

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A SHORT COURSE

Giving interviews is necessary but can be risky. One of an interviewee's greatest frustrations, especially with print news stories, is what the reporter and editor may do with the answers he or she gives. With broadcast stories, it's what reporter leaves out that is of most concern. With critics, competitors, and complainers, it's how much confusion, emotion, and allegation they can get into a story about you.

- What if the reporter makes a mistake?
- What if the reporter leaves really important things out of the story?
- If the reporter does make errors and mistakes, how do you effectively correct them? Or should you?
- What do you do about unrelated, confusing, negative, sensational, or competitive ideas that creep into the story?
- What if the story is just plain wrong?

We advocate a Web-based technique we call "Corrections & Clarifications" where a print story or the transcript of a broadcast news story is laid out in such a way that it can be effectively corrected and clarified. These corrections and clarifications are then put on a Web site, and often also e-mailed to key stakeholders and stakeholder groups. This approach allows us to avoid the restrictions that letters to the editor, op-eds, and other media-dominated or controlled response mechanisms tend to place on our ability to have correct information on-the-record and available promptly to the publics we care about. This response technique works equally well with flyers, letters, news releases, video news releases, and white papers from those who oppose us in critical high-profile situations.

Why do this? As neat as this idea is, when first suggested, almost every client wants to know why anyone would put bad stuff, of any kind, up on the Web, for any reason. Their question is, "Won't this just make it available to lots more people and critics?" Here are five reasons why you should do this:

1. Your record is your responsibility. The public perception of your record is also your responsibility. This strategy manages both the public perception and the record.
2. Constructive approaches control the tone of debate, discussion, and differences of opinion.
3. Your constituents expect you to do this.
4. Honorable people can, and should, answer any and all questions.
5. The technique tends to script everyone – constituents, critics, the media, and commentators.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations. He is an expert in managing and counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. The fastest growing portion of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation. He is one of the few who can and truly does coach CEOs.

He is a prolific author (several books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), coach, and counselor. He is quoted in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and industry trade journals. He is a columnist, advisor, or editor for almost every major public relations periodical. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. He is an internationally recognized speaker on crisis management, ethics, media relations, public affairs, and reputation preservation and restoration. Visiting his Web site, www.e911.com, is like attending the University of Crisis Management.

An accredited member of the International Association of Business Communicators (ABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (APR), Mr. Lukaszewski is a member of the PRSA's College of Fellows (Fellow PRSA) and Board of Ethics & Professional Standards. He served as a crisis communications advisor to the International Disaster Advisory Committee, Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance from 1989 to 1992, and is a civilian advisor to several other federal agencies. He lectures annually at the U.S. Marine Corp's East Coast Commander's Media Training Symposium and was the second recipient of its Drew Middleton Award. He is the recipient of both Ball State University's 2004 National Public Relations Achievement Award and the 2004 Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA, and is among the winners of the 2005 *PR News* Lifetime Achievement Award. His name appeared in *Corporate Legal Times* as one of "28 Experts to Call When All Hell Breaks Loose," and in *PR Week* as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on the speed dial in a crisis."