

Getting the News Out in Times of Disaster¹

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During late spring 1998, Florida experienced devastating wildfires. The firestorm, caused by severe heat, drought and lightning strikes, was one of the worst wildfire disasters in Floridas history. Nearly 2,300 blazes raged in the state, burning half a million acres, damaging or destroying more than 300 homes, and causing timber losses in excess of \$300 million. More than 10,000 firefighters, representing 47 states, and 150 aircraft battled the blazes. As the wildfires became more severe, local, national, and international reporters descended on Florida to cover the story.

Following the 1998 wildfires, the Governors Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee, a group of state government officials, technical experts, members of the public and other stakeholders, was formed to assess the wildfires and to formulate recommendations on how Florida could better manage its wildfire risk. The committee recognized that "communication during a major disaster has not been adequately improved and remains a critical issue requiring additional effort" (1998, p. 7). In addition, University of Florida researchers conducted a study (1999) to assess how Florida firefighter public information officers perceived their communication effectiveness with reporters during the 1998 wildfires. Questionnaires were sent to public information officers (PIOs) in the

Florida Fire Chiefs Association and to reporters, representing newswire agencies, newspapers, and television and radio stations that were in areas impacted by the wildfires. This fact sheet is based on the recommendations drawn from the Florida firefighter PIO study. However, the recommendations can be generalized to PIOs who communicate with the media during other disaster situations.

"Catering" to Reporters

Overall, Florida firefighter PIOs perceived that they effectively communicated with the media during the 1998 wildfires. Reporters, overall, were slightly less favorable with PIOs communications efforts, and newspaper reporters – in particular – were quite critical of PIOs. This may be a result of their perception that PIOs catered more to the "10 a.m., 3 p.m. and 9 p.m." deadlines of television reporters for the noon, 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. newscasts. Previous studies of disaster coverage have indicated that broadcast media are the primary distributor of immediate news during a disaster. It would follow, then, that PIOs may spend more time with television and radio reporters, because they provide more immediate news to local citizens.

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Local reporters said that PIOs spent more time helping national reporters, when more should have been done to assist the local journalists in providing immediate information to area residents. A PIO mentioned that the “out-of-town” media were more demanding than local reporters. Many PIOs said that part of their job during crises is public relations: showing fire-fighting efforts in action. Providing communications support to local reporters, therefore, would promote this public relations effort in the communities where local and state tax money are used to support firefighters.

Need for Communications Training

Most of the firefighter PIOs in the Florida study had media communication training, experience, or education. Yet, they said they should have had more communication knowledge and skills to better prepare them for the 1998 wildfires. This belief coincides with the recommendations from the report of the Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee (1998). The report noted: "There is a need for comprehensive emergency public information officer training at the state and county level, in cooperation with associations that are capable of dispatching public information officers during an emergency event" (p. 21). One area that should be stressed in training sessions is the need for immediate online information. Although only one PIO mentioned the need for online wildfire-related information, several reporters mentioned its need.

Recommendations for PIOs During Disaster-Related News Coverage

The UF researchers suggested several recommendations on how PIOs can more effectively communicate with the media during a wildfire crisis. The communications-related recommendations below are based on the firefighter PIO study:

Before the Disaster/Crisis

- **Designate a PIO in each emergency relief organization.** The PIO duties could be part of a persons regular emergency relief duties. Having a designated PIO on-staff provides reporters with a central spokesperson in everyday and emergency situations.

- **Organize a “what if” brainstorming session with others in your office.** Come up with "what if" scenarios about potential crisis and disaster situations. Determine steps on how you would respond to the “what if” crises.
- **Have a crisis communication/emergency communication plan before a disaster strikes.** With an emergency communication plan in place, PIOs will be able to respond and perform in a proactive stance, as opposed to a reactive mode, thus better controlling the information and news coverage in a disaster.
- **Select disaster/crisis communication teams.** Who is responsible for communicating with the media during a crisis? Who fields telephone calls? Who makes decisions about what to say to the media? Everyone in your office should know who are on the crisis communication and crisis management teams.
- **Provide all PIOs with communications-related training opportunities.** Emphasize topics PIOs believe to be important when communicating with the media. It is not enough to have a designated PIO on staff; that PIO should be properly trained in communication methods. (Many PIOs are volunteers.) The following topics were identified by Florida firefighter PIOs as necessary in an overall communication training program:
 - Disaster scene preparedness.
 - Crisis communication techniques.
 - Media relations (understanding how the media work).
 - Computer skills, specifically on how to communicate in an on-line environment and how to develop World Wide Web pages.
 - Speaking skills, such as media interviewing techniques and public speaking.
 - Writing skills (news writing and news releases).

- Information-gathering skills.

- **Initiate World Wide Web page development training for PIOs or a designated person on staff.** Reporters and the general public are becoming more adamant about getting almost immediate, online information. Firefighter PIOs did not recognize the need for online information to be strong; however, reporters in the study said otherwise. As much emergency information as possible should be made available on the Web.

During the Disaster/Crisis

- **Gather and classify information into categories, such as *facts* and *rumors*.** Facts should be routinely updated; rumors should be verified or exposed as myths.
- **Cater to local media before national media.** Local reporters will provide immediate, important information to area constituents.
- **Remember newspaper reporters have information needs.** The immediacy of television and radio coverage may have caused PIOs in the firefighters study to provide more resources to television reporters and video photographers. However, newspaper reporters information and photography needs also should be provided for during wildfire coverage.
- **Consider "media pool coverage,"** especially of video footage, and/or media tours to disaster-damaged areas. This should be a standard feature at all emergency command center sites and not change from site to site.
- **Be accessible or designate someone to be accessible to the media at all times.** Reporters should have a contact person's telephone number, cellular phone number, fax number and electronic mail address for around-the-clock contact.
- **Provide necessary resources (cellular phones, laptop computers) to PIOs in the field.**
- **Provide other automated services, such as a 24-hour telephone hotline, for the public to use for emergency updates.**
- **Get the facts.** Miscommunication heightens during a crisis and can be exaggerated by half-truths, distortions, or negative perceptions. Get to the heart of the real story and tell it.
- **Take the offensive when a serious matter occurs. Be active, not reactive. Tell it all; tell it fast.**
- **Deal with rumors swiftly.** Tell only the truth about what you know to be fact. Do not repeat others opinions, hearsay, or possibilities.
- **Centralize information.** Designate one spokesperson. A central spokesperson provides a singular "face" for the reporters. Viewers begin to become familiar with a central spokesperson, so this is one way to begin building credibility with the organization, if the person comes across as trustworthy. Centralized information also will minimize miscommunication.
- **Don't get mad. Don't get mad. Don't get mad.** Keep your cool in an interview or news conference with reporters. Some of their questions may be hostile, and some questions and comments may seem to be a personal attack to you, but remember that they are trying to get information on a crisis-oriented story that may have widespread impact to their audiences. So dont get mad when you are asked the "hard" questions.
- **Stay "on the record" in all interviews.** Do not go "*off the record.*" Any comment worth saying should be said "on the record." If you go "off the record," be ready to read it in print the next day. Is this unethical for reporters to report "off the record" comments? Sure, but anything can, may, and will be done to advance a story. You should not be lured into going "off the record" under any circumstance.
- **No "no comments."** Try to have an answer for reporters questions. But if you dont have an answer, dont be afraid to say, "I dont know, but Ill find out." Saying "no comment" instead, appears to television news viewers and newspaper readers that you have something to hide.

- **Write everything down.** Maintain a crisis communication inventory of what was said by whom and at what time. This way, you will have a record of the event and how it was communicated. You can evaluate your responses so you will be better prepared if another crisis happens in the future.

After the Disaster/Crisis

Dont just sit back and do nothing; you wont be ready for the next disaster or crisis! It is time to evaluate how you handled the crisis. Your review should include the following:

- A review of why the crisis or disaster occurred. Could you have done anything to prevent it?
- An evaluation of how the crisis was handled and communicated. You may want to use the crisis communication inventory you maintained to evaluate how communication was handled. Was information disseminated through one spokesperson? Did miscommunication occur?
- An examination of similar scenarios. What would you do in a similar situation in the future? What did others do in similar situations?

Conclusion

A disaster situation will happen at some point for an emergency relief organization. Taking time now to prepare for a crisis – even if you think it will never occur – and how to communicate to the news media during a crisis is your best defense.

References

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