

The Media and the BP Oil Spill

Abstract

Extension personnel are frequently interviewed by the media in a relaxed atmosphere. Critical times lead to enhanced and major media attention, which requires the ability to speak calmly, quickly, concisely, and factually. Media requests will come from a variety of venues, and lengthy interviews will be reduced to a sound bite. Working with communications professionals is useful to better develop speaking skills, and their presence at major interviews can prove valuable.

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Introduction

Previous reports (El-Begearmi, 1993; Terlizzi, 2006) involved providing useful information to Extension professionals related to communicating factual information when there are serious issues of significant impact to their region. Factual information should include not only what occurred but also the perceived consequences and what is being done. Although some details of the factual information may not generally be used, it is important to know the information in depth so that one has the ability to speak beyond the journalistic jargon ("buzz words") with the media, the harvester/grower or processor, and the consumer. This article illustrates interaction with various media based upon the principles described as a consequence of the BP oil spill.

Think Before Responding

The first media contact was an email from an Internet "news service" asking for an expert opinion related to current seafood safety. The fire on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform had not even been extinguished. At this point, the situation was under evaluation by state and federal authorities, and it was too soon to have any factual information. This email request was forwarded to the Sea Grant Communications Director for a response.

Follow the Facts

The second media contact on June 2, 2010, was from the producer of a leading network evening news program. It went like this.

Questioner: "How many people will this seafood kill?"

Specialist: "None. The fishery is closed, and none of the seafood is being harvested."

Questioner: "How sick will the people feel?"

Specialist: "People will not become sick because the affected waters and those adjacent have been closed to fishing activity due to an abundance of caution."

Questioner: "What are the symptoms from eating this contaminated seafood?"

Specialist: "There should not be any symptoms because no seafood from waters closed to harvest will be entering into commerce."

Questioner: "Well, just how many people will this contaminated seafood kill?"

Specialist: "Ma'am, as I have explained, no seafood impacted by the oil spill will be entering commerce; there should be no illness resulting because it cannot be harvested and consumed. I will be happy to discuss the healthful benefits of seafood consumption following the advice of Cartwright, Case, Gallagher, and Hathaway to be positive."

Questioner: "Thank you for your time" and a sharp click of the telephone.

In the first year after the explosion, fire and 87-day oil spill, the national and international media were primarily interested in hearing negative information. Extension specialists should present the facts rather than a scare (Cartwright, Case, Gallagher, & Hathaway, 2002; Terlizzi, 2006).

Be Wary of Recording Devices

Once the initial fervor had abated, there was the opportunity for more objective media attention (Terlizzi, 2006). There was an opportunity for positive press when some academics were trained in sensory evaluation of seafood tainted with known levels of crude oil at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Laboratories in Pascagoula, MS in June 2010. Those in academia were interviewed and filmed for television pool newscasts while conducting sensory evaluation of tainted seafood. NMFS personnel were also interviewed in the presence of communicators from their communications department. We were cautioned to remember that if a camera is in view, it is probably powered up and even whispers can be recorded. This specialist subsequently pursued a formal training session related to dealing with the media, as suggested by Brown (1994).

Sound Bites Travel

Local media tended to be more responsible in their reporting for one simple reason. They all live in the affected area; they know the area, economy and local industries. Regardless, an hour interview would be reduced to 90 seconds on the evening news.

It is also important to note that a local media interview is not necessarily destined for only one

market, especially after one has been identified as an expert. An interview with a Baton Rouge CBS station was aired on sister (CBS) and competing (NBC, ABC, and Fox) affiliates as far west as Lubbock, Texas, and east Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to the mid-Atlantic (Richmond, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Savannah, Georgia) and north to Cincinnati, Ohio. In a similar vein, a presentation at the Baton Rouge Press Club was reported in the Baton Rouge Advocate, other newspapers in the state, *USA Today*, and on an Internet newsletter, *Seafood.com*. Jargon local to an area, in this case Louisiana, may be misunderstood in other regions of the country. Try to avoid it.

Radio interviews were usually, so it was necessary to anticipate questions and prepare short, factual responses in advance (Corvello, 2003). "Dead air" on the radio is not only dreaded, but it also leads the listener to conclude that the interviewee may not be either familiar or comfortable with the subject matter (or both). Specialists must work with their Extension communicators to better hone their ability to speak in sound bites to maintain their credibility.

Communicators as Facilitators

Radio and television may visit the university. National Public Radio (NPR), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Fox News Network had well-known personalities conduct extended interviews. Although these interviews took 60 to 120 minutes, they were edited into a shorter format for a given news bite (Fox News), program length (NPR), or a two-part series (BBC). Louisiana Sea Grant and campus communicators were present to keep them informed and to photograph the interviews. A photo with the NPR personality and this specialist was on the cover of the BP Oil Spill Report to Congress. The presence of professional communicators, as facilitators allows quick reaction to regain a situation should something go awry (Cartwright, Case, Gallagher & Hathaway, 2002) during interviews with media, and especially, major media.

Use Electronic Media

Central sources of information provide consistency and accuracy (Terlizzi, 2006). The Sea Grant website, because it is dedicated to seafood, wetlands, marine water quality, and fisheries, became the official site for posting factual information. Short technical bulletins describing "Determining Seafood Safety" and "Seafood Frequently Asked Questions" were posted to better inform the public. Also, a video was made on the "Sniff Test" procedure to determine seafood taint and received almost 900 hits after posting on You Tube.

Communicators Help Scientists Speak Effectively

Credible Extension specialists get invited to display their expertise in national forums. This specialist received an invitation by NOAA to be a panelist at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History on "Demystifying the Ocean: One Year After the BP Oil Spill" before a live audience event (675 participants) and with multiple media outlets present. CSPAN taped the entire event, which is in their archives. The Director of NOAA, two processors, the co-chair of the President's Commission on the Oil Spill, and an actor and activist were also panelists. This specialist sought and received media training from the Cooperative Extension Communications Division, the main campus Communications Office, and the Institute of Food Technologists (a professional organization) and held practice sessions prior to the event.

An article in the August issue of the *Journal of Extension*, "Seafood Safety During an Oil Spill and the Sniff Test" (Lampila, in press), will continue this discussion of how to respond to the media on serious issues.

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