

Lac Megantic Rail Tragedy: Crisis Communications Lessons Learned—Again

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2013-07-18

This story originally appeared in [The Holmes Report](#)

On Saturday 6 July when train carrying oil to a Canadian refinery derailed and exploded, leaving at least 24 confirmed dead and a further 26 missing. The Montreal Maine & Atlantic Railway has been roundly criticized for its communications in the wake of the tragedy. Hill+Knowlton Strategies corporate communications expert Jane Shapiro says that some companies still have not learned the basics of crisis communications.

There is a consensus among PR commentators that the rail company at the centre of the Lac Megantic tragedy violated basic crisis communications principles. Among them, executives from the Montreal Maine & Atlantic Railway (MMA) failed to arrive on the scene quickly; empathize with those affected; and acknowledge responsibility for their role in the tragedy.

How could the company have got it so wrong?

Three observations: First, all effective crisis communication starts with preparation. Most companies have business continuity or operations related crisis plans; a surprising number have no complementary communications plan. It is not possible to be either timely or effective in responding to urgent situations without having in place a plan that anticipates the scenarios that put an organization at risk and has protocols that members of the crisis team are familiar with and practiced in. It does not appear that MMA has or was following such a plan. Indeed, the chairman seems to be acting quite alone without evidence of communications counsel or support. This has clearly been an impediment to the company's ability to respond in a meaningful way.

Second, crisis communications theory assumes that the most senior officer of an organization must be the spokesperson in an urgent situation, especially one where there has been a loss of life. While it is true that executive officers must be visible, it is equally

important to acknowledge when, by virtue of language, culture or performance, that person is not the best representative of the organization and, in fact, is a serious negative distraction. It is easy to think of situations where this has been the case and MMA now joins that unfortunate cohort. The chairman accurately acknowledged that he is not a communicator and, incomprehensibly, the company failed to offer a French speaking spokesperson in a community and province where French is the official language and the language of every day conversation.

Integral to contingency planning is preparing backup spokespeople who can more effectively and compassionately replace the CEO or chairman at the microphone when necessary and not a moment later. Since CEOs often see public visibility as a role that must fall to them, it may take a strong voice, quite possibly an external adviser, to speak truth to power and make this happen.

Third, organizations at the centre of crises must communicate within the first hours of an incident and make use of all available media, social media and direct-to-stakeholder vehicles. This is essential in establishing them as concerned participants and credible sources of information in a sea of voices, all positioned as experts. But they must stick to the facts rather than speculate about what they hope or think might be true. Otherwise that credibility is quickly eroded and replaced by cynicism and distrust.

It is remarkable how quickly the discrepancy between fact and speculation can become the focus of attention. In the immediate aftermath of the incident the chairman of MMA suggested local volunteer fire fighters, called to put out a fire on the train immediately prior to its unmanned run into Lac Megantic, had released the brakes. A few days later he said the culprit was the train's engineer who had not applied the hand brakes properly. By contrast, the spokesperson for the Transportation Safety Board, the regulator investigating the incident said, "We hold by the theory that no accident is ever caused by one thing, it's always a series of things and it always involves an organization and how they operate. We need to look deeply into that. +Who's credible here?"

Ultimately, the reality is that organizations are often remembered far more for the way they managed an urgent matter than for the incident itself. They would do well to be prepared; corporate reputation depends on managing it well.

Jane Shapiro has 30 years of experience in corporate, consulting and government environments help her provide clients with expert corporate communications, reputation management, media relations and crisis counsel. She has developed crisis manuals for a diverse range of clients and led crisis simulation exercises to introduce the plans for and test the performance of clients' crisis teams. She has trained senior executives to handle all kinds of media related scenarios.