

Dealing with the Media after a Major Accident

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Presentation Outline

- Evolution of media approach, 1980s to 2000s
- Case histories
- Expectations of organizations and the media
- Conclusions
- Lessons learned over more than 20 years

Dealing with Media in 1980's

- The expert is the spokesperson
- Experts left on their own
- No training on dealing with media
- Expected to state the facts
- Little guidance

Dealing with Media in 1990's

Regulator:

- Media Training
- Centralization of Communications Function
- Spokespersons: mid-level executives

TSB:

- Media Training
- Media events open to public
- Spokespersons: investigators, managers, executives

Dealing with the Media in the 2000's (all Government Agencies)

- More centralization / control
- More training and rehearsal
- Spokespersons more media-aware
- Press releases more sophisticated
- Much less tolerance for mistakes
- High political sensitivity

Dealing with the Media in the 2000's (TSB)

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- **Investigators & managers speak to media**
- **Media events closed to public, i.e. Press only**

Case histories of how some things
go wrong and some go right

Passenger Train Derailment, 1999

Thamesville, Ontario

- Two fatalities, multiple injuries to passengers
- On-site: Lead Investigator did all interviews
- Deputy Lead Investigator kept work moving forward
- Year later- Final Report - “media event”
- 70 people, but one reporter was late
- Live broadcast stopped



Collision and Dangerous Goods Release, 1999

St. Hilaire, Quebec



- Two crew members killed
- On-site interviews went well
- Year later - Final report - media event
- Major, multi-vehicle highway crash
- Too much competing news for big impact

Vandalism and Passenger Train Derailment, 2001

Stewiacke, Nova Scotia

- Major derailment with many injuries
- Investigators worked non-stop for 19 hours
- Director of Investigations interviewed “live” on national news
- Prior to interview, asked about possible questions
- Interview went well



Freight Train Derailment, 2006



The two spokespersons waiting for media, who never appeared

Buckskin, Ontario

- Rural area
- No Dangerous Goods
- No media interest
- Slow report production
- Nobody attended press release!
- Media misinterpretation
- Best media coverage ever!

Media Expectations

- Short “sound bite” for television or radio
- Continuous availability of credible spokesperson
- Human interest angle (especially family / next of kin issues)



Caught “like a deer in the headlights,” or just concentrating?

Investigation Agency: Expectations Versus Reality

Expectations

- No mistakes
- Stick to message (mandate, facts, findings)
- Spokespersons always available

Reality

- Mistakes
- Drift from message (mandate, facts, findings)
- Spokespersons not available



Industry & Regulator Expectations (or Hopes?) of Investigation Agency

- Will not embarrass them (sometimes)
- Will be completely objective
- No fault, no blame
- No surprises (sometimes)



Looking slightly more confident!

What can go wrong when dealing with the Media?



- Initial information can be incorrect
- Live interviews – can't retract what said
- Investigator speculates
- Contradictions with other spokesperson
- May not have all facts
- Difficult questions
- Next of kin upset

Conclusions

- Government stronger focus on control of message and much more media aware
- TSB: “standard” message but state useful facts
- Media are looking for human interest
- Almost inevitable that something will go wrong
- Special issues are important (next of kin, local politics)
- Communications staff and rail experts can err

Key Lessons

- Because something will go wrong, expect it!
- Prepare for tough questions
- Provide quality media package
- If slow news day, message will get out
If busy news day, maybe not
- You may feel an interview went badly
- but it may not be so
- Media never lose, but have short attention span!

Thank You!



Pictures courtesy of TSB archives,
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