

## *Working Under Pressure: Crisis Management, Pressure Groups and the Media*

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*An increasing demand made upon crisis managers is that of dealing with various pressure or special interest groups, including members of the media. Pressure groups can stimulate some forms of crisis (for example, the Nestle milk products boycott, the Brent Spar crisis). More usually, pressure groups become visible when a crisis response is invoked. Those dealing with pressure groups need to carefully manage the image of the crisis situation and of the crisis management. This careful management can be accomplished by being seen as open and honest, being consistent in statement and action, making concrete statements based on fact, displaying listening skills and a willingness to positively resolve the issues raised by pressure groups, and by involving members of pressure groups in determining solutions to the issues raised by those in the pressure groups.*

*Media interests act as a pressure group with a single-minded interest in getting interesting and therefore sellable stories. Many crisis and disaster managers see the media as being intrusive and threatening. Scanlon & Alldred (1982) find that the media invade a disaster site and make extensive demands on communication and transport facilities. Those interviewed by the media need to understand the needs and tactics of the media and of other pressure groups the managers may encounter during the course of crisis management.*

All crisis situations involve managing more than a direct physical response effort against some threat. Pressure groups made up of situation-created parties (media, victims, stakeholders) or which existed prior to a crisis load pressure on crisis managers when these groups publicly voice concerns over the morality of actions, safety and lifestyle issues, or treatment of victims and families of victims. The degree to which those in the world outside the crisis situation perceive the crisis situation and crisis management was acceptable depends upon the apparent outcomes from the interaction between crisis respondents and pressure groups. This is particularly true when media broadcasts and interviews are transmitted.

In many ways the acceptability and culpability of crisis management and of the onset of a crisis situation may develop from perceptions held by those attending and being informed about the crisis. Those outside the crisis situation develop their perceptions through the public transmissions made by media groups. As these transmissions develop a picture or image of the situation and of the possible causes and apparent management of the situation in the minds of their audiences, crisis managers need to develop skills in managing the image of the crisis situation presented to media and pressure groups.

## Pressure Groups and Image Management

Pressure groups intentionally or unintentionally place critical scrutiny on the image presented by an organization. Consequently, managers and crisis managers need to acquire skills in managing their interactions with pressure groups. In this sense, image management needs to be proactive rather than reactive as the first image statement made is often the most frequently remembered by those listening, viewing or reading about the organization or situation. Included within image management is the protection of the reputation of the organization (Green, 1992).

How image management will be conducted depends upon each situation and upon the focal interests of the attending pressure groups. One means of determining likely focal interest is to analyse the scrutiny or pressure already being applied or likely to be applied. Six questions help reveal the substance and scope of a scrutiny by pressure groups. These questions are:

1. Who is undertaking the scrutiny?
2. Why are these people or groups of people making this scrutiny?
3. What is their position or goal?
4. Where are they currently making this scrutiny?
5. When are they doing this scrutiny?
6. What are their outcomes for (a) the scrutineers, and (b) those being scrutinised?

The answers to these questions help managers assess the likely pressure points that may be touched by special interest pressure groups or by the media.

Once the likely scope of scrutiny seems adequately identified, a number of tactics and techniques may be used to counterbalance the approaches likely to be used by representatives of those pressure groups. One set of useful tactics that help users appear to be positive and credible include:

- making appropriate personnel available for interaction
- making concrete statements rather than emotional statements
- being seen to be open and honest about the issues
- being seen as being consistent in speech and action, and,
- involving all of the players and stakeholders.

When these tactics are appropriately implemented, the users appear to be empathic and straightforward and thus create positive impressions about their genuineness and willingness to seek solutions among those witnessing the interaction with pressure groups.

**Making the appropriate personnel available for interaction.** Negative impressions are created when those who can best deal with the issues, or who hold the authority needed to explore and resolve the issues, are not present. Such absentees create three specific negative perceptions. The first of these negative perceptions is that those absent from the interaction have something to hide. The second negative perception is that those who are absent from the interaction do not care about the issue(s) and are thus arrogant, distant and dismissive. The third negative perception is formed by expressions of frustration from members of the pressure group when they find that the people with whom they wish to interact are not available. An example of the formation of such negative impressions can be seen in the way Exxon first tried to manage the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The initial low-key media approach adopted by Exxon created a persistent negative image. The sluggish and muted communications presented in the media were seen by many in the public to portray an arrogant and distant company management that did not care about the massive oil spill. This

impression remained, regardless of the amount of time and money subsequently spent by Exxon in showing the scale of Exxon's effort to resolve and clean up the situation.

**Making concrete statements.** Dealing with the stress of interacting with potentially hostile people, with the feelings of uncertainty over what will ensue, and with the ever present possibility that the survival of the organization (and of one's job) may depend on statements made in moments of intense pressure are three of the most difficult elements in meeting people from pressure groups. One coping technique involves using self-presentation skills that allow users to *be seen to listen* to what people say and to *be seen to make a considered response* to what was said. Interaction with pressure groups (particularly by media representatives) may provoke emotional outbursts from members of pressure groups that tend to elicit similar responses from those under scrutiny. Consequently, we need to learn and practice skills that defuse these emotional outbursts and move an interaction toward the use of concrete statements that reduce emotional content and increase factual and situation-specific content.

**Being seen to be open and honest.** Most of us find being open and honest is difficult because of the high risk involved. This is particularly true when confronting any mistakes made. Failure to appear open allows scrutineers to intimate that something is being concealed. What needs to be emphasised is the *being seen* to be open and honest. Users need to work hard to show that openness and honesty is being presented. Managers or organisational representatives can be perceived as being open and honest while still presenting information in a way that creates a positive perception and minimising information that creates any negative impression.

**Being seen to be consistent.** While arguments about what is truth and honesty exist, managers need to be aware that inconsistencies in any presented external image will eventually be highlighted by a scrutineer and inconsistencies in presented internal image and in actions actually undertaken are likely to be exposed by ex-employees or disgruntled employees (including "whistle-blowers"). Managers need to be seen as being consistent in what is said across time and to maintain consistency between what is said and what is seen to be done. Linda McCartney's appearance of being visibly upset when hearing that the actual amount of fat found in her vegetable burgers was greater than the amount of fat stated on the packaging of her product and her quick decision to conduct weekly tests to stop the apparent deception from continuing provides an example of consistency between speech and action that helps managers reduce the impact of a negative image.

**Involve the players and stakeholders.** When pressure groups and their audiences are induced to get involved in resolving the issues raised in an interaction, the pressure and antagonistic interactions they initially seem to exert slowly diminishes. The media pressure group, for example, can be involved when they are permitted access to desired photo opportunities and any dramatic witness or management story. By getting the media involved in deciding how they will cover the permitted access and fairly distribute the collected material, hostility toward those enforcing the restrictions on media access may recede. The same is true for encounters with special interest pressure groups. Shell Oil, for example, belatedly invited groups placing Shell under pressure over the proposed disposal of the Brent Spar oil storage platform to outline what the groups thought could be done. The intense scrutiny of Shell's management of the issue then shifted from the apparent wrong-doing by Shell Oil to the more constructive issue of how to best dispose of the Brent Spar offshore platform. One significant side benefit from involving pressure groups in resolving issues they raise is that an innovative solution could emerge.

By involving pressure groups in resolving the issues they raise the pressure of attention and disapproval can be transferred to the pressure groups. Failure by members of these groups to suggest reasonable and workable solutions tends to make the groups appear negative and simply obstructive agitators.

### **Dealing with Pressure Groups**

Pressure groups usually focus on a single issue, although the issue may be a broad one such as environmental care. Issues adopted by pressure groups include environmental protection, transportation safety, noise abatement, anti-arms trade, anti-racism, anti-smoking, anti- or pro-abortion, being against use of animals for experimentation and testing, anti-pollution, or even getting a specific industry or perceived threat removed from a local community. In this sense, even the media is a single issue pressure group that demands access to information and on-site pictorials that enable media representatives to sell their product. Pressure groups may have nation-wide or world-wide memberships. Over 1,000 pressure groups have memberships that span across national borders, the largest being Greenpeace with over 4 million members.

Tactics employed by pressure groups include passing on damaging information to likely litigants, challenging actions in legal courts, attention-gaining demonstrations and public picketing of premises and access points, devising deliberate incidents that range from obstruction through to violent protests and acts of terrorism, and consumer boycotts. Increasingly, pressure groups are also enlisting support from celebrities, demonstrating at annual general meetings, and threatening the health and safety of users of targeted organizations. Pressure groups employ direct marketing of their single-minded vision and criticisms, opinion poll shaping, photo opportunities, and use stunts that grab public attention. These tactics support a strategy mix of nuisance-making, public visibility, increasing the costs on the targeted organizations, and try to isolate support for their targeted opposition by reinforcing public perceptions that the targeted organization is confrontive and inhuman.

Because media companies can directly shape access to the general public, media tactics are obvious and more direct. Media personnel can selectively highlight certain images or statements, even taking these out of context or simply omitting surrounding text and visuals. Tactics range from an ongoing background pressure or campaign through to high pressure ambush interviews on or near a site of a crisis. Similarly, media representatives can add pressure through emotive pressures that ostensibly address concerns about survivor welfare, safety of community members, and concealment of the "real" facts.

One example of media pressure was illustrated when the search for the wreckage of TWA 800 Boeing flight was being undertaken. This aircraft mysteriously exploded shortly after take-off from Kennedy Airport (New York, USA). The search was conducted over a wide area of stormy seas, with wreckage hundreds of meters deep in the Atlantic Ocean. Concerted media pressure over the apparently short time spent searching for bodies of victims added to the distractions and pressures on investigators and response management. The media directly interviewed family members of victims and shaped questioning toward emotional upsets over what was presented as a callous decision to shift from a search for bodies to a search for wreckage. At the same time, of course, media pressure to explain the reasons for the explosion was also persistent. While the apparently callous discontinuation of searching for bodies was eventually resolved through lengthy explanations about the difficulties being encountered, such distractions and pressures could easily have been removed by better



management of information access for both media and families of victims.

Organizations encountering pressure groups can use a strategy that starts before any pressure group campaign begins. This part of the strategy aims at improving communications with all stakeholders (from those likely to bear the brunt of a protest campaign to those who make up an initially disinterested general public). While such communication needs to appear open and truthful, the information provided may be positively skewed in terms organizational image.

The second part of the strategy aims at reducing any confrontational image presented by the organization staff. Instead of confronting protesters from pressure groups, organizational representatives may offer the groups chairs, umbrellas, food, drink, and even help them demonstrate. Such services to media representatives when combined with ready access to information often keeps those representatives at the site these services are made available.

Many pressure groups find difficulty in coping with non-confrontational behaviours and cooperativeness and tend to either go elsewhere (letting the protest fade) or to be increasingly seen as confrontive and obstructive -- thus losing public support. Managers need to make their interactions with members of pressure groups appear tolerant of multiple opinion, ready and willing to listen to *constructive* opinion, willing to learn, and always polite and sensitive to the issues involved.

Other tactics may be employed when appropriate, although these are may appear manipulative and confrontive. A counter-protest (not necessarily at the same place or time) may be organised using people unwilling to lose jobs or lifestyles that changes pushed by pressure groups may bring about. Where a protest group excludes all news media (or favours a specific few outlet organisations), crisis managers can appear willing to assist any outlet organisation. When a protest group asserts specific points, managers may avoid challenging such assumptions directly by encouraging other *independent* parties to make those challenges.

A third part of the strategy involves selection of a central corrective approach. Here, managers seek to check the authenticity of data and the balance of a protest group's media campaign. A *soft approach* never confronts, but rather contrasts points with counter-points that are presented as pre-emptive points of interest. A *hard approach*, on the other hand, does not confront data or information presented by the other party, but seeks to undermine the credibility assigned that party by the surrounding audience.

The fourth part of the strategy is to adopt a public negotiating stance that appears rational, fair and flexible. Managers need to avoid behind-closed-doors arrangements because these appear secretive and deceptive. Moreover, agreements and assertions made behind closed doors are often denied or retracted in public. Instead, managers need to appear ready and willing to talk *constructively* whenever they are seen in public. This latter approach includes involving the protest groups in the process of finding solutions in a very visible and very public setting. Should the groups join in the search for solutions, they need to provide better input than "don't-want" statements or they risk appearing incompetent and obstructive. Should the group(s) reject involvement in a solution-seeking activity, they appear to be the obstructive, confrontive, and non-constructive party -- and are likely to lose public support. This search for constructive solutions needs to be done with the help of an independent and third-party, otherwise head-to-head involvement dissolves into charges and counter-charges over control, distortion, and unwillingness to cooperate. One example of this approach was made by Nestle to resolve a long running negative campaign in the 1970s over Nestle's seemingly unethical marketing approach to selling infant milk formulas in Asia and Africa.

After trying massive and expensive public relations campaigns, Nestle overcame this scrutiny by inviting all protagonists to become members of a steering committee of an independent research centre funded by Nestle.

Protest groups hold four characteristics that make resolution difficult from the point-of-view of their targeted organizations. First, most members are emotionally committed to the group's cause. This commitment means they will publicly display "missionary" zeal and appear bright, attractive, and as individuals. Second, most groups sell simple solutions which appear attractive because of the apparent ease with which simple solutions can be applied. Third, pressure groups focus on the single issue they hold, whereas members of the organisations they target need to focus not only on the issue(s) raised but on the other goals and activities for which that organisation exists -- such as public good, profit for shareholders, or ensuring safe operations for members of staff and the surrounding community. Fourth, pressure groups stereotypically present themselves as being a small group of earnest individuals who are opposed by impersonal technocratic giants with faceless managers and implacably inflexible organizational mouthpieces. Many pressure groups work hard at appearing individualistic, small, and weak in apparent resources. These groups realise that the resulting public impression of the group being a champion of the public and of being an underdog gains support from a largely unquestioning public.

### **Dealing with Media as a Pressure Group**

Organizations inadequately prepared to handle media interest in the crisis situation and the impacts of that crisis are likely to feel more threatened, isolated, and even develop a siege-mentality. Meyers & Holusha (1986) note "even if all the details may not be right, ... once a company has been identified as the bad guy, the beating is out of all proportion as the media, in their competitive battle, fight for new angles and scoops". Consequently media management and image management emerge as important crisis management concerns with common goals and tactics. As a pressure group, the media has a single-minded focus on selling their products by making their version of the crisis situation and crisis management as interesting as possible to those directly or indirectly buying the product. Given that crisis situations by definition involve loss of control, threats to resources and people, damage from impacts and errors in judgement, interesting storylines will always tend to be what went wrong rather than what went right because of the obviously greater dramatic values involved.

Harold Stuart, the Crisis Coordinator for managing the response to the earthquake for Newcastle City Council (Australia, 1989) found that:

*The local media responded well in the first few days while the "outside" media tended to sensationalise the situation. Much of the misinformation may have been avoided if the Council's media response had been set up immediately.* p. 20

This perception of media "sensationalising" events is a view commonly held by crisis respondents. Stuart also indicates a possible outcome from being unready to manage information when a crisis happens: misinformation emerges, gets reported, and becomes "fact".

Scanlon and Alldred (1982) find that the media tend to invade a disaster site and make extensive demands on the available communication and transport facilities. Crisis managers consequently need to plan on how to cope with such media presence and to practice managing the resource demands likely to arise from such invasions. (1991) make similar claims. In the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry disaster (Zeebrugge, 1987), Pijenburg and Van Duin find that:

*Shortly after the news of the disaster got round, a number of local 'free lance' photographers had arrived on the scene. Some of them succeeded in climbing aboard tug-boats that carried a rescue team and headed for the wreck. Soon other journalists invaded the working harbour's landing stage where the survivors of the disaster were put ashore. They seriously hindered the work of the emergency services and regularly the police had to intervene to clear the way. p. 65*

The presence of the media and their apparent pressure for graphic human-interest storylines creates a siege mentality in many crisis response personnel and to victims of the crisis. Media and response managers can become antagonistic. Part of the reason for this antagonism is that most crisis plans ignore the fact that media will be present in numbers at visible disasters and crises.

Poor media management can destroy an organization. One element in the demise of a smallgoods company in Adelaide, Australia, was the lack of media management when the company encountered a crisis. When a young girl died from E-Coli food poisoning (and another twenty cases of food poisoning had to be hospitalised), the dramatic pathos presented by media reports aroused public sympathy. On being identified as a likely source of the food poisoning, the attention of the media (or media action as an accusing pressure group) was met with denials, accusations that pointed blame to other sources, locked doors, aggressively stated "no comments", and even use of water from firehoses to force media representatives away from the premises of the company. The resulting negative image was that the managers of this company were uncaring people who shirked their responsibility. Eventually, being unable to trade and having little reputation remaining, the company was officially ended.

Like other pressure groups, the media can adopt the easier position of maintaining a single interest in a crisis while crisis managers and organizations caught up in a crisis have multi-faceted responsibilities and concerns distracting their attention. Where respondents to a crisis see their job as being that of containing and resolving the crisis and of reducing the risks of loss or damage to people or property, the media see their job as finding and presenting stories that raise revenue for their respective organizations. Sherman (1989) points out that "news organizations earn their keep by producing stories that attract audiences, and thus advertisers" (p. 57). The product being sold is the paper, radio or television station or company, and not the reported crisis situation or crisis management.

While the individual reports from media representatives and the slants adopted in these reports cannot be controlled by crisis managers and their organizations, the overall output and content produced by the aggregate of media sources can be managed by providing plenty of usable and factual information, by controlling access to major (and expert) sources of information, and by presenting a positive and accurate storyline. A number of tactics can be used by managers to help establish this storyline.

### **Eight Tactics to use in Dealing with Media Pressure**

**Control where the media may go.** The bigger and more physically visible the crisis, the more media members will become difficult to manage. This fact arises from to three circumstances. First, the media have more lines of physical approach. Second, members of the media will seek to differentiate their storyline, and thus seek different angles, personalities, and storylines. Third, the larger the crisis site, the less control can be exerted by response managers. The general rule of thumb for managers is to control the journalists on the site by determining and policing where the media can and cannot go. This works well in tightly

specified localities, or when the crisis event arises in a secured zone. The Chernobyl Incident (1986) and the Gulf War (1991) provide good examples of these situations. When this form of control fails or when the site is too large to police, then an alternative rule-of-thumb is to screen the respondents and victims from the media attention. This can be done by erecting screens and using portable shelters, and by providing transport to and from the crisis site(s). Screening of victims and respondents reduces invasion of privacy and allows them to collect their emotions and thoughts, and become calmer and less distracted. At the same time such screening also places information access under greater crisis management control.

**Dealing with Field or Ambush Situations.** Media organizations like to gain off-the-cuff or street interviews for three reasons. First, the media and media members appear to be active in "chasing down the story". Second, the resulting interaction between media representative and an often hurrying and harried looking interviewee makes good actuality content for media stories. Third, the media members may get a "scoop" over other media organizations and representatives, particularly should the target for interviewing make any unconsidered responses. Interviewees undergoing street or off-the-cuff questioning are more likely to make unconsidered responses, as these comments are likely to be less rehearsed and less considered than those made in formal arrangements such as found in media conferences.

One rule of thumb is to refuse to get caught in informal or ambush interactions. If necessary, find alternate routes or seek a protective screen made up by other people or assistants. Should this fail, have three statements prepared. The first statement indicates a readiness to communicate but a plausible inability to do so (not enough facts, legal impediments from outside authorities): *I really would like to discuss with you what has happened today. At this point, however, we need to be more certain of our facts before further comment than was made in our [press release, media conference] held earlier.* The second statement emerges after persistent questioning on technical issues and reflects concern for people threatened or harmed by the crisis: *Again, I would like to discuss the causes of what has happened. At this stage, however, I am more concerned about those affected by this crisis and in getting something done to help them.* The third statement is made after further persistent questioning, usually at a point from which the interviewee can exclude the interviewers (by driving off in a car, or at an entry or exit point through which the interviewers cannot move): *This really is an issue which needs more attention than we can give here. Perhaps you can raise this matter at our next press conference which will be held at [place] at [time].* This third statement acknowledges the question, deflects an answer by acknowledging the importance of the question as being too big for instant answers, then helpfully indicates where and when such information may be made available. These are more effective statements than making use of "no comment" responses, or making awkward and often defensive sounding responses, or trying to ignore the questions and questioners. Many media organizations have experienced editors and interview teams who can make a silent or squirming target look guilty and "on the run", and who can make a "no comment" response appear to be a cover-up should they wish to do so.

**Shape the questions toward those issues to which you desire to respond.** The major advice for *media questions* is for those being questioned to know what they want to talk about and to be prepared to direct the interview to those points they wish to make. This can be done by rephrasing the question ("I think what you are trying to ask is ...") or by bridging from a weak response to a strong response ("While I need more information to fully respond to that, I can point out that what we are doing at this moment is ...").



**Make general statements to the media contain clear and concise information** (concrete statements) Effective media messages contain four elements:

- a concise and clear outline on why the statement is being made and what has happened,
- a comment that shows human interest in (be it concern or happiness) and an understanding of the impact the event covered by the press release may have on people,
- a succinct yet clear statement on what has been done, what is *currently* being done, and what is intended to be done in the future, and,
- a clear and full statement on how and where to gain more specific information, and, where and when any media conference will be held.

Try to compress important information in these elements into 15 to 30 second "bites" as these bites are more likely to be used in later media transmissions or quotes.

**Appear to be open and honest and deal with concrete "facts" and not with assumptions.** Any attempt at misinformation in a media conference will get uncovered eventually, and once misinformation is uncovered, *all* the information and presentations will become suspect. Essentially, interviewees need to focus on what is seen as correct, true, and fact, no matter how negative these may appear for them or their organization. Interviewees can word these facts and "truth" in terms that best suit themselves and their organizations.

**Remain calm, open to questions, and speak as a person not as a mouthpiece.** Personalise any comments or statements, so long as this does not conflict with the goals held by the organization and/or crisis management effort (consistency). Show concern for what is happening, express feelings appropriate to the information being conveyed, and seem alert and ready to be open and helpful. Note that media audiences often believe they can sense genuineness and openness and can reject seemingly hostile approaches adopted by media representatives when a presenter seems honest and open. Mentioning one's compassion and feelings of dismay and concern over the effects of a crisis can make any further critical questioning from the media appear out of order and insensitive.

**Use four rules-of-thumb in responding to questions.** *One*, avoid saying "no comment" as such responses appear to be attempts at concealing information. Instead, try rephrasing the question or bridging across to safer areas of interest. One can even be honest and admit that insufficient information exists for factual comment, or that due to current legal obligations that question cannot be answered. *Two*, avoid misrepresentation: tell the truth as is currently known. *Three*, avoid speculation. When asked to speculate on alternative scenarios or practices, choose to (a) refuse to offer a speculative response, or (b) point out other speculative scenarios and then conclude that speculation is consequently not helpful, or (c) acknowledge that the speculative approach outlined by the questioner is interesting and worth considering given time, resources, and a more predictable situation -- none of which was (is) available. *Four*, avoid trying to assign blame to organizations or people. When questioned about possible culpability, state that such judgements are not the province of a media conference, that all the facts are being examined by the appropriate authorities, and that such speculation distracts from the current effort of managing and resolving the crisis.

**Avoid clashes with the media.** Any accusations of reporting bias or personality clashes with specific members tends to coalesce the assembled media into a negative perception of the conference, as well as providing interesting reports that do not contribute to informing the outside public about the crisis and crisis management. The media companies ultimately control the outflow of information, and can highlight any apparent attitude or behaviour through selective editing.

## Conclusion

Unless organizations provide adequate, interesting and truthful information, the media will seek their coverage elsewhere. Well controlled and managed conferences can reduce tensions arising from the different points-of-view held by media and responding or affected organizations. Should the media create positive images about the management of a crisis, then poor or even bad management may simply be labelled "they did the best they could". Should the media focus on negative images, then even the best management of a crisis is likely to end with calls for governmental and legal enquiries, and be seen by the public as questionable and "not good enough". Organizations likely to face crisis situations need to emphasize planning and training for media interactions.

Many of these recommendations apply to other pressure groups. The key to dealing with pressure groups is to appear calm and flexible while undertaking positive responses to the situation and the issues being raised. By appearing positive, calm, and ready to try to understand the views being expressed by members of pressure groups, and by involving these members in identifying and implementing solutions for the issues they raise, much of the impact of their scrutiny may be reduced. Ultimately, key managers will need training and practice in undertaking these actions and in avoiding making emotional outbursts provoked by apparent hostility and the increase in demands upon their attention and their time.

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