



Crisis Communications

Taking Center Stage with Confidence

By Brad Ritter and Janet Ritter

Being prepared can prevent a crisis from compounding due to poor communications with stakeholders.

It was only supposed to be worth \$15, according to the police report. Days later, the data backup tape stolen from an Ohio Administrative Knowledge System intern's car began making national news. People's names, Social Security numbers, federal identification numbers, bank account numbers, and even credit card numbers were contained on the tape.

Initial and subsequent public statements about the lost data proved incorrect. A coverup was alleged. Jobs were lost and reputations were tarnished. The security breach, first downplayed by state officials, eventually affected 1.3 million individuals, businesses, and other government entities in multiple states, costing Ohio an estimated \$3 million.

DEFINING "CRISIS" AND PREPARING FOR ONE

By any definition, this was a crisis from the start. Natural disasters, management gaffes, accidents, political scandals, and even unproven allegations of wrongdoing all can threaten an organization's reputation and its ability to fulfill its mission.

In today's world, how the public *perceives* an organization's response to a crisis or potential crisis is critical. And whenever funds are involved, finance officials may find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being front-line spokespeople.

Highly effective spokespeople make the role look effortless because they have years of experience. They also have a script to work from in the form of a crisis plan.

Many government organizations have little or no crisis communications plan in place, and few finance officers have received formal media interview training. During a crisis, there is not much time to think or rehearse. Adrenalin is pumping. Thoughts are rushing. There is no time to start from scratch. And "no comment" will only fan the fire.

This is why it so important to prepare and practice before a major problem strikes, just as safety forces do. Begin by working now with communications experts to create a realistic crisis communications plan with plausible scenarios, defined roles and responsibilities, thoughtfully drafted statements, and updated contact information for key personnel and media. Then, spend the time to drill the plan by practicing speaking at a mock news conference and critiquing on-camera appearances so you will be ready when the time comes.

COMMUNICATING DURING A CRISIS

Journalists, in their very first classes, are taught to ask the "five Ws and an H" — who, what, where, when, why, and how. When faced with a crisis, a twist on

