

## SAY WHAT YOU MEAN

**AND MEAN WHAT YOU SAY**

In a crisis, every second counts. You must be as fast as you can with your media reply, news conference or public statement while not sacrificing factual accuracy.

However, maybe more important than timing, you must pay close attention to what you say. Every word that you or your spokesperson utter, put out electronically or on paper, must be meaningful and have purpose. Every sentence, every word, every phrase will be carefully scrutinized by all of your audiences, especially the media. If you are not clear in what you say, or worse if you purposely obfuscate (look it up!) the facts of the situation at hand, your credibility will be lost.

(You will note what I did in that last sentence. Obfuscate is not a word used in common everyday conversation. If you looked it up, you saw that it means “to make unclear; confuse”

But when you read it, you might have thought, “What a jerk! Why didn’t he just tell me what the word means, instead of telling me to look it up? Why didn’t he just use a different word that everybody knows, so we all could have understood the sentence better?”)

That is my point exactly!

Sometimes in a crisis, even with a good crisis plan, those involved, to use a sports term, may “choke.” In spite of all the best devised plans, when the situation becomes yours to deal with, sometimes people forget the plan and do whatever pops into their head at the moment. This includes using large words, or technical jargon to try to confuse their audiences in order to deflect some of the blame or criticism. Please resist any urge to do so and speak clearly and to the point.

Some examples. In the last year there was a well-publicized incident in which an airline passenger was forcibly dragged off the plane because of an overcrowding situation. The first statement from the airline’s president apologized for having to “re-accommodate these customers.” Re-accommodate??! A passenger was seriously injured in this incident. It was well documented by the cellphones of numerous passengers. Yet the first statement from the president talked about “re-accommodating.” To the president’s credit, he put out a second statement apologizing to the passenger, those on the flight, took responsibility and promised to work to see that this never happens again.

The problem with this is, if the airline and its president had made the second statement first, we probably still wouldn’t be talking about it in columns like this. Say what you mean. Mean what you say

In a more recent incident, a well-known beer company issued a recall because of something they initially called a “packaging flaw.” What was the “flaw” you ask? Well, apparently pieces of glass could flake off and end up in the beer. Now if you happened to drink one of these affected bottles of beer, and ingested any of those glass pieces, I dare say you would find this much more than a “packaging flaw”.

If the company had come out and said “Due to a manufacturing

problem, particles of glass may break off in a small number of our bottled beer products. To ensure the safety of all our customers we are issuing a voluntary recall on the following products.....”

That statement is direct and to the point. If you read it, any reasonable individual could assume that a “flaw” must have occurred. But when you blame a packaging flaw in your initial statement it sounds like you are trying to avoid, or worse, ignore, the seriousness of the situation. Say what you mean. Mean what you say.

During a crisis, a company sometimes finds itself in bigger trouble by trying to “massage” the truth. When this is brought to light, and make no mistake about it, the truth *will* be found out, your organization will now be viewed as dishonest and deceitful and your audiences will have a hard time believing any other public statements you make.

Your audiences have long memories when it comes to being lied to. Once you have lost your credibility, it is very hard, if not impossible, to get it back.

So, what should you do? What should you say? If you find yourself in a crisis, think back to that old-time police show in which the detective wanted “just the facts.”

When you have confirmed enough information to make a statement, this is how you should craft your message:

- Here’s what happened
- Here’s why it happened (if known)
- Acknowledgment of fault (if in fact you were at fault)
- Here’s what we are doing to help those affected
- Here’s what we are doing to prevent future occurrences.

When you are straight with the facts, your audiences may not like what you have to say, but they will at least appreciate the fact that you are being straightforward in saying it. Good luck!

As always, if you have questions, I would love to hear from you. And, if you have some examples of how your crisis communications worked well, I would be happy to share some success stories in this column.

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