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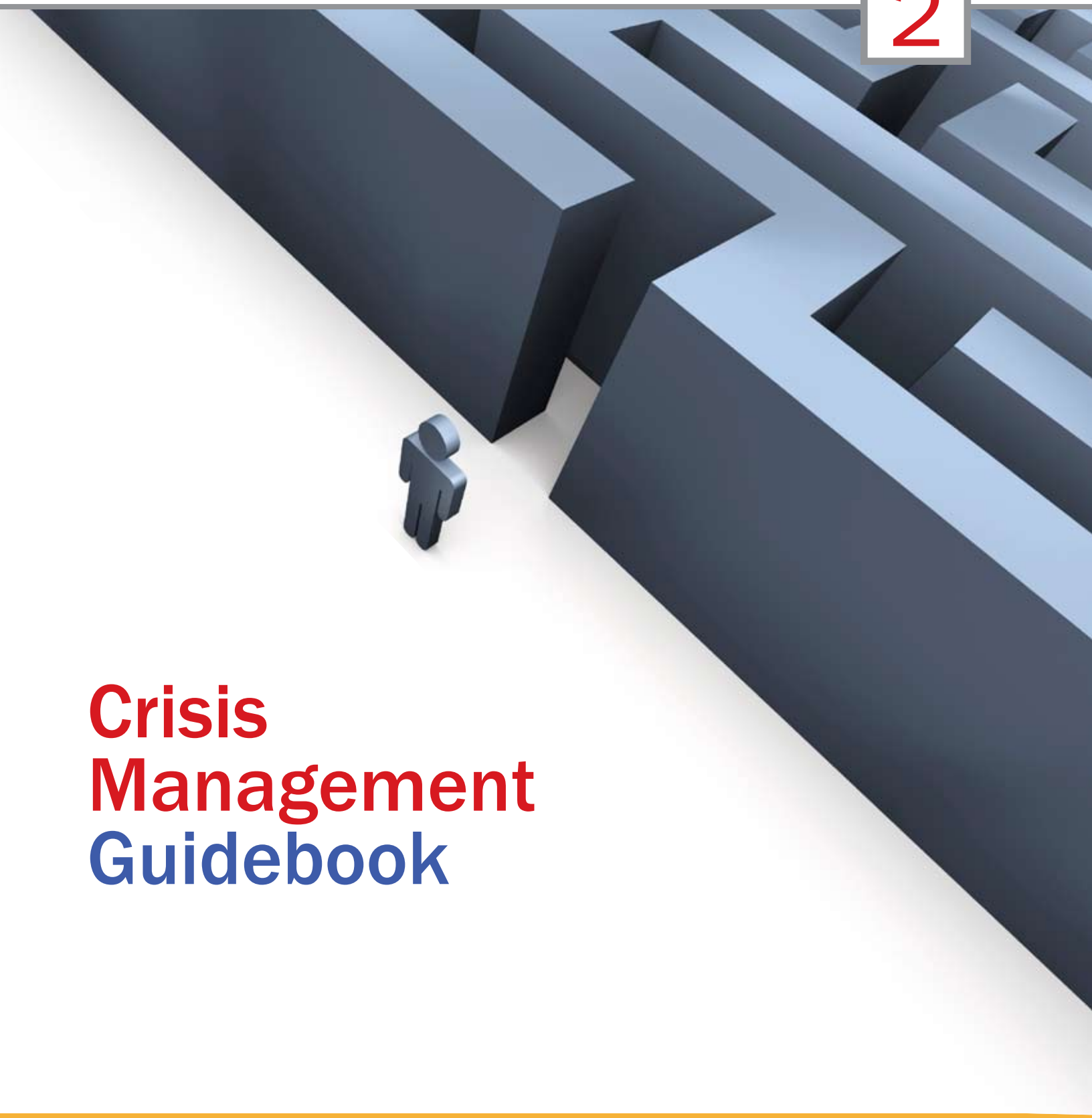

Crisis Management Guidebook

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Guidebook Editor & PR News Editor:
Courtney M. Barnes, 212.621.4986; cbarnes@accessintel.com
Managing Editor: Greer Jonas, gjonas@accessintel.com
Group Editor: Iris Dorbian, idorbian@accessintel.com
Copy Editor: Steve Goldstein,sgoldstein@accessintel.com
Director of Marketing Comms: Amy Jefferies, 301.354.1699, ajefferies@accessintel.com
Director of Circulation Marketing: Carol Bray, 301.354.1763, cbray@accessintel.com
Design: Tracey Lilly
PR News VP/Group Publisher: Diane Schwartz, 212-621-4964; dschwartz@accessintel.com
Division President, Heather Farley
President & CEO, Don Pazour

Access Intelligence

Published weekly by Access Intelligence, LLC
4 Choke Cherry Road, Second Floor,
Rockville, MD 20850 USA 888.707.5814

FAX: 301.309.3847 Telex: 358149;
e-mail: clientservices@accessintel.com

New York Editorial Office:
110 William St., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10038
Phone: 212.621.4875 Fax: 212.621.4879

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Jill Allread, *Public Communications*

Sydney Ayers, *Ayers Strategic PR*

Mark Barkett, *Dix & Eaton*

Gil Bashe, *Makovsky & Company*

Suzanne Bates, *Bates Communications*

Robert Blodgett, *CR Visions Communications*

Bud Brewer, *Massey Communications*

Clayton A. Callihan, *Interprose Public Relations*

Steve Ellis, *Levick Strategic Communications*

Merni Fitzgerald, *Fairfax County, VA*

Sarah Dean Forrester, *Trimedia UK*

Karen Friedman, *Karen Friedman Enterprises*

Mindy Frink, *Beck Group*

Stephen A. Halsey, *Gibbs & Soell PR*

Sally Saville Hodge, *Hodge Schindler Integrated Communications*

Bryan Hubbard, *Office of the Comptroller of the Currency*

Tom Gable, *Gable PR*

Robbin Goodman, *Makovsky & Company*

David Gorodetski, *Sage Communications*

Gene Grabowski, *Levick Strategic Communications*

Amy V. Greenfield, Esq., *Van Prooyen Greenfield LLP*

Melissa Lackey, *Standing Partnership*

Richard Levick, *Levick Strategic Communications*

James Lukaszewski, *The Lukaszewski Group*

Julie Litzenberger, *Sage Communications*

Joshua Morton, *Weber Shandwick Worldwide*

Erik Mueller, *Weber Shandwick Worldwide*

Glen Nowak, *CDC*

Katie Paine, *KDPaine & Partners*

Barbara Paynter, *Hennes Communications*

Arleen Porcell-Pharr, *CDC*

Dr. Maurice A. Ramirez, *Disaster Life Support of North America*

Michael W. Robinson, *Levick Strategic Communications*

Larry Smith, *Institute of Crisis Management*

Lori Teranishi,*Van Prooyen Greenfield LLP*

Linda Wilson, *Missouri Department of Transportation*

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Managing the Numbers

By Stephen A. Halsey

Science will prevail—that's what many companies believe when a crisis strikes. But such crises often center on dueling data, with company scientists on one side and expert witnesses for the plaintiffs' attorney on the other side. This Pandora's box of equal and opposite experts can unwittingly cause a company to get mired in defending minute data points, while missing the bigger issue.

Getting a firm grasp on the numbers, putting them in the proper context, correcting false claims and touting your side's key points is essential to a company's crisis response. But success requires that you go beyond the numbers and focus on action.

As simple as this notion of action sounds, it is a very hard thing for most companies to do. This is especially true when science is a core factor of the crisis and the scientific findings are either inconclusive or suspect (or made so by the opposition). Cases in point: Tylenol did not hesitate to take all their products off the shelf; Dow Corning had science on its side, only to lose in court when juries heard emotional stories of shattered lives. Science did not vindicate Dow Corning until 18 years later.

SCIENCE DOES NOT EQUAL PUBLIC TRUST

What makes science so powerful is the method and knowledge it is built upon. Implicit in this concept is that the findings are backed by data, able to be replicated and, hence, true. We live in a world where the men and women in the white lab coats with superior intellect and reason trump all, right? Wrong.

Defending science-based arguments in the court of public opinion can be a very difficult thing to do, unless the science in question is easy to understand and the findings bulletproof. The problem is that science, like many things in life, is not always clear-cut. There are often differing scientific perspectives on the same issue and different ways to view the findings of the same study. If an antagonist wants to get under a company's skin, there is no better place to attack than the science itself.

This challenge is particularly vexing for science-based companies. After all, sound science is what they base their very existence on. How could they ever waver or cede any ground when it comes to science, even if the science neither proves nor disproves any causal linkages? What should they do if they have confidence that their science will stand up in a court of law? What should they do if public opinion discounts their science?

From my experience, companies should sound the warning bells when their position rests on complex and somewhat insular science

Smart companies realize the best way to manage a crisis is having a clear path forward.

Science Alone Won't Save You

Science is something to be believed in, observed, respected and sometimes revered. But science, in and of itself, will not help a company successfully manage a crisis.

Successful crisis management always comes down to people. As such, companies must think beyond the science and demonstrate their concern for people—both inside and outside the company. Crisis managers must always make sure to step back and take an objective look at the situation, who it affects and how to communicate to those people in the most appropriate manner.

Some quick tips to remember include:

- Realize that all stakeholders want an answer to one fundamental question: How does this affect me?
- Don't be myopic. Make sure that all viewpoints are brought to the table from the outset, including science, law, business/management and PR/communications.
- Develop and follow a crisis plan that clearly defines key trigger and evaluation points, messaging and notification procedures.
- Don't hide behind the science. Make sure to address the underlying issues in an open, transparent and credible manner.
- Use science to help set and support the context of the discussion, but do not make it the context. Frame the science in a way that is easy for the general public to understand. Visuals help, as appropriate.
- Don't overestimate the power of science to enlighten others.
- Remember that despite your best efforts, logic and fact do not need to be the basis of a compelling opposing viewpoint.
- Don't underestimate the power of face-to-face meetings.
- Understand that emotion is usually the most powerful tool of persuasion in the court of public opinion and the court of law.
- Don't forget to communicate in a caring and compassionate manner.
- Do the right thing always.

that is only meaningful to a handful of experts. Such companies need to make sure that they do not fall prey to a misplaced belief in a black-and-white world where "science will always and automatically prevail." Such thinking may rule in the lab, but the outside world is not as one-dimensional. The distinction between black and white is rarely clear. All too often, the media, general public and employees fall somewhere in the gray area between the two ends of the spectrum.

BEYOND THE SCIENCE: EVALUATING THE RISK

There can be comfort in using numbers and science to guide a response strategy. However, it is just as critical to look at the emotional and business sides of the issue. If these other factors are not evaluated and managed in tandem, the

crisis response can become incremental, myopic, reactive and painful.

The key non-science factors that need to be evaluated for their potential impact on a company's reputation, profitability and survival include:

- **Clarity of picture:** Have the hard questions been asked? Is an outside perspective needed?
- **Employee trust, morale and productivity**: Will trust and morale erode based on the company's action (or inaction)? Will company decisions impact productivity? Will the action (or inaction) cause some employees to leave the company and/or seek legal recourse?
- **Escalation of lawsuits/lawyers:** Are anger, dismay or opportunity likely to increase the number of potential "victims" willing to participate in legal action against the company? Will the company's course of action (or inaction) bolster the opposition's case and/or attract others into the situation? What are the realistic costs/benefits/risks of the legal situation?
- **Escalation of media coverage**: How has the media covered the crisis and company to date? Will the company's action (or inaction) attract more media looking for stories on "corporate malfeasance?" Is the organization prepared to withstand greater media and public visibility and scrutiny?
- **Corporate reputation:** How will the crisis impact the company's overall business? Will it fuel doubts about corporate integrity and business practices? How must the company respond to protect its business interests?
- **Shareholder value:** Will a stubborn defense based on science alone affect shareholder value? Will an escalation of lawsuits and media coverage have a negative effect on shareholder value, at least in the short run?
- **Gut check:** Is this the time and place to make a stand?

ACTION IS KING

Smart companies realize the best way to manage a crisis is having a clear path forward. They focus any and all related communications on defining "Where we are going from here," and "How our action reinforces our position, credibility, trust and brand."

By their very nature, crises almost always have uncertain outcomes, a degree of blame and accountability and competing influences. There is a natural desire to want to ignore a crisis or to hunker down behind the data. But doing so won't make a crisis go away; it will only exacerbate the situation. There is a time and place for vigorously defending the science and the numbers. And there is the requirement of communicating in an open, honest and transparent manner. But one thing is certain: There is always a need for action. It truly trumps all. **PRN**

Stephen A. Halsey is vice president of Gibbs & Soell Public Relations. He has more than 15 years of experience helping companies address a wide range of incidents, accidents, criminal acts, as well as a host of scientific, environmental, health, safety and legal issues.

Playing the Field: Intercepting Tough Media with Air-Tight Strategies

By PR News Editors

How about this for irony: There are innumerable best-practices lists, training sessions and seminars about how to get the media to tell your story your way, yet university-trained journalists are schooled in the complete opposite—that is, how to translate and interpret fluff or "PR speak," when it involves avoiding tough media questions. Where does this leave media relations?

The easy answer would be "defeated." But the thoughtful answer is far more optimistic. After all, PR strategists have evolved their offerings to include media training, and many are doing so in a way that behooves both the communications executive and the journalist. As it turns out, the starting point is mutual respect. The next step, for both parties, is asking the right questions.

A SUSPICIOUS MISSION

"A reporter needs three things for a story: a theme, facts and a quote," says Andy Gilman, president of CommCore Consulting Group. "The quote is the only thing they need from you."

This comment points to a concern cited by many PR professionals: They have a long conversation with a reporter, and the next day, their comments are boiled down to a single quote and it was taken out of context, to boot. True, this can be the fault of a lazy or biased journalist who had a hole to fill, or a soapbox to stand on—all they needed was your quote for a little outside perspective. But this can also be a miscommunication of the PR professional, who didn't frame his/her comments in the most relevant and effective way possible. After all, just like you, the reporter is trying to reach an audience.

"Your audience drives the messages that you are going to deliver, as well as the language you use," says Carol Preston, a media trainer with CommCore. "You're number-one responsibility is to understand who your audience is. Then develop a core set of messages."

Gilman follows up on this point, saying, "A reporter is the filter between you and your target audience."

With that in mind, here are things a PR person can do to make sure the desired particles make it through that filter:

- Know what reporters like, which, in most cases, includes a good headline, a villain

> **"A reporter is the filter between you and your target audience."**
>
> *– Andy Gilman, president of CommCore Consulting Group*

Going From Interviewee To Interviewer

One sure-fire way to turn the tables and take control of an interview is to ask the journalist questions. "It's really about asking them questions and then calibrating your remarks," says Andy Gilman, president of CommCore Consulting Group.

This is applicable in multiple scenarios: if you are calling them to pitch a story, or if they are calling you for comment. Here are key ones to remember:

- ✔ Who else have you talked to? This will give you a perspective on the scope of the article, as well as how prevalent your company/client will be.
- ✔ When is your deadline? Asking this when you call to pitch a story shows respect for the journalist's time; asking it when they call you for comment gives you insight into how prepared they probably are, and if they are calling you as a last resort.
- ✔ Do you want the long answer or the short answer? This will give you an opportunity to get in some background information, and to allude to the fact that this is a complex issue that requires an explanation, both in the interview and in the published story.
- ✔ Another strategy for getting your comments into a story (and doing so exactly how you meant them) is by dropping verbal flags, including:
- ✔ The bottomline is ...
- ✔ The key takeaways are ...
- ✔ Five points to remember include ...
- ✔ Something I have not seen published before is ...

and a victim;

- The answers to six questions: who, what, where, when, why and how; and,
- A sound bite, but given in context (this context will help prevent them from taking your sound bite out of content). According to Gilman, the three components of a good sound bite are a headline, facts/third-party endorsement and an analogy.
- Don't ever send a reporter an e-mail saying "we would greatly appreciate it if you could publish the attached press releases." (Yes, this is a direct quote from a real e-mail.) "If you want it perfect, it's called advertising," Gilman says.
- Make sure you answer these unspoken questions that are top of mind for a journalist: "What's in it for the reporter's audience? Why should they care about what you're saying? How is it relevant to their lives?" says Betsy Goldberg, a communications coach with Waggener Edstrom Worldwide. "To demonstrate that relevance clearly, outline the problem people face, the solution you provide and the benefit they'll receive."
- Speak in layman's terms: This is not to say that commentary should be dumbed down for journalists; rather, it should be geared towards the target audience. If that

Raising A Red Flag

Just as you are trained to sidestep a touchy issue, journalists are trained to put you on the spot and get honest answers to tough questions. There are multiple ways of doing this, some of which are above board, and others of which are sneaky. Here are a few types of questions to be wary of, coupled with strategies for answering them:

- "What if" questions: These questions often come up when a journalist has already written the majority of the story and are coming to you to fill a hole. If you aren't playing along (and you shouldn't be), they will lead you down a dark road by asking you to comment on hypothetical scenarios. Good responses to these lead-ins include: "I'm not in a position to speculate;" "I'm not capable of predicting the future, but I can comment on the here-and-now," or "that question isn't relevant to this conversation."
- The same question five different ways: An alternative approach to getting the answer they are looking for is to ask the same question multiple times with slightly different angles. Novice communications professionals might find this disarming and accidentally "slip" with an answer that isn't representative of the message they are trying to convey. In these situations, throw it right back at the reporter by asking, "Why do you keep asking me that?"

audience is a specialized one, then speak their language. "We're all used to speaking in the jargon of our industries. But if you use that jargon in an interview you may confuse journalists and their audiences," Goldberg says. "You could also ruin the power of a simply worded sound bite. Using everyday words actually demonstrates that you know your topic so well you can explain it even on a basic level."

- Finally, says Showtime VP of corporate communications Richard Licata, don't take yourselves and the hard work you do for granted. "The role of [PR] in any discipline has never been recognized to the level it should be," he says. "Things don't appear in print or on TV courtesy of the Publicity Fairy." **PRN**