

**ISSUE WHITE PAPER: SELECTING A SPOKESPERSON**

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**BACKGROUND**

This briefing asks and answers these questions:

- What are the characteristics of an effective spokesperson?
- Can too many spokespeople dilute “speaking with one voice,” that is, delivering a consistent institutional message?
- How can senior spokespersons’ credibility be built with news media, particularly with respect to the CEO and COO?

**WHY IT MATTERS: THE IMPACT OF SELECTING CREDIBLE SPOKESPEOPLE**

*Health Risk Communication in Public Health Emergencies*<sup>1</sup> demonstrates why selecting credible spokespeople is important to effective communication. Using an example drawn from a national survey<sup>2</sup> of 3,011 respondents, the study showed very different levels of credibility for different potential spokespeople in response to the question, “Which public official do you trust most to provide correct information to protect yourself from bioterrorism?” Respondents said:

- Senior scientist from CDC (43%)
- Secretary of Health & Human Services (16%)
- U.S. Surgeon General (13%)
- City or state health commissioner (9%)
- Secretary for Homeland Security (4%)
- FBI director (3%)

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The obvious conclusion: some people are more credible than others regarding this subject.

A landmark 1999 study by the Public Relations Society of America Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation<sup>3</sup>, demonstrated conclusively that not only do different spokespeople have different levels of credibility on the same subject, as shown in the Harvard study, but also that spokesperson credibility *changes issue-by-issue*. The results of the study, *The National Credibility Index*<sup>4</sup>, indicated that organizations may help or hinder their cause simply by selecting the right — or wrong — spokesperson. Among other findings, it showed that:

*“Overall and from issue to issue, ‘insiders’ or ‘experts’ on the matters under consideration receive the highest credibility scores. The credibility of this type of public figure is primarily dependent not on the respondent’s knowledge of the issue but on the respondent’s assessment of the level of knowledge of the public figure being evaluated. Thus, the individuals whom they perceive to be close to, and most informed about an issue will be deemed the most credible sources of information.*”

The author, Dr. Ronald H. Hinckley<sup>5</sup>, summed-up the study this way:

*“While it may seem commonplace to those who deal in public communication, this study strongly indicates that credible communication ultimately comes down to a complex mix of who is saying what to whom, on what issue, and in what setting. It is the complexity that matters most and any communication campaign needs to have specific research to determine how the variables will play out for that specific campaign.”*

Rarely do companies or institutions have the resources to conduct issue-specific research to determine the optimal spokesperson for each issue — although it *is* ideal and certainly critical in high-stakes communication situations. So communicators select spokespeople who, in their best judgment, will be perceived by the relevant target audience as being closest to and most informed about the issue. The most effective communication programs recognize this changing dynamic and employ multiple spokespeople to communicate about different subjects.

#### **PUBLIC RELATIONS IMPLICATIONS**

The PRSA/Rockefeller study led the investigators to point out seven specific implications of the study for public relations practice:

- ➔ The generally higher credibility of sources on a local basis (legislators, press, etc.) reinforces the importance of localization of communications (i.e. grass roots).
- ➔ Choose spokespeople carefully. Authority figures (CEOs, men/women of affairs) do not have universal credibility. Source believability varies with issue.
- ➔ Be wary of accepting conventional wisdom, for example, that the press is necessarily distrusted or that the public is cynical. The results do not show this.

- ➔ Do not use words of totality: trust is not a synonym for credibility; trust is deeper, less volatile; credibility is more temporary; more fragile.
- ➔ It is imperative to do research on any major issue to determine who are the most credible figures to use as information source(s). Plan ahead to link credible sources with potential issues.
- ➔ Introduce the credibility considerations (in the context of Credibility Index findings) into planning discussions with senior management of policy communications.
- ➔ In the context of the Credibility Index findings, much of mass communications concepts are flawed; they paint with too broad a brush and misuse ideas of trust and confidence, which are not automatically linked to credibility and are thus improper benchmarks for communications strategies. Trust relates to performance "doing the right thing." Credibility does not impose such moral judgments.

#### **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR SELECTING SPOKESPEOPLE**

The evidence clearly supports these conclusions:

- ➔ It *is* appropriate to put forth more than one spokesperson for an organization. "Speaking with one voice" should be interpreted to mean "staying on-message" as opposed to "limiting the specific number of people who may speak for the organization." This does *not* suggest that any employee should feel free to speak freely "on behalf of" the organization! A centralized, managed, thoughtful process of issue-specific spokesperson selection is still a central element of an effective organizational communication program and policy. Doing so is designed to manage "speaking with one voice" and that all spokespeople remain "on-message." However, there is no "right" or "wrong" number of spokespeople — unless there is only one.
- ➔ Absent issue-specific research to select *the* most appropriate spokesperson, on an issue-by-issue basis spokespeople should be selected who are most likely to be perceived *by the relevant target audience* as being closest to and most informed about the issue.
- ➔ Closeness to and knowledge of an issue are the most important spokesperson selection criteria. However, subject matter expertise alone is not sufficient for a spokespeople to be fully effective. The next section summarizes additional requirements for a subject-matter expert to act as an effective organizational spokesperson.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE SPOKESPERSON**

Once a spokesperson is selected based on the most important criteria of closeness to and knowledge of a subject, certain personal characteristics and communication skills also are critical. For example in *The Science of Communicating in Difficult Times; Building Trust and Credibility with a Concerned Public*<sup>6</sup>, this list is offered for effective spokespeople in risk-communication situations:

- ➔ Embraces the value of risk communication, and respects the public right to know;

- ➔ Knows and understands the organization and the risk issues you're facing;
- ➔ Can effectively articulate difficult and sensitive issues in lay terms;
- ➔ Can express empathy and concern for those who may be at risk;
- ➔ Won't take it personally and respond by pushing back at a concerned audience;
- ➔ Speaks effectively without jargon or acronyms;
- ➔ Has non-verbals in check, and knows how to use them (or avoid the bad ones); and
- ➔ Has no obvious prejudices or biases toward minorities or interest groups.

In the Agency for Toxic Substances And Disease Registry's manual of *Tools and Techniques for Effective Health Risk Communication*<sup>7</sup>, these characteristics of an effective spokesperson are given:

- ➔ Deliver messages effectively and accurately;
- ➔ Speak clearly, slowly, and confidently;
- ➔ Lead interviews and be enthusiastic and dynamic;
- ➔ Be influential and credible without being rigid or uptight;
- ➔ Know messages and facts by heart; and
- ➔ Be connected to the community.

#### **BUILDING CREDIBILITY**

Research at the Centre for Risk Communication at Columbia University<sup>8</sup> confirms the PRSA/Rockefeller study conclusion that an audience's perceptions of the knowledge and expertise of a spokesperson is, in fact, one of three critical components of "perceptions and determinants of trust and credibility." The PRSA/Rockefeller study also cautioned that trust and confidence are not *automatically* linked to credibility.

The Centre for Risk Communication study supplies the two other determinants of trust and credibility: perceptions of openness and honesty and perceptions of concern (empathy) and caring.

*"Of these, caring represents half a person's total score for trust and credibility. At most you have 30 seconds to establish that you care about the people in your audience. So your first priority in communicating risk to a distrustful audience is to make it clear – within 30 seconds – that you share the community's concerns."*

This study also pointed out that, with respect to the "caring" factor, spokesperson gender has an impact and related implications:

*"This is especially important for men, because research shows that people believe men are not naturally caring. Women are perceived as inherently caring but must strive to establish competence."*

### **BUILDING CEO/COO CREDIBILITY WITH NEWS MEDIA**

In light of these data, *"How can senior spokespersons' credibility be built with news media, particularly with respect to the CEO and COO?"* The components of credibility are now clear — expertise, compassion and honesty. So the simplest answer to the question is *"demonstrate these three attributes when engaging with news media"* and be masterful at the required technical communication skills, often polished and practiced through formal media training.

The more senior question, we believe, is *"What are the circumstances in which these senior executives should engage directly with news media?"*

There are situations in which the CEO/COO's direct engagement with news media clearly would not be appropriate, such as responding to a simple information request about the organization or discussing a highly technical subject best addressed by someone who is closest to and most informed about the subject.

There are other situations, however, in which the CEO/COO's *failure* to engage with news media would be inappropriate, such as not speaking for the organization at key junctures when the organization has become engaged in an *issue* as technically defined:

*"An unresolved or ambiguous matter of social or public policy in which there is some controversy or potential controversy regarding the behavior and role of the corporation or business in general."<sup>9</sup>*

In simplest terms: the biggest guns should be reserved for the biggest battles. This does not suggest that the CEO/COO should manage the *tactical* aspects of their involvement or deal with media at the expense of not attending to the issue itself. For example, their abilities to respond in the early stages of a crisis situation may be limited because they are directly engaged in mitigating the crisis. This engagement with media *too soon* may be seen as a lack of caring/empathy, which represents half of credibility, because they appear to be ignoring the issue itself. Similarly, waiting *too long* to engage publicly through media in a crisis situation has proven time and time again to have a disastrous impact on corporate reputations and revenue.

The "biggest battles" are not always crises. There are several phases in the development of an issue, not all of which involve public responses to media in urgent situations. So the broadest view of what may comprise an issue must be taken. The key components of the definition of an issue, however, remain controversy and the potential that the organization will have to change its policies and behavior in some significant way as a result of the issue.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Selecting credible spokespeople can have a significant impact on the credibility of a message. Credible spokespeople share specific characteristics and behaviors: closeness to and knowledge of the subject, openness and honesty, concern (empathy) and caring, and specific technical communication skills.

Best practices in managing communication for a large organization have not changed, that is, having a central process for selecting and training spokespeople and an internal process for handling media inquiries are still fundamental. However, having a single spokesperson for an organization about all subjects and issues at all times can dilute the credibility of the organization's message.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Manual for a train-the-trainer program given by The Harvard School of Public Health Center For Public Health Preparedness.

<sup>2</sup> A national survey conducted during May of 2002 by Dr. Robert Blendon of Harvard School of Public Health.

<sup>3</sup> The National Credibility Index, 1999, The PRSA Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation Details available at:  
[http://www.prsa.org/\\_About/prsafoundation/nciIndex.asp?ident=prsa0](http://www.prsa.org/_About/prsafoundation/nciIndex.asp?ident=prsa0)

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Ronald H. Hinckley, Principal Investigator, President/CEO of Research/Strategy/Management, Inc., Dr. Hinckley was recently Director of Research for the United States Information Agency. Previously he served the National Security Council, in the White House, as Director of Special Studies for crisis management. In more than three decades he has published extensively on public opinion and his latest book, *People, Polls and Policymakers*, is considered the definitive work on public opinion and governance.

<sup>6</sup> A corporate risk-communication workshop offered by 2004 Frontline Corporate Communications Inc. (<http://www.fcc.onthefrontlines.com>,) Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> *Tools and Techniques for Effective Health Risk Communication*, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001. Available at <http://www.cepis.ops-oms.org/tutorial6/fulltext/tools.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Determinants Of Trust And Credibility In Environmental Risk Communication, An Empirical Study*, 1997, Richard G. Peters, DrPH, Vincent T. Covello, PhD, David B. McCallum, PhD

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<sup>9</sup> *Leveraging the Impact of Public Affairs*, Stephen E. Nowlan, Diana R. Shayon, 1984