

STORIES FROM THE EDGE



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**DISASTER AND
MOMENTS OF
LEARNING**

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Table of Contents

Introduction

By David Etkin i

Job Title - Emergency Manager: [Qualification](#) – Passion

By Alain Normand 1

So [What Do I Say](#) When I Don't Have All The Facts And The [Media](#) Shows Up?

By Jim Stanton 7

[Learning From Each Other](#)– Relationships in Disaster Relief

By Katie McPherson 10

The Earthquake That [Changed Emergency Management](#) in British Columbia

By Larry Pearce 18

Negotiating With [Warlords](#)

By Susan Macgregor 21

[Always More to Learn](#) – Especially When “Leading From Behind”

By Terry Jeggle 24



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SO WHAT DO I SAY WHEN I DON'T HAVE ALL THE FACTS AND THE MEDIA SHOWS UP?

Read the following sentence and remember it. When things go wrong, the organization that contacts the media first sets the communications template. Every comment that follows is in reaction to what you say. It is critical to get out in front of the media with your messages first, even if you don't know exactly what happened.

I have been involved in the communications process of many major events such as; plane crashes in Nova Scotia, floods in Manitoba, health issues in Saskatchewan, SARS in Toronto, Kananaskis G8 Summit in Alberta, forest fires in British Columbia and the Vancouver 2010 Olympics.



It is important to remember this - the media are storytellers and they need to be engaged in getting your story to the public. The key to your success is simple, “engage” the media. You are not talking to them or dealing with them, you are using them as your conduit to get out your messages.

Rick Hillier, former Canadian Chief of Defense Staff said, “Without the media, we cannot tell our story. We need to engage them in what we are doing.” Hillier supported his comment by allowing any Canadian service person to speak to the media, without pre-clearance by a public affairs officer, there was only one caveat, and the spokesperson had to be addressing his or her area of expertise. This openness encouraged the Canadian public

to connect with their armed forces in an incredibly positive manner.

One unifying theme I have learned is that no matter how well executed the emergency plan is, if the organization does not commit to the delivery of clear, concise, and simple communications, the event can spin out of control.

Until recent times most organizations left the responsibility of communications in a grey, undefined area. It was not on the operational radar screen and was one of those things that would “get done when needed” or the media relations “people will do it” (and that might be a department of one all too often.)

Increasingly we are seeing spokespersons for emergency organizations getting out in front of the media quickly and delivering crisp, clear messages – they are engaging the media in a much more effective manner. This requires training, practice and preparation.

So, what do you say when you don't have all the facts or perhaps you don't really know what happened? Have you been caught off guard because the media finds out before you do and you are concerned with jeopardizing the incident?

Firstly, use your trained spokesperson. While some folks have a natural ability, speaking to the media in times of uncertainty takes training and practice. Also, don't depend on a single spokesperson – have a backup for them in case the event goes on for an extended period of time.

Secondly, make sure the spokesperson “brands” your organization. Use the corporate name with frequency. Don't just say, “we,” “us,” “our” Position yourself for TV shots in front of your corporate logo; wear identifying corporate clothes, badges, hats, that are appropriate to your position and the situation. People want to hear from you and it is important that in the din of conflicting messages it is your voice that resonates.

Where possible, use your most senior spokesperson. When Maple Leaf Foods realized their product was killing Canadians, they used their President, Michael McCain as the designated corporate

spokesperson. McCain's honesty and consistency of messaging resulted in people believing what he was saying. Maple Leaf Foods has rebounded and has recaptured its market share. Mr. McCain was nominated by Canadian Press as Chief Executive Office of the Year for his handling of the *listeriosis* crisis.

Similarly, when the New Westminster, BC, police responded to a gun incident in a school, they took a **pro-active stance** to manage this serious threat. Media Relations Officer, Sgt. Ivan Chu said, "When the school was locked down, we took a pro-active approach to the media and parents with up-to-date information every 15 minutes. I used two local radio stations as my conduit for radio information to keep parents informed as well as traffic rerouting. Parents were directed by radio that we had set up an information center where they could get updates every 15 minutes, as well as counseling services." "In the end," Sgt. Chu said, "parents could not say enough good things about how we handled the situation."

The following principles - I assure you - work. There are **eight fundamentals** that people want answers to in times of uncertainty, it is called the Stanton Method:

1. What is really happening?

In times of uncertainty and stress, rumors abound and you need to get out quickly with clear messaging. If you don't know, speak about process, tell folks you have activated your plan, you are aware of the situation, and tell them to listen to the media for updates as more information becomes available.

2. How will this affect me?

People need answers to this very critical question. You need to craft messages to address this concern. Remember people will be worried not just about themselves but about their children in school, parents in extended care facilities, partners working in another location, etc.

3. What are you doing?

Here's where you can send out messages of reassurance to give people confidence and direction. It is important that you say the name of your organization frequently so your community knows you are taking care of their needs. Give them phone numbers, websites, Facebook, and other references to go to for information.

4. What do I need to do?

Keep your message clear and simple. Match them to the eight fundamentals. Accept and involve the public as a partner. Appreciate the public's specific concerns, empathize with the public and provide answers that respect their humanity.

5. Specific and detailed instructions.

One of the first things that go in times of stress is short-term memory. People don't know they don't know. For example, you cannot simply say, "We have issued a boil water advisory." You need to give people step-by-step directions in the simplest terms, with illustrations if possible, on how to follow the boil water advisory.



6. When will things get back to normal?

Your public will want to know when the road will reopen, when they can access bank machines, where can they get sand bags, etc. Make sure you have specific messages to match the needs of your audiences as the event unfolds.

7. Reassurance.

Folks want to know things are being managed in a professional and competent manner. Speak to your planning, the state of your response, and give frequent updates.

8. Voices of authority they can trust.

Use your most senior spokespersons that are recognized subject matter experts. For example, you need to use the senior police officer if the issue is one involving police response. Similarly, if it is a health issue you need a doctor or Medical Health Officer to be the spokesperson.

Notice that nowhere do I talk about blame. People do not care about blame, what they care about is what you are doing to resolve the incident. Lastly, I want to speak about engaging the media in a creative manner. Get to know your local media now, enroll them in your emergency planning. Bring them along on training exercises. They are part in your community.

They will be in your community when things go wrong and they will be thereafter. See them as partners in messaging.

My experience has been that if you craft messages by using the Stanton Method to ensure these eight fundamental concerns are met, you will address the needs of your community and will be successful in engaging the media and your public.



Jim Stanton. *Jim brings more than 30 years of first-hand experience as an army officer, broadcaster, trainer, communicator, and public speaker. After serving in the Armed Forces, Jim worked for a number of years as a journalist with the CTV network. He was the Director of Communications and Director General of Government Relations for Canada Post before setting up Stanton Associates in 1990. Stanton Associates is a communications and training company with offices in Canada and the USA. Today, he is President of Vancouver Royal United Services Institute and is one of the founding members of Honour House Society British Columbia. The late Chief Medical Officer of Health for Ontario, Dr. Sheela Basrur, asked Jim Stanton to sit on a blue ribbon SARS Panel to examine strategic communications considerations for Ontario's health programs. Dr. Basrur said: "I asked Jim Stanton to join our SARS Experts Panel because he is one of the leading minds in crisis communications & media relations in Canada."*



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