

# What the Oil & Chemical Industry Fear

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During mid-October, we attended a conference in Miami sponsored by the American Chemistry Council (ACC), called "Communicating in a Volatile World." ACC is the trade association for the 180 largest manufacturers of chemicals in the U.S. Until recently, ACC was known as the Chemical Manufacturers Association. (See <http://www.americanchemistry.com/>.)

The ACC conference was a real eye-opener. It revealed the ACC's genuine fears about the accomplishments of environmental health activists. In particular, ACC communications staff and presenters at the conference conceded that the work of coalitions like the Collaborative on Health and the Environment (<http://www.cheforhealth.org/>) and Health Care Without Harm (<http://www.noharm.org/>) has effectively raised public awareness about the health dangers of toxic chemicals in the environment and in consumer products.

They also concluded that the success of these coalitions is due to their diversity of members and supporters who include community groups, environmental justice organizations, health professionals, and researchers who focus on body burden and low-dose chemical exposures, shareholder/investment institutions, and consumers.

Here are the salient details of the various presentations at the conference:

## I. Communications Strategy - Winning the "Media War"

- Find a "credible and comforting" person to drive the message of the chemical industry in times of disaster or in response to environmental/health issues. This person may not be your company CEO, it may be the fire chief, or the mayor.
- In chemical disasters and facility emergency drills, focus the message on the response and coordination among the chemical company, fire department, police department, hospitals, Red Cross, etc. Do not refer to the chemicals or facility/transportation failures that caused the disaster.
- Conduct intensive media training with company staff – both corporate and local facility personnel. Videotape them in mock television interviews, in which they are grilled by a reporter asking them "sticky" questions. Replay the videotape and critique their performance, and repeat as often as necessary. Through this exercise, determine those who are most effective, and use them to represent the company before the media.
- Invite local officials, fire departments, and other emergency responders to media training events that are organized by your people. The benefits are that you develop camaraderie and trust with local officials, and they have the same messages as your company to present to the public in the event of a crisis.
- Turn media strengths into your strengths. The media wants a quick response, so give them one: "the incident is under investigation." This means nothing, but satisfies the "media monster." Another effective statement to use: "We don't know all the facts, but here's what we're doing to respond...." This is also very reassuring, without giving away too much information or showing liability.
- Keep track of a timeline of actions - no action is too small to be left out - that you can feed to the media to keep them satisfied.
- Get your "credible and comforting icons and faces" in front of the media instantly saying, "We are taking action and are prepared to do the following." Make sure you have invested the necessary time in coaching the icons;

videotape mock news reporter interviews and press conferences, and give critiques for improvement.

- Don't forget that media outreach is not enough, especially if it's hostile to you. Go door-to-door to get your message out. Create and distribute your newsletters with at-a-glance graphics that positively show your response.
- Don't respond publicly in a defensive mode because it angers people, and shows you to be cold and unfeeling. Even if you have the potential to be sued over the disaster, you must remember the court of public opinion, and act in a way that gives comfort; example: set up a family assistance fund; pay for people to stay at a local hotel if they have to evacuate from their homes.
- Remember that the first person in the media who makes the decision about who is to blame can decide your fate because it is extremely difficult to get them to change their minds, and even if they do, it is likely to occur when the public has lost interest in the news story. Thus, you want to be the first to proactively go to the media with statements that focus on your response, not the cause.
- You can't have government officials doing press conferences without you; you have to drive/craft the message. Partnership-building long before a crisis takes place is critical to ensuring your primary role in handling a disaster.
- Take steps to be prepared in advance of bad news:
  1. Wake up every morning telling yourself that a disaster can occur today. And ask yourself if you are prepared to deal with it.
  2. Keep in mind how the internet can be used by people who are adversarial. Information circulated on the internet gets into less reputable media, and then bleeds into mainstream media. It's a good idea to develop "dark sites" - websites that are not activated until a disaster/crisis/issue occurs – with sufficient company information that

is already in the public domain, generic information about response plans, pages for updates and press releases, contacts for more information, and blank areas to fill in with information specific to the crisis. For example, two hours after an employee at a Lockheed Martin facility in Mississippi shot co-workers, the company had activated a website informing the public about the shooting, and announcing a memorial fund.

3. Prepare a checklist of all actions that need to take place; the American Chemistry Council will have a media/crisis checklist available on its website by mid-November; carry all important phone numbers with you at all times, from facility managers to I.T. [information technology] persons.
4. Select a space that will be available to you anytime you need to hold press conferences to discuss a crisis; make sure that the space is comfortable to the media with lots of phones, computer connections, food, and doesn't block cellular connections.
5. Recruit a team of people who are the "go to" people in time of crisis; make sure they can reach each other at any time, not just in the office.
6. Remember that the quickest one wins. Your goal should be to have your statement to the media before anyone else does. If you don't, or you wait to start putting together a statement with clearance from company attorneys, etc., you will lose. Be prepared to be the first to contact the media in the event of a crisis, even if you don't have all the information.
7. Make sure that company lawyers don't create barriers to public statements. Even if the statements only provide basic information about your company and simply state that you are coordinating an emergency response with officials, recognize that such statements go a long way to comfort the public and let them know that you care and are prepared for

the crisis. Don't speculate on the crisis, especially its cause. Instead, focus your statements on the company's employment numbers, positive economic impacts, and plans to coordinate with local officials to deal with the problem.

8. Endurance is important. There really is no such thing as a media deadline anymore because of 24-hour news cycles. So keep the media continuously updated even if it is to repeat your message.
9. Know your plant managers and have a positive relationship with them. Remember that some of them are "good ol' boys" and need intensive media training to be viewed positively by the public.

## II. What the American Chemistry Council (ACC) Fears

Some time in November, 2003 news coverage by 60 Minutes, CNN, the New York Times, and a reporter in Pennsylvania named Prine (who easily broke through security systems at a local chemical facility on more than one occasion) will characterize chemical facilities as unsafe and a danger to the public.

\*\* The American Chemistry Council's (ACC's) lack of preparation to respond effectively to this upcoming news coverage, which ACC's communication staffers blame on disagreements among ACC members regarding financial support for a PR campaign. Also, the resources and tools for members and non-members to respond to this upcoming negative news will not be ready on the ACC website until mid-November.

\*\* Information drawing the connection between toxic chemicals and human health; in particular, emerging reports on body burden and low-dose chemical exposure and chemical trespass lawsuits. This topic is such a hot issue for the ACC that they canceled a presentation at the conference because they didn't want us to hear the information. This presentation focused on what environmental groups and their funders are

up to in promoting body burden testing and chemical phase-outs, as well as negative public reaction to toxic exposures and what the ACC can do about it. However, the power point presentation for this topic was part of the hand-outs everyone was given, and it reveals a lot.

\*\* The use of the internet by many diverse activists to spread awareness about the health impacts of chemicals in products. A case study involving the issue of chemicals leaching out into food when plastic containers are microwaved was the focus of one presentation titled, "Integrated Issues Management on the Web."

\*\* The use of "value-based" messaging by activists. Example: "A chemical-free world for the future of our children."

\*\* The hydra-headed impact of activists organized into networks or coalitions in which members target several aspects of one issue with the support of the full network. For example, community activism around local chemical facilities, health studies that focus on mothers and children, shareholder activism, and outreach to major customers of chemical products.

\*\* The Precautionary Principle

\*\* The likelihood that members of the ACC will not support the multi-million dollar PR campaign called "essential2."

\*\* The impact of a disaster, like Bhopal, occurring at a chemical facility that is not prepared to handle the bad PR, and will be used to bring down the entire industry.

\*\* Targeting industrial chemical processes and storage as part of chemical plant safety investigations, policies, and media scrutiny.

\*\* Resistance by chemical companies to engage in thorough media training and preparation because they fear news reporters, and routinely listen to their lawyers, who typically advise them

to shut down communication so as not to incur liability.

### III. Allies or Potential Allies Who Can Help the ACC Craft Credible & Comforting Messages for the Public

\*\* "For Hire" media/public relations experts on damage control

The individuals listed below participated in a "Blue Ribbon Panel on Crisis" at the conference. They have extensive experience in damage control PR involving 9-11, plane crashes, the Duke University blood transfusion disaster that killed a young girl, communities devastated by natural disasters, and disasters involving chemical plants or the transport of chemicals. They also have either held (or are still holding) key positions in federal government, or have worked in print or broadcast media.

James Lee Witt, former Director of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Administration ("FEMA"), who now runs his own consulting firm.

Peter Goelz, former Managing Director of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, who is now Senior Vice President and Director of worldwide crisis communication at APCO Worldwide.

Chet Lunner, Assistant Administrator in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Maritime and Land Security, Transportation Security Administration. Chet's work focuses on chemical disasters occurring on cargo ships, trains, and trucks.

Richard Mintz, former Director of Public Affairs at the U.S. Department of Transportation, who now directs crisis communications and issue management capabilities for the firm Burston-Marsteller; also previously worked for CBS News and Hillary Clinton during President Bill Clinton's term.

Kent Jarrell, Senior Vice President for litigation communication and crisis management at APCO Worldwide. We overheard him say in a side conversation that he told the Chlorine Institute that "dark days are ahead." Kent is working with the Chlorine Institute. He has intervened in emergency drills involving chlorine compounds. He described a drill that took place in Los Angeles based on a disaster scenario of chlorine gas escaping from a canister located inside a shopping mall. The companies he represents found out about the drill after it was planned, and got involved in the implementation to share their "expertise," which involved media work to congratulate the local emergency responders for their capabilities to protect the public. The media work was geared to take the focus off the fact that the drill involved the dangerous effects of chlorine gas. He noted that news coverage did not even mention the word "chlorine." Kent said that he is involved in a similar drill involving a Georgia Gulf vinyl chloride plant in Louisiana.

Morrie Goodman, ACC Vice-President for Communications, who formerly headed media relations for the Federal Emergency Management Administration ("FEMA") during Witt's appointment, organized this conference, and hoped to get the consultation and partnership of these experts for ACC. Also, Morrie congratulated himself for his work in coaching ACC President Greg Lebedev for the 60 Minutes interview. Greg did not attend this meeting. Immediately following the ACC conference, Morrie was terminated.

Jerry Hauer, Asst. Secretary at the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of Public Health and Emergency Preparedness. Jerry was invited to speak on the "Blue Ribbon Panel on Crisis," but did not show up.

\*\* Federal agencies and officials, especially those involved in Homeland Security

"Based on our relationship with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), we were able to share with them our research showing the safety of microwaveable plastics and get them to publish a favorable statement.... Since the FDA

has a liaison department in a university in every state, those departments are also publishing newsletter articles and fact sheets that spread our message." -- Kathleen McBride, ACC, "Integrated Issues Management on the Web" panel presentation.

Also, as referenced above, Chet Lunner from the Department of Homeland Security presented information on what chemical companies can expect from his office: new regulations covering all modes of transportation of chemical substances; determination of transportation links in the nation that have the greatest vulnerability; and federal aid given to address areas of vulnerability.

#### \*\* Universities and academic institutions

It was recommended repeatedly throughout the conference that risk communicators should be identifying third parties from universities and academic institutes who can be recruited into delivering to the public a positive message for

the chemical industry. Conducting joint research projects with universities was also encouraged.

#### \*\* Local officials and emergency responders

Research prepared for the ACC shows that the public has a negative view of the chemical industry largely because of facility leaks, fires, and explosions. The researcher noted that such events can be covered for weeks in the news. Risk communicators were advised to "buddy up" and "partner" with local officials in setting up community programs that involve emergency response, chemical safety, and the media. Most all panelists encouraged risk communicators to do media trainings with local officials, police, and fire departments, public health officials, and any other emergency responder to ensure that their message will be the same as the chemical company's PR. Another oft-repeated recommendation was for chemical company PR people to meet regularly with local officials to build a relationship so that the officials can take on "faith" that chemical plants are secure.

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