

## **Avoiding Getting Hit by the Bus: Lessons for the Nuclear Industry Communicators from the BP Oil Spill- 11080**

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### **ABSTRACT**

“Sometimes you just step off the curb and get hit by the bus.” ... It’s just a “tiny” little spill compared to the size of the sea. ... “I’d like to get my life back.” ... “We care about the small people of the Gulf.”

As an executive or senior agency or corporate communicator, have you ever wished you had a chance to take back what you said and start over, knowing now what you didn’t know then? The BP Gulf oil spill contains valuable lessons for nuclear communications. The gulf spill has become a communications case study that ranks among other high risk occurrences -- Tylenol, the Exxon Valdez, Bhopal and Three Mile Island. It will help shape how government and industry communicators talk to the public about nuclear matters in the coming years. Managing communications is an art form. Today’s executives must understand how images and words create perceptions that can take on a life of their own. Here we present lessons drawn from the BP oil spill to offer specific advice for individuals who encounter a crisis communications issue within their arena in the nuclear field. The core message within these pages is to communicate early, often and clearly to the public and Congress while ensuring your efforts display empathy for victims, remain conservative in terms of potential impact, and avoid finger pointing. And we make the point that it is critically important to plan, prepare and practice for disaster because there is every chance this could happen to you.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The authors have sought for three years now to bring to participants in the Waste Management Symposium observations about communicating with the public and Congress based on their decades of practical experience in this arena. It is their intent with this paper to demonstrate clear and convincing lessons for nuclear executives to heed in time of crisis. The planning and preparation done now will almost certainly reduce the time one is in the spotlight and the intensity of the beam.

At the outset it must be acknowledged that it is easy to pick on BP – very easy. In the field of communications BP is going to be a case study for decades – just as Tylenol, the Exxon Valdez and Three Mile Island have entered the textbooks as important learning experiences for those of us in this business.

The lessons to take away from this paper are these: prepare for disaster, practice for disaster, and when it occurs, communicate with the public and all your other constituencies early, often and clearly. In the section about dealing with Congress, Ms. Schmidt offers a number of experience-based observations about dealing with members of Congress and Congressional hearings.

## **Not all bad PR for BP**

At the outset of this discussion dissecting missteps by BP it is important to note it has not all been downhill for BP.

As we were preparing this paper the general counsel of the congressionally chartered panel investigating the Gulf Oil spill told reporters that it was clear to him that BP did not place cost cutting ahead of safety. Money could not have bought a better headline.

That is the good news. The bad news is he pointed to a series of missed opportunities and – on top of that -- the good news didn't come out in the middle of all the negative publicity, name calling, finger-pointing and so on that went on.

One thing is certain – it will take years for BP to rebuild the reputation of decades that was trashed in an instant with the constant picture of the wellhead blowing out oil into the gulf waters.

This was both an environmental disaster and a communications disaster, with an eye on taking away some lessons.

Note: While all the advice offered in this work is based on the decades of personal experiences of the authors in various communications and senior staff positions in government agencies and with Congressional Committees, many of the points made here are reinforced in a variety of communications publications cited at the close of this paper.

## **MESSAGE TO COMMUNICATORS – PERSONALIZE THE CONVERSATION**

The first bit of criticism to level has to do with personalizing the conversation. The following quotes from BP executive Tony Hayward are both well known and illustrative:

“Sometimes you just step off the curb and get hit by the bus.” ... It's just a “tiny” little spill compared to the size of the sea. ... “I'd like to get my life back.” ... “We care about the small people of the Gulf.”

Absent from his remarks is any sense of empathy. The lesson communicators learned in this area dates to the TWA 800 crash off long island in 1996 -- 15 years ago. The airline industry learned the hard way they had to talk first about the victims and families and not start looking for ways to duck blame. And they also learned that it is important to reach out to victims in other ways. This crash spawned the creation of a family and victim assistance program within the National Transportation Safety Board which has become the model to emulate.

It took BP far too long to demonstrate clearly and convincingly that they were concerned about the people of the gulf.

Thus, lesson one is not to think about a crisis in technical terms, whether it is an oil spill or a radiation release. That is what your engineers get paid for. Managers must think about it in about it in people terms. Don't talk about stakeholders. Stakeholders can be institutions—but in a crisis like this your reputation is riding on connecting with people.

If Tony Hayward had the opportunity to rewind the film and start over, we would suggest he approach the disaster this way:

“Everything we are doing is with just one thing in mind –protecting the environment and those who depend on these waters for their livelihoods. We don’t yet know the extent of the problem but we are moving heaven and earth to get this leak shut down. I can’t promise how long it will take. But we will throw everything at it we have. BP will meet its responsibilities to the people of the Gulf.”

While you cannot know the nature of every crisis that will touch your business, plan on talking to the public in very personal terms.

### **Stay Current, Avoid Fingerpointing**

There are two other key lessons inherent in the BP disaster. Keep your crisis planning current, and avoid finger-pointing. The BP crisis plan was hopelessly outdated and unrealistic. It talked about walrus. We haven’t seen too many of them in the Gulf lately.

Having a plan – a tested and realistic plan – is one of the core tenets of crisis communication. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) practices and practices and practices until the staff is sick of doing emergency drills. The Public Affairs office has drafted pre-staged press releases, drills for press conferences, constantly updates talking points that are available to everyone at the agency who may be communicating. Plan, practice, prepare.

Another lesson: finger-pointing and playing the blame game is no substitute for stepping up and taking responsibility. Neither GE nor Pratt and Whitney publicly piled on Rolls Royce when a Rolls Royce Trent engine exploded on a Qantas A-380. In the aviation business they understand that an accident can happen to anyone and taking advantage does no one any good. Qantas is picking a fight with Rolls Royce, but there is no piling on as was evidenced in the BP case.

### **Be Cautious and Conservative with Numbers**

Think of your worst nightmare, and then double it. BP kept putting out optimistic spill figures on the low side, not acknowledging until very late in the game that it not only could get worse but it did. In our case the issue will be radiation, so be certain not to offer an iron clad guarantee that the situation won’t worsen.

### **Speak With One Voice**

In addition, we find it critical that an agency or corporation speak with one voice. In the broad sense, BP did well on that point, although the voice they chose was very publicly removed when it became clear the political and reputational damage was mounting.

For evidence of the importance of speaking with one voice, one need only to examine the reorganization that occurred at the NRC following the Three Mile Island incident. Taking some advice of the Kemeny Commission, Congress restructured the NRC to designate the Chairman as the sole spokesman for the agency, giving clarity and focus to the agency message. While the NRC may have several figures speaking for the agency during a crisis, all those individuals, from the Chairman down to the Public Affairs officers, will be speaking off a single set of message

points developed by Public Affairs. The lesson, winging it in the absence of guidance is a poor idea.

### **COMMUNICATE EARLY, OFTEN AND CLEARLY**

The NRC Office of Public Affairs spends significant amounts of time reaching out to the news media even when there is nothing going on. The object is to build relationships and to build trust. Once you have those relationships, it makes the communicating in a crisis easier.

Communicate early – step in, acknowledge responsibility, acknowledge the scope of the problem without getting caught in providing lowball estimates the way BP did.

Communicate often – own the message. Have a coordinated response across your organization. Spend the money to control the message through social media. Reach out often, to the public, to your political stakeholders.

And above all, if you are dealing with a highly technical subject, make sure your message is distilled down to words that are quite literally in the high school comprehension range. Too complicated a message will sound hard to grasp and not build the trust you need. Think about how to explain the problem to your parents, assuming they are not engineers. Sound advice on the “dumbing down” of language can be found in a work by Randy Olson titled “Don’t Be Such A Scientist.”

Finally, if your organization has to get involved in crisis organization, front-line executives are encouraged to listen to the public affairs or public relations counsel. There will be a natural tension with the lawyers and with the engineers, but we strongly encourage executives to listen to the public affairs team. They will validate the concept of plan, prepare and communicate early, often and clearly.

### **TALKING TO CONGRESS IN A CRISIS**

Generally speaking, if you find yourself testifying before a Congressional Committee then that is not good news. It means either your crisis communication team has failed, a Member of Congress is bent on a headline, or both. Rarely does Congress hold a hearing to investigate what a company or an agency did in response to a crisis if they did a good job. Sure, sometimes Congress will hold a lessons-learned hearing, but generally the members are looking into what should have been done rather than what was done in response to a problem.

Among the questions put to agencies or corporations by both the media and Congress are a variation on question by Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., during the 1973 Watergate hearings: What did you know and when did you know it? And as a government regulator, be prepared to be asked not only that but: What didn’t you do then (and why) that you could have done to head off this crisis? And there’s always the one: What didn’t you know and why didn’t you know it?”

In addition, if you find yourself behind the witness table at a Congressional hearing, get comfortable because you are likely to be dragged up to testify several more times. Not only does the spotlight shine brightly on your company or agency, but many committees will jump on board. You will find yourself under a magnifying glass on probably many topics.

For example, the Three Mile Island accident happened on March 28, 1979. The NRC was called to testify the next day while the crisis was still ongoing by the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. Following that hearing, the NRC testified before the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Senate Committee on Government Affairs, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, House Committee on Armed Services, House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, House Committee on Science, and Technology, House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the list goes on and on. Many committees and several subcommittees of each committee had hearings on the NRC. For the next 18 months, the NRC testified at 73 hearings. The spotlight casts a wide ray of light and hits many topics once it is turned on.

### **What Not to Do**

We do not live in a perfect world and even the best employees make mistakes. So, what do you do if you find yourself preparing for a beating in a Congressional hearing? Start with what not to do. Here are some top mistakes made by companies or agencies testifying before a Congressional committee:

1. Do not wear a \$200 tie or a \$3000 tailored suit to testify.
2. If you are the CEO of a big automotive company and you are asking for the government to bail you out, do not fly to Washington DC in a private jet.
3. Do not say as the BP Chairman did that his company cares about the small people.
4. Speaking of BP, do not days after you are testifying before Congress and apologizing for the oil spill show up at a glitzy yacht race while the crisis is still ongoing.
5. If your company is held in high esteem before the crisis, as in Toyota, do not squander the good will you have built up by not being forthright.
6. Do not allow your witness to argue with the Committee members. Remember that Members of Congress control the microphones and they always have the last word.

**Preparing for a Hearing** Now that you know what not to do, what should you do to prepare for a hearing? Besides the regular advice of knowing who your audience is and who they represent, it is important to consider the following:

1. First and foremost, the witness should take responsibility. If you have to get your general counsel to approve the statement beforehand, do so. By taking responsibility, the element of surprise will help the witness in the long run.
2. If the witness is in a hole, stop digging. In most instances if the witness is trying to explain himself better, he is in trouble. The witness should use clear, concise statements that do not need explanations.
3. Prepare briefing material days ahead of time and make sure your witness reads the material, practices answering questions, and remembers to check his ego at the door before testifying. If you are a foreign owned company, make sure the witness is familiar with American society and does not speak English haltingly.
4. Anticipate that the Committee staff will have big graphics of your problem—whether it is wildlife covered in oil or a collapsed nuclear plant cooling tower spewing water—be prepared to address that particular issue.

5. Always try to testify on a panel so that perhaps the questions get spread around to all the witnesses.
6. Try to meet with as many Committee Members and staffers as possible before the hearing to establish some kind of rapport. Remember that the Members have a job to do but that they are less likely to skewer your witness if they have met beforehand.
7. Your witness can refer to a small number of notes during the hearing but be careful not to have the witness look unprepared. Make sure your witness has an expert sitting next to him who can help out with technical questions.
8. If your company or agency has a relationship with a Member of Congress who is not on the Committee, do your best to have that member come and sit on the dais with the other Members of Congress. The new Member might help you out or they might dampen criticism from the other Members.
9. Hire an outsider to critique the witness. Do not surround your witness with yes men prior to the hearing because the witness will never be prepared for the Congressional fury.
10. Anticipate the question, "What can Congress do to fix the problem?" Be prepared to say what you are doing internally and offer up a few ideas that Congress can legislate to alleviate the problem. It is better to be a part of the solution than to be left out of the room.

## **CONCLUSION**

Crises strike without warning. Preparation, planning and practice can go a long way toward reducing the time your organization is on the front page. Watch what you say. Personalize the tragedy to demonstrate sympathy with and for the victims. Be cautious using numbers. Follow some common sense rules if your organization must appear before Congress. All these approaches will contribute to making the crisis, as difficult as it will be, more manageable and are likely to contribute to minimizing damage to your agency or firm's reputation.

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