

Case 9-2 A Classic: Bhopal—A Nightmare for Union Carbide

In effective handling of a crisis, preparation and anticipation are key considerations. Managing issues means intercepting the ninety percent that are self-inflicted. Crises may be created in any of the following manners:

- Maintaining irresponsible policies
- Failing to monitor internal activities
- Not applying sound response strategies when faced with criticism
- Failing to allocate adequate resources and priority to anticipating issues

And, of course, sometimes crises will occur even when all possible preparations have been made.

When an issue escalates, it may become a crisis. A crisis is defined as a highly stressful struggle or conflict within an adversarial environment. It is marked by a potentially damaging turning point that could result in financial or mortal disaster—after which things will never be the same.

Effective communication is an essential part of trying to control any crisis situation. It is the responsibility of the company or organization to provide information about what is happening, the effects it will have on numerous publics, and what the company plans to do to resolve the situation. The questions most asked by the publics involved are:

1. What exactly has happened?
2. Why was information about the crisis not released sooner?
3. What could have been done to prevent it from happening?

When a crisis hits, its effects are felt throughout an organization. The atmosphere is emotionally unstable and forces those involved to react quickly and sometimes without thinking of long-term ramifications, even if there is some sort of anticipatory plan in place.

The focus of this case (as well as Case 9-3) is the analysis of a major industrial corporation and how it anticipated and managed its crisis—or, you be the judge, how it failed to do so.

History

In December of 1984, Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), a chemical manufacturer, was the 37th-largest industrial organization in the United States.¹ The chain of events that occurred on December 2 and 3 in Bhopal at Union Carbide India, Ltd. (UCIL), dramatically affected UCC.

UCC had incorporated UCIL in 1934 to manufacture UCC's products in India. After India gained its independence from Britain in 1947, the government began to push for greater ownership in the country's businesses.

According to J. J. Kenney, the director of federal government affairs (now retired), construction of the Bhopal plant in 1977 was controlled by the regulations of the Indian government. After UCC gave the preliminary designs to the Government of India (GOI) and the GOI approved them, UCIL took over the final design and construction of the plant. The GOI approved the

¹Our thanks to Union Carbide for providing us with a wealth of information for this case.

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plant design when the facility was built and monitored construction.²

The government wanted the plant to be as labor-intensive as possible—in order to provide needed employment—so UCIL had not installed the computer systems in use at UCC plants in the United States to monitor operations.

By the time of the Bhopal tragedy, UCC had reduced its share of ownership to 50.9 percent, while the Indian government and private citizens owned the other 49.1 percent. Plant operations were managed solely by Indians.

The Crisis Hits

At about 11:30 P.M. on December 2, a leak in one of the valves was discovered by employees at the plant. The leak was detected after a report that the eyes of some employees were tearing from irritation. At approximately 12:15 A.M. a control room operator reported an increase in tank pressure. The tank contained liquefied methyl isocyanate (MIC), a lethal pesticide. A safety valve ruptured and released excess liquid into an adjacent tank, where a caustic soda solution should have neutralized the chemical. This neutralization did not occur.

In the case of an emergency, the safety system was supposed to flash (instantaneously light and burn) any escaping gas to prevent it from entering the outside atmosphere. This system was not operating, and 40 tons of deadly gas poured into the neighboring community.

Theories as to how the leak had occurred were many and widespread. One popular theory reported extensively in the newspapers was that an employee had failed to follow correct procedures and

thus started the reaction that released the MIC gas: It wasn't until 1½ years later that investigators found that an employee had sabotaged the tanks by deliberately connecting a water hose to the MIC tanks (see Figure 9-1).

Death in the Community

Many residents in the area thought UCIL manufactured *kheti ki dawai*, a harmless medicine for the crops. In reality, the chemical-turned-gas was lethal to humans because it formed liquid in the lungs of its victims. While some died in their sleep, others drowned from the liquid in their lungs while running through the streets looking for help.

Official estimates stated that 1,700 residents were killed. In addition, 3,500 were hospitalized and 75,000 were treated for injuries sustained from exposure to the gas. Death figures range from anywhere between 1,700 to 4,000. It was also estimated that 60,000 people will require long-term respiratory care. These figures earned it the designation as “the worst industrial disaster ever.”³

Many of those killed were living in shantytowns constructed illegally near the plant. UCIL had repeatedly requested that these be moved from the area. Instead of requiring the people in these illegal shantytowns to move, the Indian government changed the law to make it legal for them to be so close to the plant.

UCC Policies Broken

The magnitude of disaster at the Bhopal facility was partly attributed to the many breakdowns in its safety equipment (see Figure 9-2). The plant would poorly repair or

²Lee W. Baker, *The Credibility Factor*, Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1993, p. 48.

³Ibid., p. 45.

Union Carbide and Bhopal

Setting the Record Straight on Employee Sabotage and Efforts to Provide Relief

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT BHOPAL? Since the tragedy in December 1984, Union Carbide Corporation's primary concern has been with providing relief and assistance to the victims, and determining how the incident happened. Generally, initial details and subsequent news reports and books have contained a great deal of erroneous information. New information uncovered during an on-going investigation has led UCC to the conclusion that the tragedy was caused by employee sabotage and that there was a cover-up afterwards by certain operators on duty that night.



FIGURE 9-1 Union Carbide published a brochure that illustrated its hypothesis as to how the tragedy in Bhopal happened. Shown here is "Setting the Record Straight on Employee Sabotage and Efforts to Provide Relief"

Source: (Courtesy of Union Carbide.)

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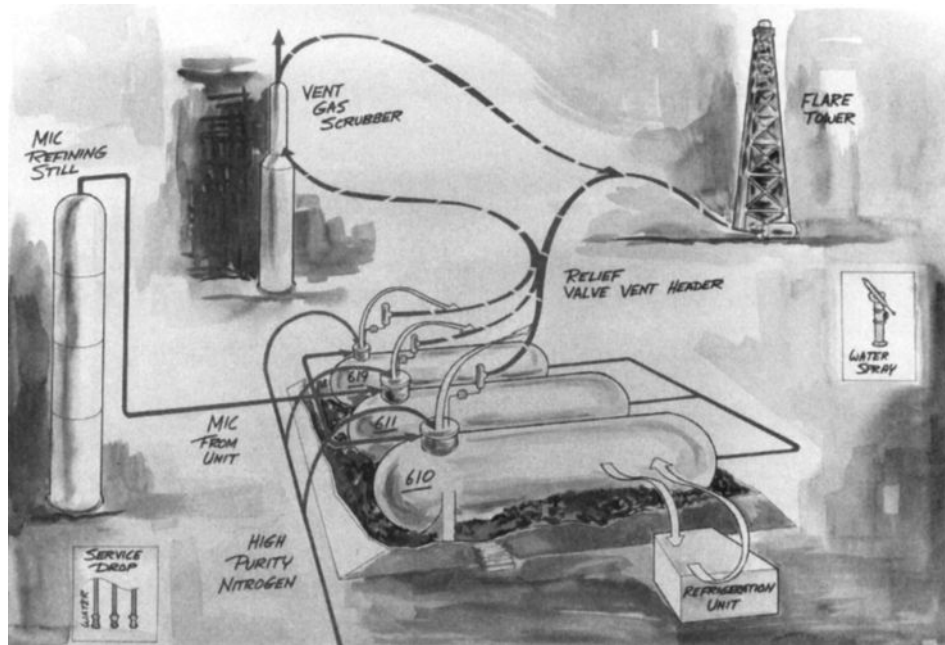


FIGURE 9-2 A diagram of the system setup at the UCIL plant in Bhopal

Source: (Courtesy of Union Carbide.)

simply shut off malfunctioning equipment. Both of these actions are serious violations of UCC policy. The following inconsistencies contributed to the conditions during the emerging crisis:

- A cooling unit was shut down months before the incident. Policy stated that this unit must remain functioning to prevent overheating.
- A flare tower, designed to flash escaping gases, had been out of service for six days.
- A scrubber (an apparatus used for removing impurities from gases), which was to be continuously running, had been down for two months.
- The warning system was inadequate for the tasks that the plant was performing. There were no alarms, no employee drills, no public education, and so on.

Communications Difficulties

From the beginning, UCC encountered problems in addressing public concerns because of the physical communication difficulties it encountered:

- *In an international incident such as Bhopal, communication difficulties can be caused not only by physical boundaries but also by cultural ones.* UCC communicators in the United States from the beginning tried to be open and candid. However, UCIL officials in India were advised by legal counsel not to communicate.
- *Bhopal, a city of 750,000, had only two international telephone lines serving the city. This situation hampered any communications that were necessary.* Because of this obstacle, UCC was receiving the bulk of its information from media reports.

- *The company's communication specialists who were put on this case found it extremely difficult to obtain reliable information from India.*
- *The Bhopal facility failed to educate the community.* Death could have been avoided if the citizens had been instructed to place a wet cloth over the face. Most of the deaths that occurred were the old and the young because their lungs could not withstand the poison.
- *Communications management for UCC in the United States was among the last to know about the incident.* Hours after the incident, Edward Van Den Ameele, former UCC press relations manager and officer on duty, received a call at 4:30 A.M. at his home from a reporter from CBS radio. The reporter was calling for a reaction to the pesticide leak. This was the first that Van Den Ameele had heard of it.
- *The plant manager of the Indian subsidiary had no background in communication, let alone crisis management.* He told a local official that "this will probably have no ill effect."

UCC Accepts Moral Responsibility

UCC did have a domestic crisis plan, but what happened in Bhopal was unimaginable for all. The initial reactions of UCC executives in the United States were humanitarian ones. Within hours of hearing the news of the chemical leak and what limited information was available, CEO Warren Anderson declared he was traveling to India to serve as the immediate supervisor of the situation and offer any assistance that the company could contribute. UCC also announced it would cease producing MIC until the cause of the explosion was known. Anderson

announced that UCC would be open with the public and the media.

Unfortunately, communication was poor in Bhopal as well. While the Indian government had assured Anderson that he could travel safely there, when he arrived he was placed under "house" arrest for charges of "culpable homicide." In addition, he was faced with the challenge of conducting communications in an area that displayed an emotionally gripping scene.

UCC declared that it accepted moral responsibility for the tragedy. One week later, UCC offered \$1 million to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, which was accepted. Four months later it offered another \$5 million in humanitarian aid to the Indian government. In this instance it was refused. UCC then offered the money to the Red Cross to disburse to those who needed it in India—and that was turned down for more than a year.

The Aftermath of Bhopal

After the Bhopal incident and the intense scrutiny and criticisms UCC received from the public and the media, UCC also faced a hostile takeover attempt by GAF Corporation. UCC defeated this attempt by selling off its consumer products businesses and paying a special distribution to shareholders. This sale began UCC's efforts to focus on its core chemicals and plastics businesses and the subsequent sale of other non-core businesses. By the early-to-mid 1990's, Union Carbide had regained a positive image on Wall Street.

UCC poured money into its safety systems and supervisory procedures, some analysts said too much, according to *The Wall Street Journal*.⁴ Maintenance practices that should have taken 30 minutes began to take three or four hours to complete. Even CEO Robert D. Kennedy (replacing Anderson in 1986) conceded that the same

⁴"Wounded Giant: Union Carbide Offers Some Sober Lessons in Crisis Management," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 1992.

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM BHOPAL

According to Union Carbide's Public Affairs Department, UCC learned four very important lessons from the Bhopal incident.*

1. It is important to be *open and candid* in every message prepared to deal with a situation. Attempts to shield information are immediately picked up by the public.
2. In the event of a huge crisis, *make immediate use of existing programs that are*

* *pr reporter*, April 23, 1990.

identified with the organization and accentuate their strengths.

3. Don't forget secondary stakeholders. In addition to employees and the media, you must consider shareholders, federal, state and local government officials, customers and retirees.
4. Don't underestimate cultural differences that may exist in a crisis that involves multinational operations.
5. Each crisis is different—*there is no formula for dealing with them.*

safety levels were achieved at some of his rivals' plants, while spending a fraction of the cost incurred by UCC.

As for the legal outcome of the Bhopal tragedy, UCC settled Indian civil suits in 1989 for \$470 million. The Indian courts

recommended and the GOI did seek extradition of former UCC CEO Anderson to India to face charges for culpable homicide. However, in September 2004, the U.S. Justice Department refused to extradite Mr. Anderson to India. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As indicated from the Bhopal disaster, Union Carbide India, Ltd., did nothing to prepare the community for any potential hazard that could have and did occur. What are some proactive actions or programs that UCIL could have implemented in order to avoid the fatal tragedy that occurred? What is the public relations role in them, if any?
2. Compare Bhopal with the Responsible Care program (Case 4-1). What part do you think the differing cultures and governments in the United States and India played in the Bhopal tragedy?
3. From all appearances, it seems that UCC was innocent of any direct causes of the Bhopal tragedy. Yet the company was all but destroyed by it. Did public opinion actually cause this near destruction? Might it have been caused by company overreaction or feelings of guilt? If not these, then what were the causes?

Case 9-3 A Classic: When Positive Actions Don't Result in Positive Perceptions

On March 24, 1989, the *Exxon Valdez* struck Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound,¹ releasing 11 million gallons of crude oil (one-fifth of its cargo) into the sea.² This incident created a crisis of epic proportions for Exxon. The mission was to clean 1,300 miles of shoreline, approximately 15 percent of the area's 9,000 miles of shoreline, and restore the area to its original condition. In 1992, after the completion of successful and extensive cleanup efforts, a federal on-scene coordinator (the U.S. Coast Guard) declared the cleanup complete saying, "Further shoreline treatment would provide no net benefit to the environment." The State of Alaska confirmed these findings. However, the damage for Exxon did not end with the termination of cleanup efforts. What was the real problem?

Perceptions, Not Facts; Actions, Not Words

Although it was only the 34th largest oil spill at that time, it goes on record as one that people will remember the most. In one study, the *Exxon Valdez* remains one of the most remembered corporate crises.³ Environmentalists have perceived it as limitless in damage even though there are few remaining signs of the spill. Many have characterized the accident as civilization once again trouncing on nature in order to reap the benefits of its limited resources and associate it with the deaths of many birds, otters, and other aquatic life.

In reality, the Alaskan food chain has survived (see Figure 9-3). Pink salmon harvests set records in 1990 and 1991.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

- Develop a crisis communication plan in advance to handle any situation; determine exactly how and what key publics will be instructed to do in case of an emergency.
- Conduct research to discover information that is not readily available.
- Insist that all company operations be monitored regularly. A crisis that results because of operational failure without these preparations will surely cause the company to lose credibility.

¹This case was developed from a case study authored by two University of Central Florida students, Fred Forlano and Greg Lorenz, under the direction of Frank Stansberry, who retired from UCF in 2006.

²Lee W. Baker, *The Credibility Factor*, Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1993, p. 38.

³*pr reporter*, July 12, 1993.

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FIGURE 9-3 Exxon published a series of reports about the aftermath of the *Valdez* oil spill and its effect on Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska. Shown here is a report entitled “Three Years After” from October 1992

Source: (Courtesy of Exxon Company, U.S.A.)

Tourism has rebounded strongly and so have Exxon’s profits. It appears that the only thing severely damaged was the company’s reputation. Those who remember it perceive it as a disaster that was poorly handled by Exxon.

How Did These Perceptions Develop?

Today, the spill has been cleaned up and Exxon is thriving as it was previously, but the residual effects of the ordeal linger.

From the beginning, Exxon concentrated on emphasizing cleanup efforts rather than addressing the public perception that it

didn’t do enough, soon enough (see Figure 9-4). This emphasis was apparent from the moment that CEO Lawrence G. Rawl entered the picture. Unfavorable media comparisons were made of Rawl with the positive images of James Burke of Johnson & Johnson and his handling of the Tylenol incident (see Case 6-3). He was characterized as opposed to serving as a spokesperson, or even publicly showing interest, because he remained in New York until two days after the spill. When he finally entered the scene, he presented himself as rigid and aggressive, not bowing to the groups that opposed him or to the media. His inflexibility may have cost him

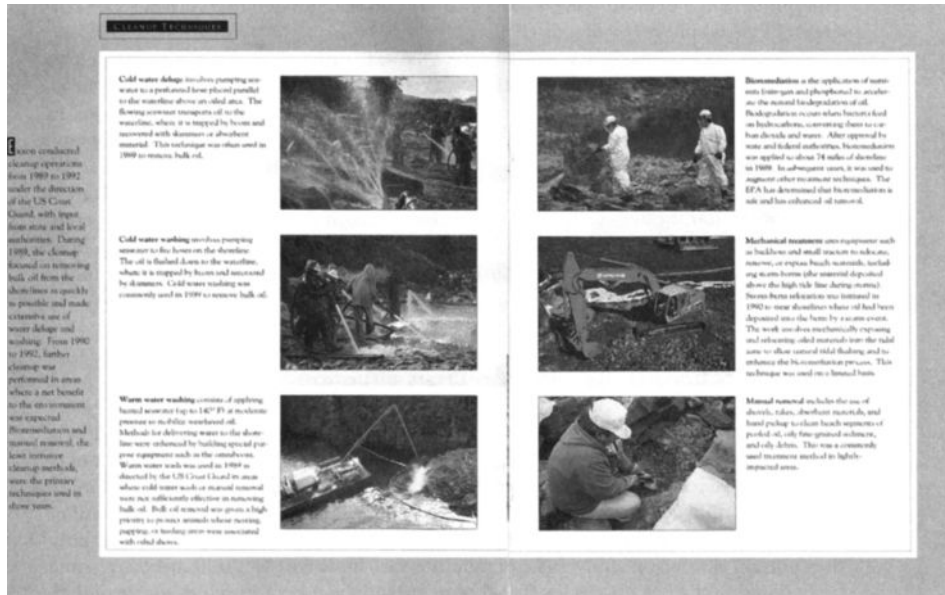


FIGURE 9-4 Exxon used many techniques in order to clean up the shoreline along Prince William Sound in Alaska

Source: (Courtesy of Exxon Company, U.S.A.)

opportunities to seek positive relationships with the various publics.⁴

When Exxon designated a location for a crisis center, the company created another situation that conflicted with its goals. It staffed the media center in Port of Valdez. Information was often slow in coming, and communication lines to Port of Valdez became jammed with information inquiries from media. It was also hard for management in New York to get information.

Another problem hampering Exxon's credibility was that it did not address how the public was perceiving the spill and its effects. It focused primarily on the *facts* concerning cleanup efforts and let *impressions* about long-term effects on the region form on their own. These facts consisted of dollar

amounts, size of work force, and stories about the confusion they had to overcome to begin the process. The public, knee deep in "green issues," found no reassurance that Alaska's vast natural regions would recover.

For legal reasons, it was difficult for Exxon to show remorse or even admit to the environmental ramifications of the crisis. It did not realize the significance of visual images and the emotional response they evoked. Media images of animals in distress were displayed often and increased negative perceptions of the company. Exxon's credibility and reputation were being strongly questioned at this time.

Exxon's full-page apology ads on April 3, 1989, were badly timed and plagued with conflicting messages. They claimed that,

⁴When Rawl was asked later why he did not become more of a force in the crisis communications, Rawl replied that "his first instinct was to head to Alaska . . . but he was swayed by his colleagues' arguments that he would 'just get in the way.'" From Lee Baker, *The Credibility Factor*, Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1992, p. 41.

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“Exxon has moved swiftly and competently to minimize” the damage. In the *same* papers, front pages reported how slowly the company had been in starting the cleanup, with a specific list of unflattering reasons why. The actual “we’re sorry statement” appeared in the last paragraph, vastly minimizing readership in today’s sound-bite world.⁵

Communications Is the Hub of a Crisis Situation

Exxon became the scapegoat for all environmental causes. CEO Rawl served as a prime example of stereotypical negative perceptions of the corporate executive. Topics discussed in the media portrayed Exxon as being money-focused and inhuman. How could a company so vast have such poor crisis communication planning? Hadn’t they learned by other companies’ examples what they should do and how they should act during a crisis? Remembering that hindsight is 20/20, here are some basic communication principles that Exxon should have kept in mind before and after the *Valdez* ran aground.

- Develop a plan that will construct a positive image. Or at least try not to create a situation that will put you two steps back.
- Exxon could have spent more time emphasizing the personal commitment being made, rather than the processes involved and the \$2.5 billion spent on cleanup.
- Conduct media research to discover the realities of opinions conveyed to the public. Are the messages strong, or do they have gaps that you can fill with your own information? Whose side is the media on? What are they saying to whom? Where are they getting their information, and is it accurate?

In addition, conducting gap research (gap research measures the gap between reality and expectations of an audience) with publics would have been fruitful.

- Attempt to establish credibility by being honest and personable with the public. If Rawl was not an effective spokesperson, he could have been replaced with someone who had the training and experience. The faces and images the public saw on television were the ones that are associated with Exxon.

Much like UCC in the Bhopal case (Case 9-2), Exxon needed to make certain that all information was accurate, consistent, and complete. Cases like this illustrate why candor is the best policy. Reveal what is being done and why. Convey what is known and when it became known. Don’t let the media find out for themselves. Exxon did not follow these basic guidelines when cleanup efforts halted for the winter in September of 1989. Rather than telling the public that because of weather limitations, cleanup would prove fruitless, Exxon simply discontinued efforts for the season. Cleanup continued until the federal on-scene coordinator and state declared it complete in 1992, but the public did not completely understand the cleanup process. They needed someone to explain it to them, and *it could have been Exxon*.

When it comes to the source of communication, make certain that the spokesperson is qualified, with proper crisis communication training. Shooting from the hip should be avoided, and a clear message should be sent at all times. Providing the image of sympathy and remorse, complemented with sincerity, may have saved Exxon’s reputation and, in turn, made the future seem brighter for all the parties involved.

A plan that defines all necessary contacts and a proposed sequence of events could have

⁵*pr reporter*, April 17, 1989.

been developed. A spill of any variety would involve the media, state and local governments, environmental groups, and internal and external publics. The support of employees is crucial. At a time when it is difficult to reach the spokesperson, the media often will create their own in a security guard or a technician.

The cleanup effort was not effectively coordinated with the efforts of all groups involved. No one knew what each group should do or when. Observers felt that both of these aspects should have been considered and put into the crisis plan as well. Even if a plan was not in place, as soon as the smoke cleared Exxon could have been initiating the coordination of communications and development of a strategy and plan with all pertinent groups.

A better understanding of how the media works in relation to delivering a prescribed message to different publics would also have been beneficial. As mentioned earlier, the public can and will sympathize with helpless animals. A good portion of media attention was given to oil-covered birds vividly depicted on television and in magazines. Even journalists said at the time that it would have been more sensible for Exxon to divert this attention by devising *proactive* programs the media could focus on. Because hard news sells, a program of hard-hitting environmental programs and principles could have been implemented. This strategy could have made the media a channel for communicating to the public

that Exxon was aware of and cares about the environment and its inhabitants.

Lessons Learned

Issue anticipation is the key to averting many crises. Some top management advisers insist that positive leadership is the only way to develop positive relationships. They believe that to think negatively would not be consistent with their goals or beneficial to the company. Exxon learned that even a very large company has a malleable reputation that can change in an instant.

Exxon was forced to realize that perceptions control reputation. In relation to other oil companies, Exxon's cleanup and spill control plan was reportedly top-of-the-line. However, by communicating specifics about the cleanup process, rather than the effects the spill would have on the environment, the company was not addressing the issues of concern. Displaying emotion and remorse for the outcome could have created a positive image of Exxon in the public's eye.

The hard lesson learned is that *anticipation*, while it may not prevent a crisis, certainly makes the road a little less bumpy. Ignoring possible situations that may occur, be they positive or negative, can lead to reputation and relationship disruptions that continue for years. An organization must be forward-thinking in order to survive in our volatile world. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As evidenced by the Exxon case, perceptions speak louder than the actual facts. Can you think of anything more that Exxon could have done to avoid this public relations disaster and salvage its soiled reputation? Can you think of any proactive measures Exxon should take now to repair battered relationships with publics still disgruntled with the company?
2. Exxon received a blow to its reputation from the *Valdez* oil spill, but its profits really weren't hurt. Does its financial muscle and lack of real competition in the oil market move it beyond control of the court of public opinion? Why do you think this?

Case 9-4 Holden Heights Hostage Crisis

The Situation Leading Up to the Hostage Crisis

During the early morning hours of December 9, 1997, a man broke into a home in the Orlando suburb of Winter Park, Florida. Inside the house, he shot and killed a man and seriously wounded a woman. Then, he slipped into the pre-dawn darkness and disappeared.¹

The Winter Park police suspected John Armstrong was the one responsible for this crime. Armstrong was a convicted felon and violent criminal offender, with crimes ranging from grand theft to attempted murder. He had served time in prison, but was released early.

Police spotted Armstrong, accompanied by his young daughter, driving on the freeway toward Orlando. Armstrong crashed his car into another vehicle and, leaving his daughter alone in the car, fled on foot into Holden Heights, a low-income neighborhood. Ignoring orders from the police to stop, he leaped through the front window of a nearby home occupied by Iris Vickson and Adrienne Phillips. At home with their two small children, two-year-old Tedi and four-year-old Malcolm, the women were surprised and frightened. Armstrong, with a gun in his hand, ordered the mothers out of the house and took the children as hostages, thus beginning a 3-day siege. The crisis participants were:

- **John E. Armstrong**—convicted felon and violent criminal released early from prison, and a suspect in a homicide in a suburb of Orlando

- **Tedi Priest**—two-year-old girl taken hostage in her Holden Heights home
- **Iris Vickson**—mother of Tedi Priest and resident of Holden Heights
- **Malcolm Phillips**—four-year-old boy taken hostage in his Holden Heights home
- **Adrienne Phillips**—mother of Malcolm Phillips and resident of Holden Heights

Hostage Crisis

Armstrong's actions created a crisis on two levels. The first crisis was a situation in which people's lives were in danger. The second was a public relations nightmare. Alone with the two young children, Armstrong started threatening to kill the children and making demands. The demands ranged from a get-away car to pizza.

The Orlando Police Department called a professional hostage negotiator to the scene. Inside the house, Armstrong was listening to the television news reports of the events at the scene while talking on the telephone with the police. At one point, police got a listening device and were monitoring Armstrong's actions. The key resolution participants were:

- **Mayor Glenda Hood**—mayor of the City of Orlando
- **Jim DeSimone**—Communication Director, City of Orlando
- **Chief Bill Kennedy**—Orlando Chief of Police
- **Captain Frank Fink**—SWAT team commander

¹This case was prepared by Jamie Karpinski, a senior at the University of Central Florida under the direction of instructor, Frank R. Stansberry, APR, Fellow PRSA, now retired.

- **Lieutenant Bill Mulloy**—Public Information Officer for the City of Orlando
- **Captain Jerry Demings**—Commander of the Crisis Negotiations Team and Orlando Deputy Police Chief

After days of negotiating, Captain Jerry Demings and Chief Bill Kennedy decided the time was finally right to act. Armstrong had been awake for much of the 68-hour siege, taking only a few catnaps. The negotiations had ground to a halt. Armstrong kept promising to release the children but never did. He was a desperate man with nothing to lose.

Armstrong had finally fallen asleep. He was lying on a bed in the back bedroom with a gun at his side. The children were asleep inches away. The Orlando SWAT Team entered the house with orders by team commander Captain Frank Fink to keep the children safe at all costs. Once in the back bedroom, SWAT Officer Scott Perkins jumped onto Armstrong and shielded the children. Perkins' hand was shot during the rescue and Armstrong was killed. The children were returned safely to their frantic mothers.

Public Relations Crisis

One of the first things a public relations professional should know is that planning and preparation are invaluable. When disaster strikes, it is too late to prepare a crisis plan or build a legacy of trust. In this respect, the City of Orlando was right on target. Although city officials could not foresee this specific event, they were prepared for a crisis. The City of Orlando's mission statement calls for "Serving Orlando with innovation, responsiveness, knowledge, courtesy, and professionalism." This mission is the cornerstone of Orlando's legacy of trust with the community. The mission is held in high regard and followed by all city agencies. Because of the commitment to this mission, city officials began preparing a crisis plan in

case of emergency. This plan was a large factor in the successful handling of the hostage crisis. For example, the Public Information Office (PIO) of the Orlando Police Department is usually run by one person—Lieutenant Bill Mulloy. However, as a part of the crisis plan, 12 new PIO officers were trained. This training had been completed a few months before the hostage crisis began. (All 12 officers were called to duty by the time the crisis ended.)

The media covered the story from the beginning. However, when Armstrong took the small children hostage, the media attention intensified. Not only were local media present, but national and international media in town on other business also covered the story. This international media presence made the handling of the information even more critical because Orlando and Central Florida are international tourist destinations. As a result, area leaders must continually emphasize the security and wholesomeness of the area to those whose travel plans might be influenced by any negative news reports.

However, because extra Public Information Officers were recently trained for crisis situations, the PIOs were able to satisfy all media requests for special interviews and give out timely information to meet news deadlines and the Orlando Police Department (OPD) became the source of most of the information the media reported.

From the beginning, Orlando's media strategy was to meet the needs of the media without compromising the efforts to resolve the crisis. Included in this plan was the knowledge that the media can sometimes help with crisis resolution. For example, city and OPD officials made an early decision to let the electricity, phone, cable, and other external communication devices remain "on" inside the hostage site so negotiators could talk to Armstrong. This communication worked to the city's advantage in two ways.

First, without trustworthy information, people assume the worst. Rumors thrive in

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the vacuum of no information. Since the city was controlling the information flow, it kept control of the situation and what information was released. Second, if you have to say something, the truth is always best. The PIOs were honest with the media and told them of new developments as soon as they happened. This created a cooperative, positive atmosphere with the media. This cooperative atmosphere allowed hostage negotiators to communicate with Armstrong through the media—primarily television—throughout the ordeal.

Two messages were constant: appeal to the hostage-taker to release the children and surrender and compliment Armstrong in an effort to keep him from harming the hostages. Complimenting Armstrong at first confused some of the media who knew the “outside” story—that OPD, given the opportunity, would use any means necessary to stop Armstrong. Background briefings cleared up this confusion and reinforced the policy of honesty with the media.

At the same time, the other target audiences were being addressed. This proves the wisdom of the strategy of speaking to niche audiences (as well as mass audiences) through the media. City residents, city officials, and employees, and the population of Central Florida looked to the media for current information on the situation, but those viewing around the world were also important audiences.

Throughout dealings with the media, five basic message points were repeated. The media helped convey these messages to the public. These points were:

1. John Armstrong was responsible for his fate.
2. The children’s safety came first.
3. The Orlando Police Department and its law enforcement partners did an excellent job.
4. This could have been prevented.
5. Expert testimony supports this view.

Conclusion

This crisis had both a successful hostage resolution and a successful public relations outcome. This can be attributed to several factors.

First, public relations must be involved from the beginning to have maximum impact. The cameras had been rolling ever since Armstrong was fleeing down the interstate. However, the City of Orlando was in control of the situation and helped the media get the information they needed and successfully solved the hostage crisis.

Next, public relations needs to always play its position and let other departments play theirs. It is highly unlikely that the PIOs would have been as successful at saving Tedi and Malcolm from their captor without the SWAT Team. It is also unlikely that the SWAT Team would have been successful at handling the media. The five key message points of the city were reinforced in every communication. This allowed a unified and constant message to reach the public.

Throughout the ordeal, Mayor Glenda Hood and the city’s public relations officer, Jim DeSimone, remained in constant contact with the SWAT team and the PIOs. The mayor knew that every aspect of the situation was being handled by experts and always knew the status of the rescue operation. However, the mayor’s focus was to convey her whole-hearted support and encouragement for city employees. She also spent a lot of time behind the scenes visiting and encouraging the mothers of the hostages. The rescue was successful in part because Mayor Hood supported the plan.

The five message points the city used were addressed and accepted by both the media and the community. This crisis was successfully resolved because the city believed in its mission and the OPD had already established a legacy of trust with the citizens.

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The Mayor was behind the crisis plan. Departments worked together but managed their own specialties. The result was a coordinated effort that kept the various publics

informed and satisfied throughout the three-day ordeal. Armstrong was the only casualty. Good police work and good communication kept the situation under control. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Was this situation handled well from a public relations standpoint? Why or why not?
2. Five primary publics were identified by the OPD. List them and tell how successfully each was addressed.
3. Who was setting the agenda for the media coverage—the media or the city? How?
4. Why was it important that Mayor Hood supported the operation?
5. Did the city use One Clear Voice when addressing the media? How?
6. What could be done to improve the handling of the public relations aspect of this situation?
7. What was the outcome of each of the city's five message points at the end of the hostage crisis? Was the city successful in getting the message points out through the media?