

## Introduction

During my twenty-year career as a Special Agent for the FBI, I had the delightful opportunity on many occasions to speak to groups about my job. Whether they were kids or adults, the audiences that I spoke to always had a lot of questions. In fact, three of the most common questions which I was asked over the years were these:

“Have you ever been shot?”

“Have you ever shot anyone?”

“Did J. Edgar Hoover really wear a red dress?”

Permit me to answer these questions, in case you were wondering. The answers, in order, are: No, no, and no comment.

Well, actually these weren't the most common questions, but they have definitely been asked. And since you will be reading in this book that you should never to say “no comment,” my answer to question three is also no. The story about J. Edgar Hoover, who was the Director of the FBI for 48 years, has been widely discredited, as it came from a mob associate and convicted perjurer who was most likely attempting to undermine the FBI's credibility.

I loved talking to groups about the FBI, and in 1990 I learned something else that I could talk about. I received a phone call from a person at FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C. who told me that the badge I carried had also been carried by Agent Frank Smith, who was present during the Kansas City Massacre in 1933. This was a historic event in law enforcement history which gave rise to the modern FBI. I was deeply honored to carry this badge throughout my FBI career.

I was honored again in 1990 when I was assigned the collateral duty as a spokesman for the Kansas City Division of the FBI. Geographically, this responsibility extended over a swath of land that covers all of Kansas and about two-thirds of Missouri. It was a busy place for law enforcement. The next eighteen years provided me with an inordinate number of opportunities to work with the press and to learn many lessons on communication.

Notice that I didn't say lessons on communication with the media. That would be too restrictive. Media communication is a large part of my experience, but the lessons described in this book can be applied in a general way to various types of communication across many industries and professions. They can be used for internal and external communication; in corporate America, non-profits and government; by executives, managers, front line employees, human resource professionals and, of course, law enforcement professionals.

There are especially important lessons pertaining to crisis situations. How an entity experiencing a crisis is perceived in the long term is often dependent not on the crisis itself, but rather on how information about the incident is communicated to various stakeholders, including employees, customers and the general public. This is of particular importance in an age where traditional journalists no longer totally control the flow of information about an incident. You don't need a degree in journalism, a satellite dish or a newspaper production facility to convey information to the public. Essentially, all that is required to communicate knowledge (be it right or wrong) to large amounts of people is a cellphone and a thumb.

As for media communication, there seems to be no shortage of preventable errors in how information is communicated to the press. Communicators who treat the media like an enemy, who lack preparation or vigilance, who make impromptu comments or who show little or no empathy to the plight of their audience are just asking for communication failure. If there was any doubt whether or not Tony Heyward, the former CEO of BP, should have kept his job following the crisis at Deep Water Horizon, that doubt, as well as public confidence in the

company, was removed following his comments about the disastrous oil spill caused by his company. He showed no empathy to the people affected by the crisis (“There is no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back”). He also tried to minimize the gravity of the situation (“It’s relatively tiny compared to the very big ocean”).

Humanizing your organization with a sincere display of empathy before you begin to tell them what you know makes it easier for an audience to accept your further communications. Teddy Roosevelt captures this sentiment perfectly with the quote, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

We have all seen examples where impromptu comments can have a lingering aftereffect on a community. Recently, the Sheriff in Polk County, Florida was asked by the press why his deputies had shot a man sixty-eight times. His response: “Because that is all the ammunition that we had.”

In 2010, we saw the Toyota Corporation break a basic rule of good communication by not being the first and most credible source of information about their crisis with faulty accelerator pedals.

Sometimes, even when people think they are doing the right thing, they take it too far. A colleague of mine in New York City told me that the head of the New York FBI field office had once come up with what he thought was a great sound bite for a press conference that had do with a criminal case against some mob figures. The FBI agent told the press that “the FBI is twisting the tourniquet on the tentacles of organized crime.” The metaphor might have worked, except that an Associated Press reporter wrote his story with the FBI agent quoted as saying, “The FBI is twisting the tourniquet on the testicles of organized crime.” That is a metaphor most would choose not to envision.

I can point to the mistakes of others, but I too have pulled some big ones in my time and learned some important lessons in the process. This book is about those experiences and others I have had in working with the media for eighteen years. It is my desire that this experience and these lessons will help you in becoming a more effective communicator.