



## The Wordchipper<sup>SM</sup>

by Larry Gauper • #279

Wordchipper@Gmail.com  
Blog: www.Wordchipper.com

Published 21 January 2011

### Crisis PR and today's "journalism"

Having spent several decades as a practitioner and student of public and media relations, I learned about so-called "crisis communication" the hard way. When I was in my salad days in that profession, experience soon taught me that one's only chance—and that's all it is: a chance—to end a negative story the media is pursuing is to follow four principles: **1. Tell it all – 2. Tell it quickly – 3. Tell what you're going to do about it – 4. Say you're sorry.**

These items seem simple, but they are not easy to do. By "telling it all," I don't mean just part of it, but include those facts that you don't want to tell and that might even seem trivial. If you don't tell *everything* about a problem, readers and viewers will keep asking about what you're not saying and the media will keep after it until you do. Unanswered questions do not move stories out of newspapers and broadcasts—or, today, off the blogs and other web media.

You also need to tell your story *quickly*—not on your schedule but the media's. Get out in front of the crisis. If you don't know all the facts at the time, tell what you know and get the rest of it out as soon as you do know—not a moment later.

Telling what you have done or intend to do about *correcting* the problem is key to moving forward. And the solution should be meaningful and clear to the public.

My fourth point is the *mea culpa*, saying you're sorry for what happened. And I strongly recommend doing it right the first time; make it unquestionably sincere. Second apologies don't work very well.

If you diligently take each of these four steps, there is no guarantee that the story will vanish from media. But if you don't do each of these tasks, I can almost guarantee the story will continue. I've seen individuals, companies and organizations take the four steps, and the story still continues because a newspaper or other medium has an agenda or some kind of vendetta they're pursuing. This is unethical, of course, but it's the price we pay for a free press.

Journalistic problems, practices and ethics today are addressed by newspaper man Jack Fuller in his new book entitled *What Is Happening to News: The Information Explosion and the Crisis in Journalism*, published in 2010 by the University of Chicago Press. In his preface, he quotes Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, co-authors of *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (1999), who describe the characteristics of today's "new mixed media culture":

- *A never-ending news cycle makes journalism less complete*
- *Sources are gaining power over journalists*
- *There are no more gatekeepers*
- *Argument is overwhelming reporting*
- *A blockbuster mentality is taking over*

I couldn't agree more with these two authors' views. Newspapers and other media are scrambling for content with fewer human resources (reporters and researchers) than they've ever had before. I know from my own experience in communication that what is *emotional* connects. So the more of that element the media can inject into what should be a factual story, the better they think it "sells" with audiences. And I suppose they're right. But here's where journalistic responsibility comes in. Media used to do a better job of reporting the facts, instead of inserting added emotion into stories.

To help hold reporters, writers and editors accountable, Fuller cites Kovach's and Rosenstiel's "intellectual principles of a science of reporting"—principles, I believe, we have either lost or are losing in today's media-by-argument:

- *Never add anything that was not there.*
- *Never deceive the audience.*
- *Be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives.*
- *Rely on your own original reporting.*
- *Exercise humility.*

Both of the books I've mentioned are excellent commentaries on the sorry state of media ethics and diligence today. There are so many important stories that need reporting, but the resources don't seem to be there to do the digging and ensure accuracy. Headline writers have given way to prejudicing a story before anyone reads the first paragraph; too many times, one side of an argument is missing and topics are strung out over days and weeks, simply because of their gossip, emotional appeal.

A free and diligent media is critical to our representative democracy. I can only hope those who run it and work in it are guided by and—in cases where they've strayed—will return to the five principles I've quoted.