

July/August/September 1996

TO: Executive Addressed

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RE: Selective Engagement: Powerful Principles for Surviving Corporate Crises

Business organizations rarely become extinct due to crisis, but the high-profile crisis can generate serious temporary harm to reputation, credibility, and integrity. Selective engagement is an approach that focuses on limiting the scope of crisis visibility, reducing mistakes, and controlling surprise. Selective engagement is a mindset and communication strategy stressing focus, control, and patterns of action governed by the following principles:

1. Act to control, to contain, and to manage your own communications.
2. Always let opponents speak for themselves. (Avoid media goading to comment.)
3. Concentrate preparation on only the toughest questions.
4. Focus on the communications goal -- no matter what.
 - o Define your own achievable goal -- or someone else will guess, speculate, or forecast it for you.
 - o Refuse to be distracted.
 - o Refuse to be irritated.
 - o Refuse to be rushed.
5. Force the issues, messages, and the players to be small in number. Resist bullying by your opposition, the media, or PR critics to enlarge, expand, or create new issues or mindless visibility.
6. Keep your friends, relatives, and bosses on the script, or quiet.
7. Let entropy occur. Allow the energy of events to dissipate through appropriate non-action. Accommodate the force and effect of events and issues before taking counteractive measures; see where they lead, first.
8. Monitor the media aggressively, but avoid letting them drive your strategy.
9. Respond to the media only when your message goals are served. (There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that says you have to call the press back!)
10. Use a limited set of brief, positive messages.
 - o Adapt messages to changing attitudes and responses only when necessary.
 - o Keep messages consistent across all affected audiences.
 - o Stick to your script.
 - o Avoid negative words and phrases -- they become the headlines and the story every time.
11. Use non-news media direct communications tools.
 - o Talk directly to employees, customers, suppliers, victims, and others directly affected.
 - o Only use the news media to:
 - Reach critical "unreachable" audiences.

- Create appropriate perceptions among audiences who care (they select themselves).
 - Contact others who are affected indirectly.
12. Honorable action, on the ground, is always the crucial ingredient, not media coverage.

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