

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AND TERROR ATTACKS: IT'S A WHOLE NEW PR BALLGAME

This article was written by public relations consultant and media trainer Andrew Blum. It was published by CommPro, a website for public relations professionals.

By Andrew Blum

The terror actions in New York, New Jersey and Minnesota once again showed the times we live in. But they also showed that crisis communications now is almost as important as first responders in such incidents.

Each needs to be prepared to deal with a bombing or attack at a moment's notice. This is even truer when communications teams involved are at the local, state and federal levels – and all are responding.

While some involved may not like it — historically local and federal authorities have felt their turf stomped on by each other — there needs to be a lead agency and spokesperson here. There also needs to be lots of coordination to deal with a crisis like the recent ones we had.

Even though I would give both the responders/investigators and communications teams high grades, there was some disconnect at the beginning when elected officials and police and FBI addressed the media on the central semantic question: was the bombing a criminal deliberate act, an act of terror or an incident of international terror.

New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, two Democrats engaged in prior political disagreements, took a different initial tone on that issue: the mayor sided with police and declined to call it terror at first; Cuomo leaned towards linking it to terror right away. That is one area where the message needs to improve.

Additionally, the attacks spilled over into the presidential election with Donald Trump commenting right away and Hillary Clinton waiting for more facts. They then engaged in attacks on each other over national security. Politics is the wild card in such attacks and can hijack the message.

Where the authorities and communications teams excelled was in using cell phone emergency alerts to let residents of the New York City area know they had a suspect in mind who they were looking for.

According to a story in PRWeek, the NYPD, meanwhile, used its 118 Twitter accounts to share photos of the suspect, who was captured on Monday morning, and to send the public information. This was according to Peter Donald, NYPD assistant commissioner for communication and public information, PR Week said.

While cell phone alerts and Twitter were a big help, crisis communications still comes down to PR people and planning so when an attack happens the plan can work well.

Tips for Crisis Communications and Terror Attacks

- Just like first responders have training drills, so should communications teams.
- Refresh your crisis plan often.
- Give the press and public the best answers you have when you have them. A breaking event like a terror attack will always change so be prepared to provide many updates.
- Avoid contradictory statements.

- Use all PR and social media channels.

About the Author: Andrew Blum is a PR consultant and media trainer and principal of AJB Communications. He has directed PR for professional services and financial services firms, NGOs, agencies, families and individuals, and other clients. As a PR executive, and formerly as a journalist, he has been involved on both sides of the media aisle in some of the most media intensive PR crises of the past 25 years. Contact him at ajbcomms@gmail.com or follow him on Twitter: @ajbcomms