



Rosetta Public Relations – Communications Briefing

COMMUNICATING IN THE FACE OF DISASTER

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, 20 people in Canada died from Listeriosis, a food borne bacterial infection. In August that same year, an airliner crashed at Madrid airport, killing 154 people. These events illustrate a constant in crisis communications - whether you work with food, pharmaceuticals, transportation, natural resources or one of the many government bodies regulating these sectors, death is often not far behind. It's one feature that separates true crisis communications from issues management. In fact it could be said that the true test of your crisis communications capability is how you manage (and emerge from) a crisis in which people die.

Unfortunately, in the mining industry, death is all too common. And in the coal industry, mine disasters seem almost expected. In the US alone the 21st century has witnessed three major disasters - Crandall Canyon, Jim Walter Resources Mine No. 5 and Sago Mine, as well as several minor ones. In this paper I will look at all three, examining the situations, the media response and the crisis communications strategies that were deployed. All were high intensity situations resulting in serious tragedy. Whatever industry we are in, we can learn from what was done well, what was executed poorly and what was not done at all.

THE DISASTERS

More than 200 stories underground in Alabama lies one of the richest coal seams in the US. Jim Walter Resources, part of a New York Stock Exchange-listed conglomerate, owns three mines working that seam - JWR No. 5 mine and two others in the area. On the night of September 23, 2001, just weeks after 9/11, a section of the mine roof in JWR No. 5 collapsed, releasing a pocket of methane gas. A spark from a nearby battery charger ignited it, creating an explosion that injured four men, one of whom would later die in hospital from his wounds. It was then that, in the laconic words of the Department of Labor, "a secondary explosion occurred." The truth is somewhat more horrific - a fireball of methane and coal dust raced through the mine, hot enough to melt metal. It consumed all the oxygen in the mine. The next morning everyone agreed that the 12 men left below ground could not have survived. With the fire still burning underground and

the mine unstable, the rescue effort was called off. The bodies of the miners were recovered in the two months that followed the disaster. All told, 13 men died in the span of a day.

Fast-forward five years. Early on the morning of January 2nd 2006 29 miners went underground in the Sago Mine in West Virginia. Only 17 would return to the surface alive. Like JWR No. 5, a methane explosion sparked the disaster. One man died in the blast while 12 others, unable to reach the surface, huddled down to await rescue. In the ensuing 41 hours all but one would slowly succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning. Several miners left notes for their families, detailing their final hours and making the true dimensions of the disaster very human and tangible. Rescue efforts were slow and, in the words of the final report on the disaster, “everything that could go wrong did go wrong.” Even as the survivors penned their desperate notes in darkness, rescuers waited topside for permission to enter the mine. As at the later Crandall Canyon disaster, boreholes, remote cameras and robots were used to try to find survivors. Adding to the horrors of this disaster were the miscommunications. Rescuers underground initially reported finding the 12 missing men alive; this news rippled through the community and to the national media. The mistake was rapidly corrected as the rescuers discovered that only one of the men found was alive. But the original version ran - *USA Today's* headline read “Alive! Miners Beat Odds.” It is the tragedy of hope betrayed. A little over two days following the explosion, the bodies of the dead miners were removed from the mine.

The next year’s calamity occurred outside of the east coast coal country. About two hour’s drive south from Salt Lake City, Utah is the Crandall Canyon Mine. In the early hours of August 6, 2007, pillars supporting the roof of the mine collapsed, causing a tremor that registered 4.0 on the Richter scale (bigger than the shockwaves created by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster). Six miners were trapped 5.5 km from the mine entrance. Boreholes were drilled, oxygen samples collected and a nation watched riveted to their TVs as cameras probed the underground debris for signs of life. It was enough to spur the rescue effort, despite the seismic instability of the mine. Ten days later another collapse killed three rescuers and the rescue was called off. Two more boreholes were sunk but no signs of life were found. The rescue effort ground to a halt as government, mine officials, miners and families realized the unthinkable - the six miners would remain entombed under the mountain. No bodies were recovered.

	Sago Mine	JWR No. 5	Crandall Canyon
Disaster type	Explosions Entrapment CO poisoning	Collapse Explosion	Collapse and entrapment
Sequencing	Sudden disaster Brief rescue effort Recovery operation	Sudden disaster Rapidly turned into recovery operation	Sudden disaster Extended rescue effort Second disaster Abandonment of rescue No recovery
Survivors	Yes	Yes	No
Media environment	Intense interest	Moderate interest Overshadowed by 9/11	Intense interest Slow news cycle
Duration	2 days	2 days	10 days
Bodies recovered	Yes	Yes	No

COMMUNICATIONS ENVIRONMENT

First it has to be admitted that there is a pre-existing narrative in the US mining industry. It goes something like this: unscrupulous mine owners, with the collusion of uncaring government agencies, operate unsafe mines in the reckless pursuit of profit; miners pay the price with their lives. Shifting that story is a tough proposition and outside the scope of this paper. Instead we'll consider how it played into media coverage of the disasters.

Second we have to contend with the irrational ability that all of us have to hope. Most people in mining communities temper this with knowledge, and sometimes with personal experience, of the history of mining tragedies. But recent experience had given the mining community grounds for hope. In 2002 a mine in Pennsylvania had flooded suddenly, trapping nine miners. More than three days later all of them emerged alive. If it worked there then why not in Alabama, Utah or West Virginia? When hope faded people wished for a miracle. According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 80 per cent of Americans believe in miracles. This too would colour media coverage.

Five Facts

1. The public naturally distrusts the government, sees the mining company as the villain and the miners as the victims.
2. We hope and when hope is gone, we expect a miracle. We tend not to want to accept painful realities.
3. Mine disasters convey horror viscerally.
4. During and after the disaster there are competing voices with differing messages, all communicating in a rapidly changing environment.
5. There are distinct phases to mine disasters and communications has a different role in each.

Third, mining disasters are visceral. Few situations convey the 'doom factor' of a crisis as vividly as men trapped underground in darkness waiting for rescue or death. Even when killed suddenly and violently, death in a mine has a special kind of horror.

Fourth, during and following a mine disaster a lot of things are going on and a lot of different people are doing and saying different things. There is a constellation of players - mine owners and operators, engineering firms, local and state governments, rescue teams, miners' unions, the Mine Safety and Health Administration (US Bureau of Labor) as well as the miners, their families and the community. It's a very chaotic and fast-moving communications situation.

Fifth, the communications cycle is either: (a) disaster, rescue, inquiry or (b) disaster, recovery, inquiry, or a blend of the two. Communications has a different function in each phase from the provision of information to reputation management. This is especially true when the crisis moves into the later blame phase.

HOW DID THE MINING COMPANIES RESPOND?

Two of the mining companies involved are traded on the NYSE and have market capitalizations ranging from \$400 million to \$1 billion. We expect that they would have professional communications staff and access to consultants and thus would manage their crises better. This is largely true except that, in the case of the Sago Mine disaster, a single mistake proved catastrophic. The third disaster - Crandall Canyon, was managed by a private firm with a headstrong CEO. Nothing but missteps and mistakes followed.

Jim Walter Industries, the conglomerate that owns JWR No. 5 mine, is no stranger to high intensity communications, having dealt with a buyout by Kravis, Kohlberg and Roberts as well as asbestos litigation. The company actually had two crisis plans - one at the operational level at the mine and the other at the corporate level. It was to be expected that official company statements would be cautious - the two press releases issued by the company follow a template: description of the situation (later an update), details on company efforts and supportive remarks about the miners and their families. There was one press conference after the event and many interviews with the media. All in all, the information flow was carefully controlled. Dennis Hall, Jim Walter's Director of Public Relations, was on the ground in Alabama and knew the men who died and their families quite well. He worked as family liaison for the company. This is all good, prudent crisis communications work - no speculation, demonstration of effort and resolve to deal with the situation and a show of compassion. The overhang of September 11th, meant that it was considered regional news by most national media outlets, which preferred to focus on recovery efforts at Ground Zero and a national response to the terrorist attacks. It was only later that it would get national pick-up.

The company tried to make amends by paying out funeral and travel expenses. It even paid out wages for the dead miners for the 40 days their bodies lay underground prior to recovery. However, just days after the disaster, the initiative went to the families of the victims and the story quickly became one of deliberate negligence, of the company ignoring safety issues and of higher than normal accident rates at the mine. "They wouldn't listen. They didn't do anything [about mine safety]," said one miner. This narrative spread from local and regional media outlets to national ones, including the Chicago Tribune. Even worse, the trust fund established by the company for the families of the victims became a bone of contention with the suggestion that the company was withholding the money from the families. The company, hampered by legal proceedings that prevented detailed comment, chose to ride out the repercussions of the disaster.

Over in West Virginia, the International Coal Group did not experience media neglect. In fact the Sago Mine disaster dominated the all-news channels like CNN and MSNBC for the full two days. Anderson Cooper and Geraldo Rivera showed up. In face of this, the company managed to distribute information fairly effectively. They ran a textbook crisis communications plan - avoid speculation and 'what if' scenarios, support the miners' families, provide all relevant information quickly and without spin, be cautious and don't raise hopes. I can find no fault with their work until the media picked up the story that the miners had been found alive. No media outlet confirmed this story before running it. Fatally, the company let the erroneous information circulate for several hours before correcting it.

As with Jim Walters, attention turned to finding the culprit for the disaster. Media and union attention focused on safety violations. The company took what I think to be a remarkable step - identifying the truly important constituency in the crisis, they reached out to make amends and

gave something back, establishing the Sago Mine Fund for the victims' families with an initial contribution of \$2 million (Jim Walter Resources did the same).

Things went less well for Murray Energy, the owner of Crandall Canyon. Subject to the same level of media frenzy but extended over ten long days, the CEO, Robert Murray, chose to manage communications himself. The results were disastrous. For the media, it was true drama – hope, despair, bravery, reversals and a larger than life figure in the form of Murray himself. You couldn't script better television. The second tragedy gave it the air of a slow motion disaster. It was a slow news cycle and, like the OJ Simpson trial, soon the disaster was the only thing on TV. Murray though, seems to have thought he could cultivate the media and get them on his side, even taking camera crews down into the mine to the rescue site. He oscillated between expressing hope and despair. He even managed to get himself barred from the briefings held for family members, allegedly because he shouted and disturbed them, making children cry. There was no discipline either of messaging or tactics. In the words of Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, "I don't see any method at all." Murray didn't control those aspects of the crisis that were in his power and instead let the crisis rule him. Coupled with the nature of the elements he couldn't control, it became a perfect storm, one that continues to this day with lawsuits and record fines.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are, I think, ten things we can learn from how these crises were handled.

1. The role of luck – the nature of the crises (duration, rescue, recovery or non-recovery) and the media environment at the time of the disasters determined what was possible for the companies involved.
2. Related to this first point, it's important to know what you can and can't control in any given circumstance... and focus on those that are within your power to affect. For example, changing the perception of the coal-mining sector during a crisis is a fool's errand; it would be better to affect families' perceptions by showing compassion and action.
3. Focus on the really important audiences and the rest will follow. Murray made the mistake of cultivating the media instead of building rapport with the families and paid the price.
4. Quash rumours quickly – establish a 'truth squad' to monitor claims from media and other sources and correct them rapidly.
5. Prepare – it's obvious from later reports that these mines had issues. In the case of Crandall Canyon the mine was fatally flawed. Why then was there no plan in place to deal with the probable event of a collapse? Plans don't need to be excruciatingly detailed but a general outline of approach is needed. You can work out likely scenarios and responses, anticipate tough questions, identify how you will behave and what tone you will take as well as determine message dissemination tactics for specific audiences.
6. Choose your media spokesperson carefully and train him/her well – sometimes the person in charge isn't the best face for crisis communications.
7. Your communications goals and those of the media are not often in sync – they want a good, eyeball-catching story with lots of drama and you want a calm and measured response. You can get friendly but never forget that your interests diverge.
8. Take it on the chin – if you knew about the issues and did nothing about them then this is all you can really do. Wait for it to subside and try to rebuild your relationships with key constituencies.

9. Make amends – you can say you're sorry and that you regret the crisis happened but sometimes the most effective communications are actions, not words.
10. Get ready for the shift from immediate response to the blame game. Know the likely positions of your opponents in these cases.

A FEW WORDS ON DEATH

Anthropology is the study of human beings, the folks we communicate to. So it has always been surprising to me how few of their insights we bring into our communications work. Take death, for example. Fischhoff and company have integrated some anthropological insights on death into their work on risk communication but it really hasn't gone much further than that.

We live in a 'non-death' society, where we try to avoid its presence. When it does happen, death is a professional affair, usually gradual and targeting older people. The typical trajectory is illness or infirmity, institutionalization, decline and death, all in the hands of professionals. Grief is localized to a small circle of friends and family and hidden (and somehow unseemingly). Uncontrolled, sudden death – mine disaster, plane crash etc., is a violation of this order. In this circumstance death is seen as unfair; it should be preventable.

And when death happens we want the bodies back. Stanford University professor, Robert Sapolsky, writes:

The desire for tangible proof of the death of someone we know or love is a natural human impulse. But often that desire extends well beyond a purely rational need for certainty. In circumstances where there is not the remotest chance that someone is still alive, we still expend great energy and often put other lives on the line in order to retrieve the dead.

Does this remind you of Crandall Canyon?

What useful advice does this give? Four things, principally:

1. Families of those who die in mine (and other) disasters will view the event as unfair and seek to blame others (mine owners, government) rather than see the disaster as an unforeseen event. This is not to say that disasters are to be accepted as unpreventable, it is instead to point out that we should plan for this mental state, remembering that discussing blame and responsibility should only happen outside the actual crisis.
2. There are distinct phases in our acceptance of death. In crisis communications the most important is the shift from **pretence** – we suspect the truth but act as if it's not true, to **open awareness** – we accept the truth and talk about it. Crisis communications must take this into account without raising unrealistic hopes.
3. One of our responses is to lionize those who have died. In this way we talk about the victims of plane crashes as 'heroes,' for example, when in actual fact they were unfortunate victims (we often have no way of knowing if they faced death bravely or not). Crisis communications should acknowledge this need and use the language of bravery in referring to victims.
4. Recovery of bodies enables closure for families and signals an end to the crisis. Without them it lingers, as at Crandall Canyon.

FINAL THOUGHT

Communicating during a crisis – when there is death or the imminent possibility of death, is different from managing an issue or conveying risk. It's an acid test of your abilities. The story often becomes less about the disaster and subsequent rescue efforts and more about the media coverage and the responses to it. Perhaps the best advice for communications professionals facing this sort of situation was written more than a hundred years ago:

If you can keep your head when all around you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you

DEDICATION

This paper is on a grave subject; I dedicate it to the men and women who tried to manage communications during these three crises and, most importantly, to those who died in these disasters and their families. I thank Dennis Hall of Jim Walter Resources and Professor Paul Voninski for their help.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McIvor founded Rosetta Public Relations Inc. in 2006 after a career in the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care that bridged both communications and health policy. He has managed communications for many government initiatives. Paul also provided crisis and risk communications to the government, helping to manage crises like the SARS outbreak. Prior to his time in government Paul worked in investor relations, helping companies raise capital and navigate their first few years as publicly traded corporations.

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