melodrama, complete with white hats and black hats. It seems to intentionally ignore the complexities of real life and real events. In the new era of instant news, information demands are growing exponentially and audiences are quickly developing whole new expectations regarding events or facts that affect their lives.

In many respects, although the communication team did an admirable job, we were living in an era that had passed by. We had entered a postmedia world, but were operating as if it was still a media world. We operated in a time frame and with measured steps that reflected a public information world that no longer existed. The subsequent viewpoint expressed by some in the community that the public information effort was bungled was not an indictment against the effort made, but more a reflection that change had occurred, and the paradigms we operated within did not take that change into account. The team members, who came from

government agencies, the companies involved, and public relations and communications firms did a credible and professional job. However, like the massed columns advancing in the Civil War or the inglorious charge of the French mounted knights, we were fighting a battle with outmoded tactics and technologies. This became clear only after the battle was long over.

11@ve RuBoard
11@ve RuBoard

A Noninstant News Response

Not everyone is afforded the luxury of a wake-up call that a new day has dawned. My wake-up call came on reflection of what was done well and what could be improved. It was then that my realization came that things had changed. The evidence of an instant news world surrounded us, but was not clearly visible or understandable until we realized the ways in which we missed the mark. At the time it appeared there were no choices or options. Later, those options became more visible and with them, an understanding that an entirely new way of thinking about providing public information was needed.

The following are some of the key elements that were identified as indicators that change was needed:

1. No "golden hour" response
2. Inadequate internal communication
3. Antiquated information distribution
4. "Scratchpad" method of database development
5. Handcuffed without email
6. Separate Web team to update site
7. Behind the curve on media response
8. The "media first" mistake
9. The approval process slowdown
10. No inquiry and response tracking
11. No way to easily update new reporters

No "Golden Hour" Response

Although definitions might vary, most crisis communication experts consider the first hour of response the "golden hour." Why focus on this first hour? Because in most news-making events, the initial reports emerge in this first hour and the story begins to be told and written. As the old saying goes, "You only have one chance to make a first impression." Every subsequent news story will either follow the line of the initial story or contradict it. Every reporter is influenced by the initial information emerging and the initial public reports, as is every member of the audience. The information that is available, the way it is prioritized and presented, who it comes from, who it does not come from, the context of the information, and the history of similar events are all critical items normally included in the first reports emerging from an incident.

In the pipeline incident, there was no effectively coordinated golden hour response. The initial reports coming from a company spokesperson nowhere near the scene later turned out to be quite incorrect. The company had little to no visibility until late the next morning at a press conference. The inability to very quickly "push" information to the media and other stakeholders about the company, its background and history, and whatever information about the incident was known at that time did not bode well for the ongoing information response. Subsequently, in talking with a number of communication professionals, it has become clear that this inability to meet new information demands is very common. Although some companies and industries with a high risk of major public events have extensive preparations in place, many do not. Many communicators seem to believe that a communication team has hours or even days to put the infrastructure in place, organize the information process, and get to work. However, events such as September 11, 2001 and the Enron Andersen story demonstrate that the communicator's understanding of "now" means they will probably be too late.

Inadequate Internal Communication

In a real news-making event, the communication team has a great many responsibilities. Effective internal communication is certainly one of them. September 11, 2001 demonstrated to many executives that they were unprepared to quickly reach employees at their workplaces or homes, particularly in a major crisis when telephone service was affected.

Internal communication means effectively gathering the needed bits and pieces of information and being the source of reliable information for internal audiences. Those audiences include corporate management, employees, other company communication team members, the immediate response team, and other agencies or organizations involved in the response. The reality is that many of these people who need to have the latest and most accurate information about what is going on are not likely to be on scene. It seems like an impossible situation and without the proper planning, policies, and technologies it really is impossible. However, effective internal communication is also critically important and the task of communicating with these internal audiences and sources of information falls on the communication team.

In the emergency center after the pipeline accident, the communication team on scene was focused on preparing and distributing information to the media. That was the task the team understood that it was assembled for. All other efforts were secondary, ad hoc, and uncoordinated. The impacts of this can be very significant, one of them being the confidence or lack of confidence in the entire response team by the corporate and agency leaders who are not on scene. If the organization leaders who are not there don't have good, timely information about what is happening, they cannot evaluate the effectiveness of the response. They need this information to determine whether or not additional resources are required and whether or not to begin second-guessing those who are extremely busy dealing with the rapidly evolving situation.

Antiquated Information Distribution

Technology has revolutionized business and government in the past many years. Unfortunately, there's a good chance if you find yourself in a command post responsible for managing an overwhelming crush of reporters and information-hungry stakeholders, your most important tools may be random scratch pads, barely operational phones, and perhaps a single fax machine.

At the very time when the dot-com explosion was dominating the business scene, the pipeline accident communication team did not even have a fax machine to support the communication effort. There were a few computers scattered around the EOC, but the process of getting them adequately connected to working printers was a tremendous challenge. Internet connection was not a reality until several days into the event, and then it was strictly through dial-up connections. A few employees brought laptops with them, but without a real network, data was transferred by floppies. In the basement of the county courthouse, cell phones were mostly unusable.

The information process as it evolved was fairly simple: Someone would write a draft of an updated information release and get it to the computer that was connected to the printer an excruciatingly slow printer. The draft was given to the Unified Commanders and others who had direct knowledge of the latest information. The changes were then incorporated and then it went back through the process. When the release was approved (usually three or four drafts later), it was rushed to my office about six blocks from the EOC. There, one of my employees would stand by the fax machine and send it out to the rapidly growing list of reporters who were eagerly awaiting the latest dispatch from the incident's Joint Information Center.

"Scratchpad" Method of Database Development

In an event of significant public interest, a large number of people are going to want and expect the latest information. The most important of these are the family members and close friends and associates of anyone

possibly hurt or killed in the incident. The list quickly grows to neighbors closest to the event, employees, company leaders, local elected officials, people from the various agencies responding to the event, prominent people in the community who hold their place because others consider them continually "in the know," and oh, yes reporters: local reporters, regional reporters, national and international reporters, industry reporters, stringers, publishers, broadcast executives, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, our method of distribution was to answer questions on the phone and to send our updated fact sheet to an outside office where someone stood for an ever increasing amount of time faxing it out and manually adding to the rapidly growing fax list. Within a few days, it took two hours to send the broadcast fax. Now, if you were on the tail end of the two hours, and you were a reporter, you would probably not rely on the faxed fact sheet. When you got the new one, you'd probably call in and see what was new since the fax broadcast had started.

The growing list was developed very simply. Any one of perhaps 10 or more people in the EOC assigned to take media or community calls would answer the phone, and if a reporter asked to be put on the fax distribution list or wanted a call back for a later answer, the responder would take down the name, and phone or fax number on any old piece of paper lying around. If it was to be added to the fax list it would usually make its way to me and I would take it back to the office along with the next update. From there my administrative assistant would load it into the fax machine. There was no way of knowing whether the question was answered, whether the person got the information he or she needed, and no way for the communication leaders or information officers to know who had called, for what reason, and whether a response had been properly offered. Management of the message was definitely handled by walking around.

Handcuffed Without Email

Connection junkies that we are, when separated from our cell phones, text pagers, and certainly email, we become almost panic stricken. In the pipeline incident's EOC, most cell phones had very weak to no signal and because Internet connections were almost nonexistent, email was out of the question. In "old-world" crisis communications planning, the information center is designed to be a place where all those participating in the information function can gather together. Reality is not so neat. There are a number of people critical to the information function who cannot be physically present, but who need to participate in the information function—company and agency leaders, lawyers, experts with critical information, on-scene responders, and so on. Take some of the routine methods of communication away, and everything tends to slow and lose efficiency. Take email away and replace it with phones that need to be shared with a lot of others who all have an urgent need for communications and you have instant frustration and inefficiency.

We have all become accustomed to working at our comfortable workstations. We have the tools at hand that we rely on to get things done. However, in a crisis incident with a defined command and information center, we find ourselves removed from that comfortable and efficient world. When the demands for efficient and accurate work are higher than they can possibly be in our normal routines, we are asked to do without the very things we rely on for quality communication. There are only two solutions to this very significant challenge—either we find a way to work from our well-established workstations or, the tools we use to communicate, including email, PDAs, wireless phones, and so on, must be completely accessible at the information center regardless of where it is located.

Separate Web Team to Update Site

It is quickly becoming commonplace that in any situation involving significant public interest, a Web site must play a key role. The effectiveness of a Web site as a critical information tool is dependent on the degree to which the communication manager or managers have direct and immediate control. Since 1999, there have been tremendous advances in the technologies that enable Web content to be managed "on the fly" by nonprogrammers or noncode writers—in other words, the rest of us.

All things considered, in mid-1999 we were fortunate in the early stages of the response to have a Web presence for the event. It featured photos that were taken by the hazmat-trained photographer authorized to take photos to be shared by all news organizations. No one was allowed into the "hot zone" without training on operating in environments where hazardous materials are present. Because of this, the only photos or videos used came from helicopter shots or those provided by the fire department-authorized photographer. In addition to the photos, the Web site included all the latest fact sheets, usually posted within an hour or two of being approved.

However, the Web site used for the incident provided only a fraction of the potential benefit for the information response. It was managed by one person, which meant it was limited by her availability and her work schedule. She was a county employee taking orders from the County Department of Emergency Management director. This represented few significant problems, but it became clear that as far as the Web was concerned it was this person who managed information flow. The Web address was that of the county and it was almost impossible for anyone to remember. Because it was the county's property and under their control, information items of interest to reporters or an interested public on things such as the company's safety record or background information on the company, and the ability to respond to questions or post frequently asked questions were simply not considered.

As a result, after the emergency response began to evolve into a more long-term restoration effort, we developed a Web site for the company. Previously it did not even have a Web presence, being one of those companies not normally in the public eye. The company considered it an advantage to "fly under the radar." Why bring yourself to attention when everything is going along swimmingly? A Web site was therefore built to provide company information of interest to the public, the emerging activists, and the media. Only now, the information focused on this one large event that would probably forever define the company in the minds of the public.

Behind the Curve on Media Response

Few executives, or even communication professionals, can adequately prepare for the crush of eager, insistent reporters that automatically comes when a company or organization finds itself in the maelstrom. The media training experienced by many people who may find themselves under the hot lights or behind the microphones is valuable, but rarely comes close to putting stress on people like the real thing. This is particularly true when the person who steps in front of the camera knows that the questions may be intentionally aggressive, and the media may have already tried the company or organization in their own private courtroom, delivering a guilty verdict.

As in most real situations, the press conferences were only the tip of the iceberg in the pipeline incident. It started out with the reporters there trying to get the latest information from anyone that would talk to them. Then, it changed to phone calls, often repeatedly from the same reporter, and then from new reporters from the same publication or broadcasters who needed to be taken through the whole sequence of events one more time. It was not unusual for the same reporter to call the information center several times with the same question looking for different responders to provide different answers. Then it evolved into private and individual interviews by phone or in person with reporters intent on getting scoops or pursuing their special angles.

Each stage of the process involved a different type of reporting, and, as a result, should have received a different kind of media response. However, despite the best efforts of everyone involved, it seems in hindsight we were continually one step behind the reporters. When they shifted to a new game, we were still playing the old one. Unable to take a strong step forward in information management, the information center continued in a highly reactive mode rather than taking the opportunity to anticipate and keep pace.

It was my strong sense at the time that we were doing a good job of handling the crush. It is true, the team worked well together, and responded as efficiently and effectively as possible given the constraints we had. In

retrospect, and particularly from the company's standpoint and with the advantage of hindsight, I later understood we were continually playing catch up. Aside from the effort to reach out early to the community influencers, there was little effort to get ahead of the curve and take proactive steps to directly communicate key information and anticipate the direction of coverage and public interest. It is a situation that perhaps many people would consider normal or acceptable, but as will become clear later, getting behind the media curve is frequently deadly in this new era of instant and direct communication.

The "Media First" Mistake

How can putting the media first be a mistake to a communications professional, particularly a public information officer? Simply because there are a number of stakeholders who expect and believe they have a right to the absolute latest and most up-to-date information. If you give them unadulterated and truthful information before or at least simultaneous with the media, you gain appreciation and support. If you give it to them through the media, you are considered unresponsive or uncaring.

Some of these people have been mentioned already. They include anyone with a close connection to individuals who may have been personally and directly affected by the incident—family members, neighbors, coworkers, and relatives. They also include local elected officials, community leaders, and agency managers, such as the heads of state environmental regulatory agencies or the head of the local Red Cross. With an incident of sufficient scope, these people include the governor, U.S. senators, and state elected officials. When you start making a list, particularly when you think about these things in advance of an incident, you understand that there are quite a few people who have a reasonable expectation of getting direct and immediate information about what is going on. However, you only have a small crew to work with and there are all those reporters out there.

As in most situations like this, the communication team in this incident was involved primarily in meeting the needs of the media. One of the best things that we did, from the company perspective, was fax a letter from the president of the company to a list of local elected officials and community leaders within a few days of the incident occurring. This direct, personal, and relatively immediate information was very well received. It was in observing the value that was placed on this limited direct communication that helped me understand that most of the opportunities for such communication were passed up because they were impossible in our situation. Thorough direct communication would seem impossible to most in situations like that. Yet, in this new era of direct communication that task cannot be treated as impossible because the stakeholders do not see it as impossible. The new understanding going into such situations is that the media is one group among a whole number of groups of equals. That is a big change.

At the same time the information center was working hard to communicate with the media, a local activist group was communicating directly through a growing network of contacts. The environmental disaster, in addition to the human tragedy, awakened passions of many in the community, easily spurred on by the direct communication being conducted by the activist group who spotted an opportunity to provide leadership in a new cause: pipeline safety. The momentum built by this group proved to be a potent force in the weeks and months that followed and demonstrated that those involved in such incidents need to have and use the same direct communication methods as those who wish to take advantage of such situations to pursue their own agendas.

The Approval Process Slowdown

Now, now, now! Reporters and all those others looking for information aren't content with later and tomorrow. Urgency has always been a critical element of effective reporting, but with the advent of 24-hour instant news coverage, "now" takes on a more urgent meaning. After the best available information was collected and word-smithed into a new statement for the press, it needed to be "vetted" for approval. The final authority in a situation managed under the Incident Command System is the Unified Command. The Incident