You turn on the TV news or pick up a newspaper, and what do you see? There are bad things happening all around you. Yet as you sit in the comfort of your living room or office, it’s easy to think that nothing bad will ever happen to you. You may not have experienced a serious crisis—yet. But as a public utility professional, you can’t depend on your luck to hold indefinitely. The time will come when something bad does happen—or is alleged to have happened—and you become the subject of sensational media coverage.

Because of this inevitability, every water and wastewater utility must have a crisis communications plan (CCP) in place. This plan is used to address the public and the media following any type of negative incident. Despite the best prevention efforts, incidents happen, and preparedness can make a huge difference in the outcome. Poor crisis communications planning can turn one disaster into two. In addition, every utility should have a designated public information officer (PIO) who is the primary liaison with the media agencies and provides many of the routine updates.

Some crises occur because of an avoidable mistake, such as human error or malfunctioning equipment. Other crises are totally out of your control, such as a hurricane or flood. Although the public is not likely to hold you responsible for a natural disaster, what if you were perceived as not having responded effectively? What about rumors and misinformation, which can be started by just one upset person and be spread on the Internet? Whatever the situation, you must be prepared to answer tough questions.

Are You Ready to Respond?

Following an incident, you have a very short window of time, perhaps 1 to 2 hours, to demonstrate that you are taking appropriate actions and intend to provide the media with answers as quickly as you can. A bad situation can quickly become worse without proper planning. Your PIO must have a plan of action ready to implement as the crisis is breaking. Significant delays will occur if the PIO has to stop and think about who should be notified and try to make sure he or she has the proper contact information for those individuals. If this happens, the PIO is likely to be perceived as disorganized and incompetent and perhaps even untrustworthy, which reflects poorly on the organization as well. Any PIO who has been suddenly thrust into the spotlight when bad news breaks, knows how much a little preparation helps make handling moments of crisis much easier.

Know the Basics of Crisis Communications

The basic principles of any crisis communications plan include:

- Preparation. Utilities must have crisis communications plans.
- Swiftness. Following any incident, the CCP must be implemented quickly. Timely information should be provided throughout the incident.
- Accessibility. Utility representatives must be accessible to the public and the media.
- Factual presentation. The message must be completely honest and factual. There cannot be any speculation.
- Practice. The CCP should be practiced along with all other aspects of incident preparedness. The CCP should be included in the incident followup analysis.

The reality of the media. Like it or not, the media is the primary means by which utilities communicate with their customers, stakeholders,
and the public. Each media sector has a preference for the form of information they receive, and utility managers and PIOs must be prepared to “feed” all of them. TV producers prefer live video clips that coincide with their news programming whenever possible. Newspaper editors prefer more in-depth interviews, and detailed material.

For major evolving situations, utilities should establish a regular place and time for media updates, generally at least twice per day, such as 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. The location should be near the incident site, emergency operations center, and so forth, but at a sufficient distance to keep the media out of the way.

**Putting a face on the organization.** The PIO should conduct the initial interviews in order to provide the head of the utility with a “buffer” so that a more complete statement can be provided later. The utility head then becomes the designated voice of the agency or company. A perfect example is the way New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani stepped forward after 9/11. The public wants a “face” on the utility. That person should have at his/her side the technical experts required. This also demonstrates the “solidarity” of the organizational leadership.

**Preparing employees and other key stakeholders.** Your utility should communicate with all employees about the policy whereby media inquiries are directed to the PIO. However, when an incident does occur, the utility must quickly educate employees on the company position. Employees are likely to be asked about the incident by their friends and neighbors, and they need to know how to respond. They will not all always say exactly what the utility wants them to say, but it will certainly be better than, “I don’t know; they don’t tell me anything!”

All personnel who are likely to be in the role of a spokesperson should be trained in how to give a good interview. This training should include role-playing of crisis scenarios. Recording the interview on videotape allows for valuable feedback and critique.

**PREPARING THE MESSAGE**

Every message from your utility should be clear and concise. Prepare draft messages for the known potential incidents that may occur in advance. It is much easier to prepare a final statement in the heat of an incident if a draft has been prepared. Also, draft public information messages for every possible incident your utility might face.

**Honesty is number one.** Every spokesperson must stick to the facts. The spokesperson should clearly state if they do not know and are not able to determine those facts. Of course, it’s always best to accentuate the positive, but don’t try to sweep the negative under the rug. A spokesperson should never seek to place blame, unless it belongs elsewhere with 100% certainty. Also, they should not use technical jargon or try to “snow” the audience. Spokespersons should be empathetic and sincere in their compassion.

Consult legal counsel as needed. However, the message you relay to the public should be that of the utility; it should not be something that was obviously crafted by an attorney. For example, it’s better to say, “Indications are that errors were made, and we are going to do everything we can to correct the situation,” than to say, “We are conducting an investigation and are not at liberty to release any additional information at this time.” Even if the investigation proves that mistakes were made, the utility can gain credibility by being honest and offering to help. These actions often prevent people from becoming so angry that they threaten to sue. Work with attorneys to preserve your reputation as well as minimize the chance that you will be sued.

**CHECK YOUR CRISIS READINESS**

You can evaluate your readiness for a crisis situation by using the free checklist developed by Judy Hoffman (co-author of this article). The checklist, “How Ready Are You to Respond Effectively During a Crisis?,” is intended to help with internal evaluations of various items that are vital to ensuring that your organization can respond quickly and effectively.

If you can honestly answer yes to every question on the checklist, you are well-positioned to deal with a crisis. If you have an occasional no, the checklist will point out areas for improvement. If you answer no to most questions, this should serve as a red flag that you are tempting fate and seriously jeopardizing your organization’s reputation as well as your own.

To obtain a copy of this self-assessment tool, contact Judy Hoffman by e-mail at jchent@fcc.net with the words “Free Checklist for AWWA” as the subject line. Additionally, you can sign up on her web site at www.judyhoffman.com for a free, monthly e-zine with tips on dealing with the media and handling angry people.

In addition, the US Environmental Protection Agency is currently preparing a package of template messages for water utilities under the title of Message Mapping. More information is available at http://www.epa.gov/nrmrl/news/news012006.html.

—Judy Hoffman is the author of Keeping Cool on the Hot Seat: Dealing Effectively with the Media in Times of Crisis and the CD “Dealing Effectively With Angry People.” She provides workshop, speeches, and conference work sessions on these topics and can be reached at jchent@fcc.net or at www.judyhoffman.com. Jack Moyer is the emergency management director with URS Corp., Morrisville, N.C. He specializes in emergency preparedness planning for public organizations and provides workshops and exercises in these areas.