

CHAPTER 8

HOW YOU SAY IT SAYS A LOT!

“Humor is the affectionate communication of insight.”

~ Leo Rosten

So maybe you were the victim of bad publicity. Most likely, it was through no fault of your good intentions, but our society has changed. People are more likely to scream to the press or start their own blog than ever before about things you wouldn't have imagined. Before you can wink twice, there can be an e-mail or Internet smear campaign waged against you or your business. And unfortunately, whether the allegations are true or not, if it's in print or in any form of media, people tend to believe it! Hence, one of the biggest services in a marketer's world today is crisis communication and media training. Simply put, re-educate angry customers to help change their negative experience and subsequent, vocalized opinions.

Here's a classic case in point: A water utility provider in a smaller community of a few thousand homes is located within thirty miles of the main city. Add several years of drought. It would seem, on the surface, that water conservation and rising cost would be the major points of contention. In reality, ineffective communication between the residents and this municipality caused an offensive/defensive relationship that led some angry homeowners to scream to the press. Not only did they get plenty of news coverage, an even more hostile relationship ensued on both sides. Despite many attempts at open discussion town meetings with the municipality's general manager, there was an "ambush" mentality that was impossible to avert without sufficient media training and strategic public relations to help the manager respond appropriately without getting defensive, which led to great mistrust among the residents.

What the community at-large failed to realize was the damage being caused by a few people. Their anger got in the way of their ability to rationally understand the municipality's operation and long-term master plan. Shouting to the press was creating an even greater detrimental outcome to themselves and the entire community. With enough negative publicity regarding water supply or pricing, home property values may actually fall. People could have greater difficulty selling their homes for a good price and potential homebuyers are often wary of moving into a community with bad press.

Now, if the problems are legitimate, those are issues that need solving. But do so quietly and work together to achieve a reasonable outcome. WHY? If it becomes a community perceived to have severe water issues via the print or electronic press, this kind of media reporting actually hurts the very people who were complaining, as well as everyone else! Realtors will stay away, and so will potential buyers. Therefore, crisis communications and media strategy training were critical with this municipality's staff and management. Once reporters bite into a story like this, they or their editors become the gatekeepers of which "five to fifteen second, often out-of-context sound-bites" the public hears. These shortened, edited clips tend to be repeated; then other reporters

jump on it and talk to more angry homeowners, which creates an even bigger public monster and liability for the community as a whole.

Says A Lot Preview