

# Downtown Promotion Reporter

## Communications/Media

### Breaking bad news is skill downtown must be able to wield

A spike in store robberies, property vandalism, credit card fraud, and muggings suddenly hits the downtown area. Sidewalk sweeping will be reduced from six days per week to just one day. The title sponsor pulled out of the Christmas parade. The largest downtown employer is closing its doors.

When situations like these arise, it calls for prompt and appropriate action from the downtown organization to calm fears and build confidence.

#### First off, don't panic

Before deciding how to react, define your goal and your audience, says Lindsay Strand, a communications consultant, media trainer, and speech coach.

Whenever downtown has bad news that needs to be shared, think about all the people who need to be informed as part of an audience pyramid, she advises.

"Put at the top of the pyramid the most important people to communicate with right away, and what they need to know. That may change over time," she says, as a given crisis changes. "You need to decide, who needs information first and what they need to know. That may vary with different groups, but all of your messaging needs to be consistent and tied together," she says.

#### Tailor the details to the audience

How general or specific downtown is in sharing the bad news all depends on the audience. Let's consider the first situation above: A spike in store robberies, property vandalism, credit card fraud, and muggings.

"The first thing you need to do is to assess, what are

the true risks, and what steps are being taken to address those risks," Strand says.

"Your communication to your retailers may be different than the communication that is shared with the public." For example, downtown may wish to tell retailers very specifically, "We've increased security during these hours," she says. "Contact this security consultant we're working with about measures available to boost your store's security on site."

"You might want to be very specific with downtown businesses, and provide more detail than you

#### When squashing false rumors, clarify the truth and move on

In this age of social media and citizen journalism, the Internet is becoming the primary place where information is exchanged and shared, and anyone with an opinion and a technological means to share it can have an audience.

As we all know, the sensational stuff that spreads like wildfire online may seem plausible, but more often than not is pure fiction.

If downtown finds itself in a position where it has to counter a false Internet rumor or misleading blog post, it needs a simple message that's well-understood by people. But don't belabor your points.

"Clarify the things that are absolutely mistaken or incorrect, and then move on," advises communications consultant Lindsay Strand.

would to the general public, about what kinds of criminal events are happening, so that they can best protect their employees and customers,” she adds.

“You may want to then work with the police department, to decide, ‘What’s the strategy that we need to have with the public?’” she says.

“Is the strategy simply that we need to have a more visible security presence, or do we need to be issuing some kind of statement?”

It is also vitally important to get all of the available facts before deciding on a course of action. In this case you might ask: is it true that there has been a spike in each one of these crime areas, or is that just a popular impression? “I can’t tell you how many times people have engaged me to head off a crisis that was just based on poor information,” says Strand.

What’s important for your audiences to know when sharing negative news like this, she says, comes down to effectively communicating four things:

- Downtown is on top of the problem.
- Downtown knows what’s going on.
- Downtown has a plan in place to address it.
- Downtown is being proactive.

### **Keep news in context to keep fears in check**

How does downtown address a negative news issue or crisis without adding to it by stirring fear?

“One of the things that you have to remember is to show people that you have a plan in place, but don’t keep the entire focus on yourself. Broaden it out so that people remember the context of this,” Strand says.

For example, she says, “We may see an increase in some types of crimes in this down economy. They’re not just going to happen in one particular city or city center. It may be part of a trend, that this kind of crime is happening across the country. And here’s what we’re doing in our community to address it,” she says.

Notice that this response does two key things. First, it broadens the issue out, reminding people that the rise in crime is not only happening in this one particular downtown, but something people and businesses must be more vigilant about everywhere.

Second, it brings the larger issue back to the local level in a way that inspires confidence. “Again, let people know that you have a plan in place to address the problem,” she says.

### **Protect downtown’s credibility**

When you do have bad news to tell, it’s very important to keep in mind “what you have in your goodwill bank with your audiences,” Strand says.

Does downtown have solid relationships and respect? Does it have a reputation for being credible and forthright?

“If people have to make that hairline decision, ‘Do I believe or trust this?’ they look to what’s in the goodwill bank for an organization’s reputation to decide,” she says. “Reporters do that, and so does the public.”

If a downtown organization has a history of being nonresponsive or less than forthcoming in responding to crises, the press and public in general will be more likely to jump to the conclusion that the problem is bigger than downtown is letting on.

On the other hand, if downtown’s leadership has faced tough situations before and addressed them in ways that earned the goodwill of their audiences, “they will be much more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt,” she says.

“It’s always important to construct your message from the audience viewpoint,” she says. “Think based on what they’re thinking. What concerns do they have, what benefits will persuade them, and what do they need to know. Not what you want to tell them, but what do they need to know.”

For example, if the price of on-street parking will be going up, “telling the story about your budget gap isn’t going to have the same impact as if you tell them from their standpoint, what is happening, both good and bad, and what it means to them.”

There are also times when bad news isn’t significant enough to be on the radar of the general press or public. Then it’s best to simply prepare a standby statement and have it ready if and when it’s needed.

But if it’s clear that downtown has bad news that is going to unfold publicly and be in the public eye, “you’re always better off being the first one out with a story because you frame the story, and you maintain control of the release of information. The minute you’re not seen as participating, others will take the leadership position,” Strand says.

“If you want to maintain control of the issue, you need to demonstrate that you are in charge and be the first out there to frame it up,” she says.

“Nobody likes surprises. Your constituents are going to be more receptive if they’re hearing it from you first rather than hearing or reading about it somewhere else.”

### **Choose the messenger**

Choosing the most appropriate messenger to break bad news to the community depends on the working relationships that downtown has with relevant elected officials, city departments, property managers, etc., the severity and nature of the situation, and who’s willing to step forward with the information.

All parties concerned must be kept in the loop to determine the most appropriate messenger. If an apology is in order, make it. Remember that apologies that come too late are seen as insincere.

A variety of vehicles may be needed to deliver the message, and different age groups tend to favor different communication means. But when the situation is critical, face-to-face communication is always best.

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