

## **CRISIS COMMUNICATION: *Only you can prevent forest fires*** **NETA Communication Council - September 21, 2005**

Given that crises are a part of daily life in public television (and everywhere else), are you, as a communication professional, ready to respond on behalf of your station?

WKNO's promotion director Teri Sullivan organized a panel of three experts to present their thoughts on how to communicate effectively when a crisis arises:

- Sherri Fallin, CEO, Duffey Communications, Atlanta
- Echelle Rutschman, Senior communications officer and system director of corporate communications, Baptist Memorial Health Care, Memphis
- Jeffrey Davis, Vice president, communications, APTS, Washington, DC

Duffey Communication's Sherri Fallin went first, with six precepts for preparedness.

1. Plan for *likely* scenarios. Be ready to continue operations and customer relations no matter what happens.
2. Have safety nets in place, so potential problems can be flagged *before* they escalate. Monitor blogs, chatrooms, talk shows. Know what is top-of-mind for your stakeholders (friends and foes)
3. Media training for your spokespeople. Ideally this should be done on a regular, on-going basis. Role play, rehearse, train new executives so that your organization's message points are conveyed consistently and professionally.
4. Keep everyone in your organization informed. Don't "circle the wagons" internally. Use all-staff memos, letters from the CEO, to communicate the situation (and head off problematic gossip.)
5. Test your preparedness. Take your response plan out for a drill at least quarterly.
6. Build bridges among your supporters, and build back-door communications to your detractors. In crisis times, call the groups and give them a heads-up on what's happening.

Baptist Health Care's Rutschman followed, talking about how to respond to a long-term sustained crisis which, unlike an emergent crisis, can sap your ability to maintain focus as months (even years) go by. In the case of her organization, the problem was the closing of the original, well-known, well-loved Baptist Hospital in downtown Memphis.

The community's reaction to news of the landmark facility's closing was "a negative shockwave," that threatened Baptist's reputation. Echelle found six things to be of critical importance in responding to this situation, both initially and in the five years since the closing was announced.

1. Listen to your stakeholders during the decision process. Know their concerns.
2. Speak to their emotions. Show you care. Acknowledge feelings.  
(Using cold hard facts to respond to hot emotions does nothing to improve the climate.)
3. Train/drill relentlessly to insure that your message points are consistent throughout the organization and its supporters.
4. Inform all your employees first. (Don't let them hear it somewhere else.)
5. Tailor your communication tactics to reach each group of stakeholders. Follow up with them; keep them "in the loop" as time elapses.
6. Don't stop when the crisis seems to subside. Keep going, keep pushing, be proactive. Anticipate, rather than react. Develop a Q & A and post it on your Web for reference in days to come.

APTS's Jeffrey Davis is intimately involved with fighting metaphorical fires for public broadcasting. Earlier this year, he worked tirelessly to counteract the threat to public broadcasting's federal funding.

For him and his organization, it's important to know the media stakeholders. He and Kristin Wilson (APTS communication associate) actively cultivate relationships with reporters, so that the connections are in place when needed to brief them on a story. The same is true with relationships between APTS and Capitol Hill. Knowing what legislators' staffs are working on, having a sense of what's coming, and being able to connect with them -- the two-way flow is important.

APTS also serves as consultant, counselor to stations, helping them sort the facts and define their response. Station buy-in is critical to achieving the unified message in response to a challenge on a national level. Conference calls are a good way to get everyone on the same page, but long before that, it's the *relationships* that must be nurtured and developed.

Note: Jeffrey Davis and Sherri Fallin will be presenters at the NETA Conference in Houston this January. More details soon.
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Question: Is it okay to post your organization's statements online, rather than putting your spokesperson or CEO through the rigors of a testy press conference?

All three panelists agreed – they recommend doing the face-to-face communication whenever possible. Showing up in person denotes candor and strength; not appearing looks like trying to hide.

Question: How is media training accomplished?

Sherri: Usually in the offices of the person or people getting the coaching. Role-playing is a good way to handle this, rehearsing likely questions, key message points.

Echelle: Media training is offered once a month to anyone in the organization who may be asked to represent the company in any way. (Example: a dietitian commenting on the newest fad diet.)

Question: In what area do you think public TV needs to improve in crisis communication?

Sherri: In building bridges to your detractors, especially the conservative organizations. Find the sympathetic person on your opponent's staff and cultivate a back-door line of communication. Keep all your stakeholders informed.

Question: What do you do when a supporter *isn't* helping, e.g. *MoveOn.org* and the federal funding issue?

Sherri: Let your elected officials know of your quandary and get back on your positive message. Realize that you cannot control everything. Don't get involved in the soap opera. Keep your eye on the ball.

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NETA's Communication Council creates conference call discussions on a periodic basis on topics of importance to all stations, like crisis communication. Earlier this year, it was guerrilla marketing, how to "spin" pledge, and how to promote your video-on-demand (VOD) services.

The council is steered by an executive committee, elected from station communication professionals. Please contact them with your thoughts, ideas on other subjects you'd like to have presented.

Teri Sullivan, WKNO (chair)  
Catherine Christman, SCETV  
Mary Dickson, KUED  
Twyla Lozano, Ozarks Public Television  
Bob Neese, LPB  
Anne Peterson, Idaho Public Television  
Randy Tinney, Mississippi Public Broadcasting