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**AMUSEMENT PARK CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND ITS EFFECT  
ON THE CRISIS NEWS LIFE CYCLE**

By  
Kristin B. Siebeneicher

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts in Public Relations Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
~~June~~ 14, 2004

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor

Date Approved 6-16-04

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## ABSTRACT

Kristin B. Siebeneicher  
AMUSEMENT PARK CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND ITS EFFECT  
ON THE CRISIS NEWS LIFE CYCLE  
2003/04

Professor Anthony Fulginiti, APR, Fellow PRSA  
Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purpose of this thesis was to evaluate whether effective amusement park crisis management can shorten the crisis news life cycle. Twenty-two in-depth interviews with seasoned media, amusement park public relations practitioners, and park PR practitioners who formerly worked in media were conducted and analyzed through content analysis. Coverage of an amusement ride incident was analyzed through content analysis to support interview findings. Numerous strategies are identified to build a foundation for effective crisis management, and to shorten the duration of crisis news coverage. Differences in managing print media versus television media are discussed. The thesis identifies amusement park incident criteria that either indicate one-day crisis coverage, or high volume and frequency of coverage and the likelihood of continuing crisis coverage. The identified strategies and crisis criteria can help amusement park public relations practitioners manage crises and shorten the news life cycle.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks all of the public relations professionals and media who selflessly gave their time and insight to this thesis. Thanks to parents Catherine and Paul Siebeneicher for their unending love and support. Thanks to Sean McAllister for his enthusiasm, patience, laughs and love. Thanks to amazing Professor Tony Fulginiti for his insight, guidance and editing skills – I feel lucky to have shared this project with you. And finally, thanks to the addictive industry that grabbed me as a child, and hasn't let go. Theme parks bring joy and excitement to millions each year with its loops, spins and drops and I've surely enjoyed the ride.

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# CHAPTER 1

## **IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

When Americans want to escape from stresses of everyday reality, they often seek refuge in the thrills, fantasy and emotional release of an amusement park. More than 600 parks and attractions across the country totaled more than 324 million visitors in 2002. Grossing \$9.9 billion in revenue, the amusement industry provides valuable sustenance to America's economy. ("U.S. Amusement/Theme Parks & Attractions Industry – Attendance & Revenues," *IAAPA.org*)

While amusement parks statistically rank as one of the country's safest forms of recreation, infrequent ride accidents do occur. The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that in 2001, 6,704 emergency room-related injuries occurred related to fixed-site amusement rides, resulting in 134 overnight hospital stays and an average of two fatalities per year over the past decade.

Based on these data, and the calculation that each guest averages five rides annually, the likelihood of being injured and requiring overnight hospitalization is more than 1 in 11 million, and the chance of being fatally injured is just 1 in 760 million. Government and independent data both support the fact that more than 99.99% of park fixed-site amusement riders enjoy their experience without incident. Statistically, amusement park visitors are much safer on the rides than skiing, biking, jogging, dancing, skipping rope, and even riding in their own vehicles heading to the park. (*ibid.*)

Despite the amusement park industry's remarkable safety record, the media can

nevertheless shake the public's faith in the industry and in a particular park. Dramatic photographs, inflammatory interviews and sensational reporting about a park incident, coupled with frequency of incident coverage, can distort the public's perception of the incident's severity and further damage the park's reputation. When the public deems an amusement park unsafe, that park faces attendance and revenue loss. Ultimately, that park could collapse under the weight of public mistrust and media scrutiny.

Amusement park public relations managers must effectively manage crises and work to maintain or rebuild the park's safety record. Through crisis preparation, public relations managers will be ready when crises strike. Authors Timothy Coombs, Granville King III, Peter Stanton and David Zerman champion the position that prepared managers and their crisis management teams will immediately begin executing effective crises plans that minimize impact to parks' daily operation and upholds their reputation. Without proper planning and experience, public relations managers can cause further damage through media mismanagement. A company's inability to communicate its message skillfully during a crisis can prove fatal. (Fink, 92)

### ***Validity of Study***

Scholars like Zerman, John Dimmick, Camilla Gant and S.J. Ray have demonstrated the influence of mass media on public perceptions, influencing everyday decisions, and even affecting the success or failure of a business. Ray states, "The media can influence public perception in regards to issues involving cause, blame, response, resolution, and consequences."

Zerman states that because of pressure to earn high television ratings and sell

large volumes of newspapers, editorial executives opt for stories that garner public attention, including sensational and human-interest stories, particularly stories with a strong visual. Karl Parker, a television news professional for 10 years and producer of Philadelphia's WB-17 News agrees, "a good visual is critical." Parker states that several key factors motivate news coverage including "threats to public safety, violence and anything that warrants a police or emergency response."

Jonathan Alter and Bill Kirtz note and criticize the media's propensity toward sensationalism. Even 552 top media executives in 1998 survey agreed that the line between business and editorial was crumbling and that sensationalism was too prevalent in news. The survey also indicated that media executives and their staffs acknowledge that a line is being crossed between "infotainment" and news (Noack, 14). Therefore, in an effort to sell newspapers and increase advertising dollars and ratings, the "business of journalism" has shifted toward bias and sensationalism, and away from fair and impartial reporting.

Sadly, this focus on sensationalistic reporting reaches beyond the public's perception of companies or public figures. A medical study from the University of California Medical Center suggests that local TV news's focus on fires, accidents and murders also distorts the public's perception of real risks to their own health (Trigoboff, 30). Clearly, the new "business of journalism" negatively impacts the American public.

Some amusement industry decision-makers agree that the ethics of news reporting are in short supply. Tim O'Brien's and Natasha Emmons' articles in the amusement industry's most highly regarded publication, *Amusement Business*, reflect the opinion that sensationalism and unbalanced journalism sometimes taint the coverage of amusement



incidents.

Understanding the media – how they operate, who makes their decisions, their motives and deadlines – is the key to anticipating their actions. Karin Korpowski, who has spent 13 years in the news media and entertainment public relations, states that “having a good relationship with your media and knowing their business can have a very positive effect on news coverage.” Therefore, public relations practitioners must think like the media think, and forge trusting relationships with the media to practice effective media relations.

Zerman concludes that knowing how the media operate will help a manager effectively communicate the organization’s viewpoint in a crisis, and help keep the organization running during this time. (25)

Christopher Krese, King and Zerman stress the importance of a crisis management plan to help a company cope with a crisis. Debbie Evans, public relations director for Six Flags Inc.’s 31 theme parks worldwide, agrees that a crisis plan is essential. “Prepare the plan in advance, review it, assign roles to individuals and prepare responses for a wide variety of incidents.”

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Does the proper crisis management of an amusement park ride incident shorten the crisis news life cycle?

A “crisis” is a turning point. In Chinese, “crisis” is formed by two words: “wei” meaning risk, and “ji” meaning opportunity. Crisis management is an opportunity to respond and take control, versus reacting to a crisis, signifying a loss of control.

Stephen Fink says that a situation can become a “crisis” when it has potential to escalate in intensity, suffer close media or government scrutiny, interfere with normal business operations, jeopardize the positive image of the company and its officers, and damage the bottom line. (15-16)

Fink created the concept of a four-phase “crisis life cycle” to explain the emergence and development of a crisis: (20)

1. **Prodromal stage.** “Prodromal” is derived from Greek meaning “warning.” Warning signs emerge in this pre-crisis phase. This phase features the public relations manager’s only opportunity to prevent a crisis from happening.
2. **Acute stage.** The crisis occurs in this stage.
3. **Chronic stage.** This stage is the life of the crisis, which could end quickly or linger. The public relations manager must work to reduce the length of the chronic stage.
4. **Resolution stage.** The crisis is resolved during this stage.

Following these phases, the company then returns to the prodromal stage, awaiting the emergence of new warning signs. (ibid. 21 – 28)

The crisis news life cycle also features four phases that may progress in sequence, or out-of-sequence, similar to Fink’s life cycle.

1. **Phase One – Break the Story.** Once crises occur, the media will report them. Given the 24-hour news cycle, much competition lies among news stations to be the first to “break” a story. Media want to know what has happened, why, anyone was hurt or killed, and if the incident happened before.

The company must enter the information exchange arena to maintain any level of control over the story. Therefore, the company's most critical opportunity to be heard lies in the first response when the public relations manager works to minimize the crisis or even end the story. The essential first response might affirm what has happened, show concern and/or compassion, set the stage for forthcoming information, or attempt to end the story by dispelling rumors or news inaccuracies.

2. **Phase Two - Follow-up.** Depending on the nature of the story or the visuals attained, media may follow up. Public relations managers should always prepare for follow-up questions to the initial story such as reasons for the crisis, corrective actions and preventative strategies.
3. **Phase Three – Investigate and Expose.** If the media feel mismanaged or that information is being withheld, some reporters may work relentlessly to “find the truth” or “expose a cover up” in the name of public good. They might investigate past incidents to find patterns of activity, or point the finger at certain employees. They might film with a “hidden camera” to prove there is more than meets the eye. Young reporters might use this opportunity to gain personal exposure or promotion to a higher-ranking market.

This phase could produce a burst of news stories, or lingering, sporadic follow-up stories that stretch for weeks, months or longer. The phase length might depend on what else is happening in the news. If little else is making headlines, the crisis story and its visuals may repeat to fill airtime or column inches.

Public relations managers must approach this phase with caution, and work with their crisis management teams to ensure the company operates honestly, openly and with accuracy to prevent further negative information from surfacing, thereby adding new life to the story.

- 4. Phase Four – Keep the Past Present.** Often, the media will revisit a company's historical shortcomings. The public will be reminded of the company's negative past over and over as media find present relevance to link the company to its troubled past.

The final news life cycle phase might survive throughout the company's lifetime, depending on the severity of an incident, if incidents were repeated, or if new incidents continually emerge. The media might link one company's incident to unrelated incidents, or revisit the incident while the company rebuilds its reputation.

If a company's reputation has been tarnished in the media, public relations managers must begin the slow process of repairing and rebuilding that reputation. Public relations managers must continually, proactively reinforce their companies' positive messages, and prepare for bad history to resurface. Managers must isolate the incident, and push toward a positive future.

*(Six Flags 1999 Media Training)*

## **DELIMITATIONS**

The author is a public relations practitioner who has spent the last eight years in the amusement industry working for Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, NJ. She has

completed numerous crisis management training courses with amusement industry crisis experts and general public relations experts. As part of a crisis management team, she has managed dozens of amusement park crises.

The author maintains relationships with numerous amusement industry public relations managers within Six Flags Inc. and in several other amusement park companies. She has been building relationships with New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey and national media for 10 years. In addition, she works closely with amusement industry writers and critics.

This study focuses only on the management of fixed-site amusement ride incidents, and uses interviews from managers and executives from fixed-site amusement parks.

This study does not discuss crisis management pertaining to radio or Internet media, only television and print. Radio has the least public relations impact in amusement park crisis situations, as there is no opportunity for dramatic visuals. Most television and print media maintain Web sites and reflect their news stories on the Web. Therefore, it is understood that if a crisis garners on-air or print coverage, it will also appear electronically on the media outlet's Web site.

The author interviewed two experienced members of the media – Karl Parker, former reporter, anchor and news director, and current producer of the WB-17 News in Philadelphia, and Korpowski, a former print news reporter, TV news editor and producer in Cleveland, and public relations manager for Six Flags America outside Washington, DC. These experts were chosen for their work experience relating to corporate crisis communicators, namely amusement park public relations managers. Television impacts

amusement park crisis communication most intensely, given the immediacy of aerial helicopter footage, dramatic visuals that enhance a new story, and the 24-hour news cycle. Newspapers impact amusement park crisis communication because of likely follow-up stories, and dramatic still photos that enhance the story.

The author also interviewed an experienced theme park public relations practitioner, Evans, the public relations director for Six Flags Inc.'s, the world's largest regional theme park company. Her views, coupled with Korpowski's vast theme park public relations experience with Walt Disney World, Anheuser-Busch Entertainment and Six Flags, provided valuable insight into amusement park public relations managers' challenges and practices.

The study does not systematically rate or measure the impact of crises discussed. It does not reveal public reaction to amusement park ride incident media coverage. The study is based on verbal or written accounts from the managers who handled those situations, and media who covered them, to assess the success or failure of crisis management plans and managers' performances. These actual cases will be used to suggest whether proper crisis management can shorten the crisis news life cycle.

## **PURPOSE**

While amusement parks remain an incredibly safe form of recreation, amusement park ride incidents are widely reported. Given the visual nature of ride incidents, the coverage of such an event can dominate the media for days, weeks or longer – regardless of whether injury or death resulted from the incident. Korpowski states, “Despite its newsworthiness, a compelling visual will be covered.” Evans says that coverage is also

contingent upon the other news of the day, and “if it’s a slow news day, a coaster stopped on a lift hill could be a top story, but shouldn’t be.”

To help amusement park public relations managers prepare for ride incidents and the media inquiries that follow, managers must understand the amusement industry as well as the media, how they function, and meet their needs. They must also know other factors that influence why and how stories are covered, and what determines the frequency and longevity of a crisis story. Evans states, “If the story is compelling, displays drama or controversy, it will be covered.” Parker adds that a story will continue to be covered as long as new developments arise and/or new visuals become available.

Effective crisis management will successfully help navigate the public relations manager and the amusement park through the crisis, and help preserve the park’s positive reputation by shortening or ending the crisis news life cycle.

Much can be learned by gathering crisis management information from experienced amusement park public relations managers and the media’s decision-makers. The author identified the typical crisis news life cycle of varying types of amusement park ride incidents based on three criteria. This research will help public relations practitioners successfully manage park incidents based on the anticipated crisis news life cycle. Those criteria are:

1. Are there aspects of certain events that create high volume and frequency of coverage and high likelihood of continuing coverage?
2. Are there aspects of certain events in which second-day stories are possible but might not happen based on the incident’s nature and public relations practitioner activity?

3. Are there aspects of certain events or public relations practitioner activity that shorten the crisis news life cycle?

This research determines what role, if any, pre-existing public relations manager/news gatekeeper relationships play when ride incidents occur.

This research examines geographic differences in media management in various regions of the country and how these differences affect crisis communication. The study also identifies key differences when the practitioner deals with television versus print media during crises.

### ***Hypothesis***

The author hypothesizes that proper crisis management of an amusement park ride incident shortens the crisis news life cycle, often by overcoming media zest for sensationalism. Amusement park public relations managers can employ specific strategies and tactics to prepare for crises and properly manage crises once they happen, thereby counteracting media attempts to sensationalize the story and shortening the crisis news life cycle. A positive public relations manager's reputation forged among media will also help the manager during crises, adding credibility to the company's message and the messenger who delivers it.

The author believes that geography plays a role in the building of personal relationships between media and amusement park public relations practitioners. The part of the country in which public relations practitioners practice their craft affects their relationship with media. Media ranked among the top 10 local advertising markets, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Dallas, face strong competition



and therefore use more sensationalism to attract readers/viewers and drive sales. The sales drive also leads media in the top 10 markets to thoroughly cover ride incidents (given the inherent drama and potential for compelling visuals) with little positive news balance, while smaller markets offer more balanced coverage of positive park news stories and crisis coverage.

However, the author believes there are exceptions to these rules. Certain factors virtually guarantee prolonged accident coverage regardless of how the crisis is handled, such as a dramatic visual, death of a rider, multiple riders' injuries, inflammatory sound bites from riders or bystanders, and outside influences like a "slow news day." To media, such factors typify the meaning of "news" – what is "new."

Based on common media practices and the evolving "business of journalism," these criteria overcome proper crisis management and the park will garner significant media coverage. Evans says, "Sometimes it doesn't matter if you manage the situation properly, the story will still be covered and potentially live on and on." A television station will continue to show compelling ride incident footage for days despite lacking new developments, she added.

## **PROCEDURE**

To fully understand amusement park crisis management, it is necessary to understand crisis management and the media. Extensive library database searches for articles, journals, speeches and abstracts were conducted through ABI/Inform Global, ProQuest and LexisNexis using the words and phrases, "crisis management," "crisis communication," "crisis management teams," "management of crises," "public relations

crisis management,” “public relations management,” “communication management,” “television news,” “news broadcasting,” “news planning,” “media coverage,” “media gatekeepers,” “news ethics,” “journalistic ethics,” “news media,” “print reporting,” “media credibility,” “sensationalism in news,” “crisis management and entertainment,” “theme parks and crisis management,” “amusement parks and crisis management,” “amusement accidents,” “amusement rides,” “theme park safety,” “amusement injuries,” and the like. Additional online searches were conducted using the same words and phrases.

A search for similarly-themed theses was conducted at Rowan’s Campbell Library. The author also searched Campbell Library, Rowan’s public relations graduate resource room, bookstores and consulted with other public relations practitioners for crisis management books.

Various amusement industry Web sites were searched for information, as well as sites offering statistical information about the amusement industry, such as *IAAPA.org*, *sixflags.com*, *themeparkinsider.com*, *rides911.com* and *CPSC.org*. Additional public relations crisis management information was garnered from *Altamira.com* and *NEA.org*.

Crisis management and training materials were collected from Six Flags Inc., The Gooden Group, International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, and public relations/crisis courses the author completed.

In addition to secondary research sources, the author completed in-depth telephone interviews with two amusement park public relations practitioners, Evans, public relations director for Six Flags Inc., and Korpowski, public relations manager for Six Flags America in Largo, Maryland outside Washington, DC. Korpowski is a former

print reporter and television producer and assignment editor in Cleveland.

Philadelphia's WB-17 News Producer Karl Parker was interviewed. Parker is a former reporter, anchor and news director in the Midwest and New Jersey.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

*Amusement industry:* The large-scale business activity involving amusement parks.

*Amusement park:* An outdoor area for entertainment, with a merry-go-round, roller coaster, refreshment stands, games of chance, etc.

*Attendance:* The numbers of persons attending an amusement park in one calendar year.

*Batman & Robin: The Chiller:* A dual track, linear induction-powered roller coaster at Six Flags Great Adventure, Jackson, NJ.

*Break the story:* Action by a reporter or media outlet to make public a certain story before anyone else reports the same story.

*Crisis:* A turning point, often threatening to result in unpleasant consequences such as strain, disruption, or public and media scrutiny upon a company or person.

*Crisis communication:* Communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after a negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks 2). Crisis communication focuses on the media, public and employees.

*Crisis life cycle:* Term created by Steven Fink in *Crisis Management* to describe the four stages of a crisis: "prodromal" or warning stage, "acute" or actual crisis event stage, "chronic" stage or the life of a crisis, and the "resolution" stage marking the end of the crisis.

*Crisis news life cycle:* Phases of media behavior during crises. The four phases include – break the story, follow-up, investigate and expose, and keep the past present.

*Crisis management:* Systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur (Pearson 61). Crisis management includes crisis communication.

*Crisis preparation:* Work completed by a public relations manager and management team that outlines potential crises and their resolutions, rehearses crises and their predetermined resolutions, and reviews the performance of all parties involved to improve future responses either in drills or actual crises.

*Electronic media:* Internet media sites.

*Fixed-site amusement park:* An amusement park that is not mobile, where rides and refreshment stands remain in one place, unlike a carnival.

*Fluff stories:* Human-interest/feature stories for entertainment value.

*Incident/accident coverage:* Television and print reporting of a particular crisis.

*Information exchange arena:* Dialogue between media and public relations managers; the give and take of information. Also known as media relations.

*Infotainment:* The act of presenting news in an amusing, curious or slickly-produced manner as entertainment, rather than simply reporting the news in a straightforward way.

*Mass media:* Newspapers, television, radio.

*Media decision makers/gatekeepers:* Members of the mass media who choose stories to report, such as news assignment editors, news planners and managers, reporters, producers and the like.

*Media Relations:* Public relations practitioners working with members of the media. Also known as information exchange arena.

*Public relations:* A management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics upon which success or failure depends. (Cutlip, 6)

*Public relations crisis plan:* A method for planning and thinking about situations in day-to-day operations, business and company communities, and preparing company people to understand and respond to the special demands of crisis conditions. (Stanton, 19-22)

*Public relations practitioner/manager:* The individual responsible for executing the company's public relations program, including acting as a crisis communicator.

*Revenue:* Income generated from the operation of an amusement park.

*Ride accident/ride incident:* Both refer to an amusement ride happening that is not expected or intended. A "ride incident" will typically be resolved by redundant safety systems, meaning that while one safety system failed, a backup system worked properly, as designed, usually sparing riders from injury and limiting damage to property. A "ride accident" typically signifies a failure of all safety systems, and sometimes results in bodily injury, damage to property, or loss of life. The term "ride incident" will most often be used in company statements, regardless of what actually occurred. Media will sometimes continue the use of "incident" when amusement parks offer it, but effort to

sensationalize, or not understanding the difference in meaning, often lead them to use “accident” instead.

*Six Flags America:* Regional theme park operated by Six Flags Inc. located nine miles from Washington, D.C. in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

*Six Flags Great Adventure:* America’s largest regional theme park with more than 100 rides, shows and attractions. Located in Jackson, NJ, next to Six Flags Wild Safari animal park and Six Flags Hurricane Harbor water park. All three Jackson parks are operated by Six Flags Inc.

*Six Flags Inc.:* The world’s largest regional theme park company with 31 parks internationally. It is the parent company of Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey and Six Flags America outside Washington, D.C.

*Slow news day:* A phase when little to no news is breaking, and old stories are repeated to fill newspaper space or television airtime.

*Stonewalling:* Behaving in an uncooperative manner by refusing to answer or withholding information when asked a question.

*Theming:* Giving a theme to an item, such as a specific period in history, a famous character or notable brand.

*24-hour news cycle:* The constant reporting of news 24 hours a day. The 24-hour news cycle brought an end to traditional news deadlines, making the need for responses to media inquiries immediate.

*Visual/Dramatic visual:* That which can be seen, and is filled with action, emotion or exciting qualities.

## CHAPTER 2

While little has been published on amusement park crisis management and its effect on the crisis news life cycle, experts have written extensively about crisis management and the media. This chapter examines literature content on crisis management principles, techniques and pitfalls, focusing on media relations and the crisis spokesperson role, and media's role in society, practices and the business of journalism.

Finally, this chapter exposes a media attack upon the amusement industry, reveals the amusement industry's crisis management procedures, and offers industry experts' crisis coverage reviews. The chapter profiles Six Flags Inc.' crisis media training and its response to safety attacks, as well as several travel and tourism industry crises and their resolutions.

### **CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

#### *What is a crisis?*

Experts agree that crises involve a time of risk and uncertainty. Timothy W. Coombs defined a crisis as an unpredictable event, a major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly (2). King III called a crisis "an unplanned event that has the potential of dismantling the internal and external structure of an organization," potentially affecting not only employees and other members internal to the organization, but also key publics and stakeholders external to the organization (235). Kathleen Fearn-Banks stated that a crisis "interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of an organization." (1)

Addressing the opportunity provided by crises, Steven Fink stated, “a crisis is an unstable time in which a decisive change is impending which may produce a highly undesirable outcome, or a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome.” (15)

Fink further defined a crisis as “any event that may escalate in intensity, fall under close media and government scrutiny, interfere with normal business operations and affect the image and bottom line of a company” (15-16). Stanton’s similar criteria include risks to life, health, safety and environment, resources needed beyond internal capability, management and staff diverted away from the routine for an extended period, and communication requirements that exceed the routine. (19-22)

Crises may be products of external forces, internal ineptitude, or both (Brody, 181). Crises are unpredictable but not unexpected. Coombs believes that wise organizations know what crises will befall them, they just do not know when (2). Therefore, communicators must guard against all eventualities. (Brody, 181)

### ***Importance of Crisis Management***

Crises have become an inevitable, natural feature of our everyday lives (Mitroff 3, 2001). In fact, no organization is immune to crises (Coombs 1). Therefore, all organizations need crisis management programs. The program must provide framework and procedures for helping organizations cope with all crises. (Zerman 25)

Once stakeholders view an organization in a negative light, its reputation and overall survival may be at risk. Senior officials within the organization will often attempt to communicate with the media, the general public and key stakeholders to appear as having controlled or contained the crisis (King III 235-50). It may seem unfair, but an organization’s reputation, that has developed for years or even decades, may be destroyed

in the time it takes to say “no comment.” (Ucelli 21-25)

Crisis management – planning for a crisis, and managing a turning point – removes much of the risk and uncertainty, and allows organizations to achieve more control over their destiny (Fearn-Banks 2). Since a “situation” can escalate in intensity, that same situation – if caught and managed in time – might not escalate. Instead, it could dissipate, or be resolved (Fink 15-16). Successfully executing a crisis management plan demonstrates a company’s commitment to building, sustaining and reinforcing a community of trust. (Temple 40)

Effective crisis management includes crisis communication that can alleviate or eliminate the crisis, but sometimes bring the organization a more positive reputation than it had *before* the crisis. Research shows that organizations that practice media relations and ongoing two-way communications often avoid crises or endure crises of shorter duration or lesser magnitude. Research also shows that organizations with crisis management plans come out of crises with a more positive image. (Fearn-Banks 2-3)

Therefore, sound crisis communications procedures and a solid crisis management infrastructure need to be part of business as usual. (Krese 22)

### ***Keys of Crisis Management***

In a company white paper, Earle Palmer Brown designated 10 crisis management rules, including anticipating crises, using a crisis team, designating a spokesperson, being calm and truthful, moving swiftly, addressing all audiences and analyzing results.



## ***1. Crisis Management Planning***

All crisis management activities must include planning (Duke 30-36).

Organizations can anticipate and prepare for unpredictable crises or catastrophes. In anticipating the worst, an organization must compile a list of disasters that could befall it (Zerman 25). This, coupled with response procedures, becomes the basis for a crisis management plan.

The crisis management plan will include information such as evacuation procedures, emergency staffing of various company departments, and places to purchase or rent emergency equipment, tools or vehicles – all the things organizations may need in crises. (Fearn-Banks 24)

Crisis response involves multiple processes, some more complex than others. Organizations must first respond to victims, contain problems, and assess damage. The crisis team must notify governmental agencies, manufacturers, vendors, and others, while it implements internal crisis management procedures. Finally, the organization must communicate effectively with all involved, dealing with legal, corporate responsibility and media problems in the process. (Brody 189-190)

## ***2. Crisis Rehearsal***

Responsible organizations will conduct various mock crises in anticipation of actual accidents. Working directly with senior officials and upper management, such events allow a crisis team to collect valuable information regarding the crisis plan's effectiveness, communication needs and crisis control methods. Also, important information regarding what failed, why it failed, and what changes are needed would be forwarded for review to the crisis team. (King III 235-50)

### ***3. Crisis Prevention***

Of course, the best way to avoid having to manage a crisis is to prevent it from occurring (Coombs 17). Organizations can avoid crises by recognizing the warning signs -- what Fink called prodromes. The warning signs or prodromes indicate that a situation can develop into a crisis. The effective crisis manager detects these prodromes and takes action to defuse the situation. If all goes as planned, the crisis manager has averted the crisis. (ibid.)

### ***Crisis Management and Crisis Communication***

While *crisis management* can be defined as “a systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur” (Pearson 61), *crisis communication* is the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during and after the crisis, or negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks 2). Therefore, crisis communication is a key crisis management function.

### ***Keys of Crisis Communication***

#### ***1. Instant, Effective Communication***

“We have entered the era of instant communication, faster than timely, faster than promptly, now...virtually instantly,” James E. Lukaszewski said. If the media can communicate the news the instant it happens, crisis communications dictates that organizations must respond almost as fast. The inability to communicate your message skillfully during a crisis can prove fatal. (Fink 92)

Communication shortens the duration of crises because it forms the core of the

initial response, strengthening reputational management, informing stakeholders, and providing follow-up information. (Coombs 133)

## ***2. Identifying Communication Strategies***

E.W. Brody (198) outlined 12 communication strategies during crises:

1. Define the problem
2. Establish objectives
3. Catalog resources
4. Gather information
5. List assumptions
6. Assess program potential
7. Formulate policy
8. Define audiences
9. Establish strategies and tactics
10. Organize and assign tasks
11. Establish schedules and monitoring systems
12. Assess results

## ***3. Crisis Communication Planning***

While Brody did not specifically address the creation of a crisis communication plan, countless other crisis experts have. Clarke L. Caywood, Scott M. Cutlip, Steven C. Davis, Shearlean Duke, Douglas G. Hearle, Ron Rogers, Arthur W. Samansky, David L. Sturges, Richmond K. Temple, Loretta Ucelli, and the previously cited Fearn-Banks, Fink, King III, Krese, Lukaszewski, Stanton, and Zerman comprise just a few public relations practitioners and educators who support crisis communication planning.

Crisis communication plans are methods for planning and thinking about situations in day-to-day operations, business and company communities, and preparing company people to understand and respond to the special demands of crisis conditions (Stanton 19-22). Fink stated that organizations must establish crisis communication plans early in their crisis management planning stages (96). Crisis communication plan's

usefulness directly correlates with how specifically it addresses particular crises types.

(Fearn-Banks 18)

Crisis communication plans should provide a sound overall, well-thought out series of actions developed under relaxed conditions, and have the flexibility to integrate new ideas and efforts quickly, meeting evolving circumstances. (Samansky 25-28)

Crisis communication plans extend procedures described in the corporate emergency manual and serve as a companion piece in light of the fact that the crises will, from time to time, begin as an emergency but escalate beyond the routine. (Stanton 19-22)

Crisis communication plans should be more manageable and easier to read than crisis management plans. Crisis communication plans should be so organized that practitioners can hastily refer to each section during a crisis. Many companies urge key employees to keep copies of the plan in various key spots – the office, at home, near the nightstand or in the car, so one is typically available when crises occur. Crisis communication plans generally speed and improve communication with publics, and should help conclude the crisis more favorably. (Fearn-Banks 24; Samansky 25-28)

Crises suspend the normal hierarchy of business. Crisis communication plans should have their own trained personnel for crisis response – crisis communication teams (Ibid.; King III 235-50). Like crisis management teams, crisis communication teams must conduct drills, testing plans and individual performance, undergoing media training and maintaining crisis communication tools, such as dark Web sites, media lists, contact lists and stakeholder lists. (Krese 22)

Crisis communication plans allow corporate communicators to contribute to the

resolution of the actual event, interact with key publics during the situation, and maintain normal business activities as customers expect. (Stanton 19-22)

#### ***4. Preparing for Media Scrutiny***

Most crises subject companies to intense media scrutiny. Companies can anticipate media questions by anticipating types of crises. A crisis communication plan focuses on the procedures and protocols for crisis resolution, prepares the company to address media and public expectations, and helps the company maintain or defend its image and reputation. The plan should list potential crises and a category for each crisis type with positive key points for immediate release. These messages are important to convey early in a crisis. Organizations are not hiding the truth; they are presenting it in a controlled, proactive package. (ibid.; Fink 96-97)

#### ***Media Relations and Media Management During Crises***

“The media that you have tried to pitch ideas for new stories, the media that toss ‘perfect’ news releases in the trash, the media that never return phone calls – *that media* will call on you in a crisis. They will probably not phone in advance. They will just show up on your premises – ‘in your face.’ The media, seeing themselves as advocates for the people, can be the principal adversaries in a crisis,” Fearn-Banks declared. (3)

Therefore, the time to begin crisis communication “is when there is no crisis and when it is possible to create a reservoir of good will” (Fink 96). Public relations managers should ensure that their organizations maintain positive media relations. The organization should maintain high credibility and its management should be media accessible. Public relations managers should arrange media briefings, interviews, plant tours and so on. (ibid.)

During crises, when tempers flare and deadlines loom, the adversarial relationship between media and the organization can escalate (Fink 96). “If an organization in crisis is talking to the media for the first time, it is very likely that the coverage it receives will be more negative than it should be, regardless of the story,” Davis stated. (38-42)

However, if during times of calm the public relations manager and the organization go out of their way to establish a relationship, even somewhat, the organization will appear credible to the media during a crisis, and more smoothly communicate organization-favorable messages (Fink 96). Like advance procedural planning, organizations can prepare for crises by nurturing media contacts so they understand the business and get to know the leadership under more controlled and favorable circumstances than during crises. (Davis 38-42)

It is true, unfortunately, that bad news sells. Information about a crisis reaches publics by media more than by any other means. Media deem negative stories more newsworthy than positive ones (Fearn-Banks 63). Hearle noted, “A crisis is a public happening, and it’s public because of the media. News organizations thrive on bad news, you can be sure you’ll get media attention in direct proportion to the degree of badness involved.” (405)

Crisis managers give news media highest priority because they have no choice – media intrude upon crisis situations. Crisis managers also know that news media serve as societal watchdogs and sometimes, reformers (“Lessons Learned from Crises” bulletin). Therefore, crises can also reform organizations.

Before crises, or at the onset of crises, organizations must anticipate what media need and want (Fearn-Banks 64). Prompt, open responses minimize damage potential

(Brody 189). Early crisis control prevents rumors and speculation from needlessly intensifying crisis damage. (Coombs 133)

The reverse proves equally true. Efforts to evade, avoid, and conceal compound organizational difficulties (Brody 189). Therefore, in crisis communication plans, Caywood said that an organization's corporate media policy should state the importance of being open, honest and proactive with media during crises. (420)

Whether organizations release bad news or not, media will garner a "good" story with or without their help (Fink 101). Therefore, public relations managers should "help" media, while always striving "to control and manage the message, control and manage the communications, control and manage the crisis" (Fink 98). Organizations should proactively issue the most positive statements possible, rather than defending against the negative, reacting to media's questions. Organizations that adopt proactive stances during crises will better control the message. (ibid.)

When crafting print hard news stories, reporters will summarize facts in the first paragraph. What follows – reactions, interpretations from experts or various involved parties – can create problems (Davis, 38-43). Existing media relationships can help an organization penetrate the reaction paragraphs. Media often first call people they know for quotes, since reporters on deadline do not have time to learn about unknown organizations. If the reporter already has the organization's critical information, from prior relationship or proactive crisis statements, the article will have more information from that organization. (ibid.)

Reporters typically receive story assignments and often are not knowledgeable of, or interested in, the issue (Fearn-Banks 71). They aim to create an interesting story, a

story that will earn them a promotion, a raise, an extended contract, or an award.

Reporters prefer that you assist them, rather than be an obstacle to them. (ibid.)

While some reporters are just born hostile, others are driven to hostility by communicators who present evasive answers, when they bother to give any answers or interviews at all (Fink 103). Other reporters, particularly television reporters, practice “confrontational journalism.” Perhaps trying to make a name for themselves, these reporters thrust microphones under someone’s nose and try to catch their prey off guard on camera (ibid.). While the media do pose a threat, most reporters are decent people, trying to do a tough job. If treated fairly, most reporters will respond in kind. (ibid.)

Brody thinks crisis managers should use three principles to control and manage media communication during crises: (190)

1. Don’t compound the problem. Avoid speculation, lies, misleading statements, stalling, and stonewalling. Don’t get in the way of reporters. Never assign blame. Treat reporters fairly. Communicate openly.
2. Get the problem and story behind you as quickly as possible. Gather and release all information as quickly as practicable. Announce delays and reasons for them. Make sure announcements are complete and accurate the first time. Explain any omissions and why.
3. Prepare for tomorrow. You’ll deal with the same media again and again. Your stature and reputation will depend on how well you handle the crisis. Your career will outlive the crisis, provided you adhere to ethical standards.

Typically, crisis communication plans include these 10 fundamental procedural elements for crisis media management: (Zerman 25; Temple 40)



1. Assign one spokesperson and one back-up spokesperson who can be contacted 24 hours a day to address media inquiries.
2. Do not delay when disaster strikes. Act promptly and be helpful to media, including establishing a properly equipped media center if possible and appropriate.
3. Permit safe access to the disaster site. Helps media be on your side.
4. Do not deny a crisis exists when it is obvious one does. Silence implies guilt.
5. Do not provide information about victims until families have been notified.
6. Do what you can to console the stricken and reassure the community with accuracy, timeliness, sensitivity and compassion.
7. Have a plan for monitoring the media during the crisis and recording all approved responses to media inquiries.
8. Keep employees, customers, suppliers, community leaders and stakeholders informed of developments as they occur.
9. If the organization has a website, use the Internet to update key publics on the company's response.
10. Say "thank you" to everyone who helped or offered help.

### ***Crisis Spokesperson***

The spokesperson's main responsibility entails managing the organization's message with accuracy and consistency (Carney and Jorden, Seitel qtd. in Coombs, 71). Hearle wrote, "If ever anything demanded early, complete, and continual communication, it is a crisis," and organizations in crisis must speak with a single voice. (399)

Crisis spokespeople must be selected very carefully. To the public, this person *is*

the organization. Sometimes several persons are spokespersons - the spokesperson must be qualified to talk about relevant issues to maintain credibility. As crises strike at any time, backup spokespersons should be pre-selected in case the preferred person is unavailable during a crisis. (Fearn-Banks 29-31; Hearle 399; Coombs 71)

An effective crisis spokesperson must have some position within the company. Even if the public relations manager typically performs as the organization's spokesperson, he or she might not take the crisis lead. (Fearn-Banks 30)

The spokesperson must be articulate, powerful enough to make decisions, accessible throughout the crisis, able to talk clearly in concise soundbites, and pleasant to the camera's eye (ibid.; Hearle 399). Crisis spokespersons should maintain eye contact with audiences at least 60% of the time, minimize use of adaptors/eliminate fidgeting, minimize verbal disfluencies/eliminate repeated disfluencies, vary vocal qualities/avoid monotone, use appropriate hand gestures and an expressive face. (Coombs 151)

Moreover, the crisis spokesperson must appear rational, concerned, and empathetic. He or she should pre-train, rehearse well in advance of the crisis, receiving briefings prior to the crisis and be kept thoroughly informed during the crisis. (Fearn-Banks 30; Hearle 399)

The crisis spokesperson should be a member of every crisis management team. No matter how good the crisis management team, no matter how complete the crisis management plan, if organizations cannot communicate their messages during crises, they have failed. (Fink 96)

### ***Crisis Management Challenges***

When crises occur, communicators face the challenge of making complex decisions

in a hurry. Communicators need a process for making those difficult decisions. Creating this process begins with an understanding of the common mistakes organizations often make during crises: (Stanton 19-22; Lukaszewski qtd. in Cutlip 390)

1. Rushing to judgment. Communicators must understand the facts before communicating. Use a holding statement or at least make clear that a fact-finding effort is underway. Do not speculate or make judgments in the absence of complete information.
2. Hesitation. This leads to public perception of confusion, callousness or incompetence.
3. Failure to act. Responding at an appropriate level without evading the media, employees or other constituencies who need to hear from you will stand the company in much better stead than ignoring the problem.
4. Overreacting. Successful planning begins by differentiating a crisis from an emergency. An emergency is a daily occurrence that impacts operations, but does not significantly distract management from regular responsibilities or impede the company's ability to do its job. During emergencies, the company typically continues to function essentially as normal. Crises, on the other hand, galvanize public attention to the company, prevent management from conducting business as usual and necessitate a specialized level of intervention and response.
5. "Bending" the facts/prevarication. Because of our litigious society, it is tempting to shape communication to the company's benefit. Communication does not have to admit wrongdoing, but it should not invent exoneration. Typically, the Court of Public Opinion rewards honesty and candor. The truth is a good starting place.

6. Obfuscation. Leads to the perception of dishonesty and insensitivity.
7. Lack of concern/empathy/sympathy
8. Affixing blame
9. Remaining insular
10. Absence of teamwork
11. Restriction of information internally. By failing to use internal communications, you fail to use your front line communicators. Test messages with your employees, and enlist their insight.
12. Litigation. Guarantees greater visibility and may limit reasonable solutions.
13. Confrontation. Keeps the issue alive by giving others visibility and a platform to respond to.
14. Pontification. Creates vulnerability without confronting the issue.
15. Retaliation. Increases tension and emotion, rather than reducing it.
16. Failure to plan

Carl Gustin echoed Stanton and Lukaszewski's crisis management mistakes by identifying the "seven sins of crisis communication" - unpreparedness, absence, ignorance, silence, distance, untruthfulness and naiveté. Organizations must accept that society currently values open and frank speaking, acknowledging mistakes, and presenting realistic and achievable expectations for future action. (5)

### ***Corporate Crisis Preparedness***

Given decades of well-publicized crises, vocal crisis management experts and the availability of exhaustive crisis management materials, are companies prepared for

crises? According to a 2002 Foundation for Public Affairs survey, nearly 25 percent of Fortune 1,000 chief executive officers have not designated a team to manage communications in a crisis situation. (Quenqua 2)

## **MEDIA**

### ***Importance in Society***

Carl Bernstein declared that media are probably the most powerful of all institutions today (91). As the dominant source of news information, TV news greatly influences our day-to-day decisions and cultivates our perceptions of what issues and events are important to society. (Gant 628-39)

The mass media can make or break a business (Zerman 25). During crises, the media's influence on public perception may affect an organization's livelihood. Media can influence public perception regarding issues involving cause, blame, response, resolution, and consequences. Presented in a negative light, the legitimacy of an organization may be threatened. (S.J. Ray qtd. in King III 235-50)

### ***How Media Choose the News, News Sources***

Generally, news story ideas become potential news stories if they satisfy a mixture of news selection criteria, namely information subsidy, normality, proximity, resource constraints, significance, timeliness or visual potential (Dan Berkowitz and James Buckalew qtd. in Gant 628-39). Television news decision makers favor actual news stories involving government/politics, disaster/accidents, and crime (Berkowitz and Mark Harmon qtd. in Gant 628-39). Ian Mitroff said, "If an event is dramatic enough, then it can become news anywhere and at any time." (62, 2001)

Not even the attack on America and the war on terrorism could wrench local TV news from “live, local and late-breaking” coverage of carnage, crime and accidents. The reflex to cover this type of news is so strong that it commands most newsroom resources not specifically earmarked for other topics. (Dean 94-96)

What one media organization might consider news, another might not. What makes an item newsworthy can differ from morning to night, and from one place to another (Zerman 25). A journalist working for a newspaper might find one story newsworthy, while another journalist, working for a radio or television station, might not see the story in the same light. The story is no less newsworthy to the electronic media, they just might have different news priorities on a particular day. (ibid.)

Common media news sources include network feeds, newspapers, news wires, radio/television programming, police/fire scanners and government information subsidies. (Gant 628-39)

### ***The Business of Journalism***

Daniel C. Hallin professed, “Economics has eroded the barrier between journalism and the profit-making business of selling audiences to advertisers,” (79). All news media have been affected, as declining audiences and the proliferation of new advertising media have squeezed the bottom line, and as the news media have increasingly become part of media conglomerates for which news is only one more form of “software.” Television has experienced the most dramatic changes. Deregulation, mergers and acquisitions, and assumptions of debt have all combined to force budget cutbacks and increased pressure to worry about ratings. (ibid. 80)

To survive, newspapers must sell in large numbers and television stations need high ratings. Therefore, editorial executives inevitably seek stories that garner public attention, including sensational stories. News that has a human-interest element is also a high priority, especially if good visuals accompany it. (Zerman 25)

A frustrated Dan Rather said that networks and newspapers commonly use focus groups, screening news programs to determine which stories rank most popular, not most important. He said market research shows that stories about the national debt and the national trade deficit, “don’t sell newspapers or attract advertisers to broadcasts.” (93)

Bernstein alleged that the “greatest felony” in today’s news business “is to be behind, or to miss, a major story,” so speed and quantity substitute for thoroughness, quality, accuracy and context (86-87). The pressure to compete and the fear that another reporter will make the splash first, “creates a frenzied environment in which a blizzard of information is presented and serious questions may not be raised; and even in those fortunate instances in which such questions are raised... no one has done the weeks and months of work to sort it all out and to answer them properly.” (ibid.)

In a blatant admission of media bias, Jonathan Alter stated that in today’s “new information order,” media first present the opinionated “take,” then the public can log on to the Internet or visit the newsstand for the facts (24-26). So-called “news comes from a thousand mouths – from Meredith Viera or Chris Ruddy to some caller on the line names Mike. Stories can move from Internet rumor to Leno monologue without stopping at a traditional news organization in between.” (ibid.)

Alter identified today’s media template as the talk show. While wire-service values of concision, neutrality and gravity endure, they are increasingly overcome by a

“gabby, argumentative and irreverent” media style. “Reporting is expensive, talk is cheap,” he said. “Year by year anchors of news give way to ringmasters of talk.” (ibid.)

To some degree, networks have adopted the local news practice of dropping neutrality and presenting the journalist as a “regular person” who shares and champions the audience’s emotions. Old tabloid press practiced this, using language of outrage and tragedy. (Hallin 81)

### ***24-Hour News Cycle***

As technology evolved, the 24-hour news cycle was born. Instant communication via television, radio, telecommunication satellites orbiting the earth and the internet create a 24-hour-a-day information flow. Because of the real-time media immediacy, reporters broadcast today’s disasters and other major news events live as they occur. (Fink 92; Zerman 25)

“The constant 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year craving for news – everything everywhere is local news – has created a media monster whose appetite is voracious,” Mitroff said. (63, 2001)

The immediacy of communication heightens the immediacy of crises. Sometimes the communication itself becomes the news it is intended to cover. (Fink 92)

### ***Visuals – Illustrating or Distorting the News?***

As the pressure to generate high ratings evolved, so increased the pressure for news stories to have high “production values,” both narrative and visual: drama, emotion and good video. (Hallin 80)

The emphasis on visuals not only changed the look of news stories, but it affected



the news selection process. A late 1990's University of California Medical Center study showed that visually-driven newscasts most often covered more dramatic or traumatic events. However, the most visually compelling story is not necessarily the most important story. (Trigoboff 30)

The result? The study suggests that local television news' emphasis on fires, accidents and murders distorts the public's perception of real risks to their health, while news gatekeepers suppress less visually stimulating stories profiling real risks. (ibid.)

### ***Sensationalism and Infotainment***

Mitroff criticized the "relentless blurring of the lines between some of the most critical functions of society, e.g. the creation of 'infotainment' through the unprincipled merging of news and entertainment." (150, 1990)

He said that one of the main dangers associated with the infusion of entertainment into nearly every aspect of society is that entertainment, not accuracy, importance or truthfulness, becomes the standard of conducting all business. Under this principle, media must keep the audience continually stimulated. (ibid. 152, 1990)

With entertainment as the norm, media sacrifice everything else. Media frame everything, including disasters, in terms of its entertainment or "sensationalistic" values (ibid.). With a fine line between news and entertainment, crises serve as entertaining news. "The public is perceived to enjoy watching, reading about, uncovering, and hanging organizations, companies, and individuals that *might* have done harm to people, or even worse, to animals," Fearn-Banks wrote. (64)

Alter agreed that news, public affairs and history itself are morphing into entertainment (24-26). Fearn-Banks noted the difficulty to detect where news ends and

entertainment begins. (52)

Why the focus on entertainment and sensationalism? In an effort to sell newspapers and win ratings wars, media give the public what it wants to know rather than what it needs to know (ibid. 64). Consultants tell news producers that news programs must be dramatic and exciting to garner viewer attention. Some manufacture the drama. This causes irresponsibility, poor journalism, and sensationalism. (ibid. 51)

“Gotcha” journalism, typically not journalism at all, was a trend in 1990’s television news shows and talk shows. Although investigative teams have produced consumer protection pieces for years, there was a new irresponsibility and a drive to entertain viewers more than to protect them. (ibid. 49)

### ***PR’s Media Criticisms and Media’s Self Evaluation***

A late 1990’s Pew Research Center survey of 552 top executives, mid-level editors and producers/reporters from local and national news found that journalists believed the factors undermining press credibility included declining reporting standards, the blurring of editorial and business lines, and reporters’ reliance on sensationalism (Noack 14). The survey also showed that media drove controversies rather than just reported the news regarding the coverage of public figures’ personal and ethical behavior, and that top executives felt financial pressures simply changed practices rather than reduced quality, but editors and news staffs disagreed. (ibid)

Mitroff said that media have blurred the line between “reality” and “fiction” for years. “One cannot distort or manufacture reality at will,” he commented (97, 2001). Bernstein echoed Mitroff’s comments, saying that media squander their power and ignore their obligation (91). “For more than 15 years we have been moving away from real

journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid infotainment culture in which the lines between Oprah and Phil and Geraldo and Diane and even Ted, between the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, are too often indistinguishable,” he said (87). He said that factors distorting coverage include celebrity and the worship of celebrity; news’ reduction to gossip - the lowest form of news; sensationalism; and a political and a social disclosure “that we – the press, the media and the politicians, *and* the people – are turning into a sewer.” (ibid. 84)

Rather said journalism attracts more than its share of “lightweights and careerists instead of writers, reporters and dreamers.” It attracts too many people who “love the limelight and too few people who love the news.” He complained that too many media become known as news packagers, not news gatherers. (97)

Media failures have contributed immensely to the emergence of a talk-show nation, in which public disclosure reduces to ranting, raving and posturing (Bernstein 90). “We now have a mainstream press whose news agenda is increasingly influenced by this netherworld,” Bernstein said. (ibid.)

Media commentator Tom Rosenstiel criticized the hype of current reporting. He likened the difference between journalism long- and short-term thinking to the choice of attracting audiences by stripping or playing the violin. The first will generate a crowd, but only constant sensationalism will keep them coming back. (Kirtz 11)

Rather said that as journalism becomes increasingly more competitive, all media rely on the tried and true local news formulas. They have accepted the proposition that people do not care about foreign news or hard news at all, that “feel-good” news - entertainment, infotainment, features, and gossip – sell better than “anything serious” and

far better than “anything too disturbing.” (94-95)

Bernstein declared that media condescend to the public, giving them what media think they want and what media calculate will sell, and boost ratings and readership.

“Many of them, sadly, seem to justify our condescension, and to kindle at the trash,” he said. Bernstein argued that journalists must challenge people, not merely amuse them.

(87)

### *A Positive Prediction of News' Future*

Rather warned that broadcast news and newspapers are in danger of “sinking into a miasma of mediocrity, with a new generation of hacks turning out clichéd images which match their clichéd writing, in formats rapidly degenerating into trite and stale formulas.” (97)

French media scholar Claude-Jean Bertrand disagreed, predicting that in the future, media will be able to distinguish between entertainment and news, and that media will provide more information that dives below the surface. (Stein 70)

Bertrand, a long-time U.S. press critic, believes that 50 years from now there will be few or no daily newspapers in their present format. Instead, computers will tailor journalists' news packages to meet the particular needs of every subscriber at any time. (ibid, 70-72)

He feels news will take priority, rising above entertainment with people relying on all-news radio, a CNN-type of continuous service and/or audio and visual data banks where people can find news and information on order. (ibid.)

Bertrand said media will present even purely local news stories in the context of their relationship to the general society, a trend already under way by the newsmagazines.

Crime, for example, will be strongly linked to alcoholism, drugs, unemployment, loose psychiatric supervision, or easy access to guns. News' future will reflect information about the whole world and how individuals and nations fit into the picture, as opposed to the current "mosaic of silly little events." (ibid.)

## **AMUSEMENT PARKS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

### ***Industry Under Attack***

From 1987 through 2003, 42 reported deaths on fixed-site amusement rides averaged 2.4 fatalities per year (Levenson 12). Media attention to amusement ride fatalities sparked when six fatalities occurred in 1999. In April of 2001, Rep. Edward Markey of Mass. embarked upon a major media campaign promoting his attempt to close "the roller coaster loophole," regarding the lack of federal oversight of amusement parks ("Carousel"; "Roller-Coaster"). In New Jersey, Department of Community Affairs' Director of the Division of Codes and Standards Bill Connolly joined the Markey bandwagon, intensifying media scrutiny for New Jersey amusement facilities.

By the summer of 2001, the amusement safety debate bombarding the public via countless media outlets. From *The Fort-Worth Star-Telegram* (Wood), to *The Washington Post* (Adler), from *USA Today* (Sloan, *Amusement Park*) to *LA Times.com* (Yoshino) and *ABCNews.com* (Palazzolo), amusement safety became one of media's hottest topics, launching the amusement industry into crisis management.

International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions' (IAAPA) President Bret Lovejoy responded to numerous media inquiries. In June of 2001, the IAAPA communications manager Susan Story released a white paper regarding industry safety ("Statement") followed by a series of press releases touting industry safety

practices, and letters to the editor from Lovejoy, including those to the *New York Times* and *ABC Evening News*, throughout the summer.

Amusement park spokespeople, industry consultants and ride enthusiasts defended their safety programs and championed the industry's safety commitment. Sean Wood's *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* article featured an interview with Six Flags' Safety Director Pat Hoffman. Adler's *Washington Post* article included comments from Dennis Speigel, president of International Theme Park Services Inc., a consulting company. *ABCnews.com*'s article featured quotes from Bill Linkenheimer, president of the American Coaster Enthusiasts group.

Mass media interest virtually ceased due to the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001 and the subsequent war coverage monopolization. However, amusement industry web sites continued to feature stories beyond 9/11. Sites such as *Rides911.com* and *saferparks.org* currently feature frequent updates of amusement injuries, trends, legislation and law suits still today.

#### ***Amusement Industry Experts Review the Fairness of Media Accident Coverage***

"Television and newspapers have increasingly run eye-catching reports on the possibility of physical harm coming to amusement ride patrons over the past two years," Natasha Emmons wrote in 2001 ("Park Execs," 15), "...and even when a premature statement by a California coroner attributing death to a roller coaster was retracted...the news media still ran special reports on the dangers of rides."

"They're looking for the sensational, that's just the press," Lovejoy said. He noted that reporters' questions start from the premise that rides are unsafe. He felt that

reporters try to garner negative answers, but that once expert provide the facts, reporters' attitudes change. (ibid.)

He noted that in cases of ride malfunctions, all media cover the story and that parks must share information with media and the public, showing immediate corrective actions, (ibid.)

Lovejoy thought IAAPA should have more proactively pursued the media, presenting the positive side of amusement parks including benefits to America's economy and the key role they play in people's entertainment and amusement choices. (ibid.)

Tony Fiori, corporate marketing director for Ray Cammack Shows, said media always heighten the drama. He simply provides accurate incident information and hopes they use it. (ibid.)

Fiori also stressed the importance of crisis plans. He said that negative issues regarding guest safety will harm the industry. Therefore, the industry must be more aggressive sending the positive messages, and sharing information on safety programs, safety training and inspections. Eventually, media will begin seeing the industry's positive side, he said. (ibid. 16)

Kent Lemasters, president of the Amusement Aquatic Management Group, was concerned that mainstream media often sensationalize, focusing on the negative, not giving equal treatment to the positive. (ibid.)

Lemasters stressed that parks must to act as quickly as possible assessing the crisis situation, and not reporting details to the media until the park has thoroughly completed the investigation. "...a comment is important to the media, but the comment

is that we have not completed an investigation and once we do, we will get back to you with a statement,” Lemasters added. (ibid.)

Lemasters believed accident coverage inflicts damage upon the park that experienced the accident, and does not taint the industry as an unsafe place to visit.

Some industry insiders believed that media taint public opinion with unbalanced amusement lawsuit and accident reporting (Emmons, “Minding,” 13). Heavy G-force and brain injury coverage concerned Baltimore attorney R. Wayne Pierce, who has represented the amusement industry for 30 years and had 30 to 35 active injury defense cases in Aug. 2001, two of those involving brain injuries. A disproportionate amount of attention toward brain injuries could cause hysteria and shut down amusement operations, which would unfairly impact everyone, he said. In fact, *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the death following a coaster ride showed a sensational slant, with one headline that read, “As Thrills Increase, Risks to Brain Rise.” (ibid.)

### ***Company Crisis Management Profile – Six Flags Inc.***

#### ***Crisis Communication Training, 1999 - 2003***

Oklahoma City’s The Gooden Group prepared an exclusive crisis communication training program presented in 1999 to Six Flags Inc.’s public relations managers (“Six Flags 1999”). Six Flags Great Adventure’s crisis management team used the same program through 2003. Media training objectives included reviewing the “anatomy of a crisis,” “information transaction,” “objectives in a crisis,” “crisis communications” and “talking to the media.” (ibid.)

Mirroring aforementioned crisis communication practices, The Gooden Group’s



program stressed crisis prevention, and preparing a crisis communication plan defining crisis roles and identifying the spokesperson. Should crises occur, the plan identified two crisis objectives: minimizing potential park damage and turning as many negatives as possible into positives. (ibid.)

It stressed that media will produce the crisis story with or without the park's help, and the importance of entering the information transaction as early as possible to exercise crisis control. The program addressed the "open and truthful" first media contact, that should include recognizing the problem, showing compassion, reporting steps to resolution and sticking to the facts. The crisis team should plan follow-up steps, should the media feel unsatisfied with the park's response, escalating the problem and lengthening the story. (ibid.)

Additional media tactics included fast media response to all inquiries, preparation for "surprise questions" designed to elicit emotional response, and monitoring the Internet for rumors, especially those from American Coaster Enthusiasts. (ibid.)

The program reviewed spokesperson "dos" and "don'ts" regarding appearance, body language, tone and message content. (ibid.)

### *Six Flags Proactively Addresses Safety Concerns*

Based on significant media attention focused on potential risk of neurological injury to amusement riders, in 2002 Six Flags Inc. underwrote an independent safety study to evaluate current medical evidence on health risks and potential research areas ("Fixed Theme Park Rides" 2). Neuro-Knowledge, an American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) program, and Outcome Sciences organized the program.

Simultaneously, Exponent Failure Analysis Associates, retained by Six Flags Inc., investigated “the type, frequency and severity of injuries that occur at fixed amusement parks” and assessed “the likelihood of injuries to patrons on rides. (“Investigation” 1)

Six Flags released the two studies’ findings at a Washington, D.C. news conference January 21, 2003. Renowned neuroscientists, engineers and NASA astronauts joined Six Flags President Gary Story and IAAPA President Clark Robinson, supporting amusement industry safety. (“News Conference”)

Six Flags prepared detailed press kits including the Neuro-Knowledge panel report, Exponent investigation report, and additional pamphlets and white papers regarding Six Flags safety programs (“Safety By Design”), amusement park myths (“Myth vs. Reality”) and newspaper articles supporting ride safety (Fitzgerald; “New Coaster Evidence”).

Six Flags was the only amusement company to proactively address industry safety attacks through expert research, and the only company to host a press conference supporting safety programs.

### ***Crises Strike the Travel and Tourism Industry*** ***Michigan’s Adventure Ride Collapse***

On July 30, 2001, a ride collapse at Michigan’s Adventure left 33 riders stranded for nearly five hours (O’Brien, 1, *Officials*). Emergency personnel arrived in less than five minutes. The ride’s precarious position necessitated the help of a crane to evacuate riders, but park officials first removed a fence and several trees to properly place the crane. Once the ride was stabilized, riders were cut from the safety restraints, since power to the restraints was cut as a safety measure (*ibid.*). Twenty-eight riders were

treated for minor injuries and released. Three were hospitalized but released by Aug. 2. (ibid.)

Camille Jourden-Mark, the park's vice president of marketing and park operations, said that employees immediately sprung into action as planned, comforting families, answering telephones and contacting family members once the rider list was compiled (ibid.).

Media barraged the park Monday night, immediately following the incident. The park kept camera crews in the parking lot, away from emergency crews. On Tuesday, the park proactively escorted film crews and other journalists through the park. The public relations director from Michigan Adventure's sister park, Cedar Point, helped with crews and logistics that day. (ibid. 2)

By Wednesday, August 1, the park restricted access to some media returning for the third or fourth time. The park had no new information to release, so limited contact was made between the media and Jourden-Mark. (ibid.)

Attendance throughout the week remained strong, at anticipated levels. Therefore, the accident did not appear to hurt the park. Jourden-Mark was proud of the staff and felt they handled the event properly, from attending to riders' needs, through media management. Reviewing the accident, she said press briefings were like feeding frenzies, with everyone trying to outdo each other, "They feed off each other." She offered one piece of advice to other amusement park crisis managers: "Try to deal with the media on a one-to-one basis. You'll be answering the same questions over and over again, but reporters tend to be much nicer and much more civil when they are away from the others." (ibid. 1)

*New Crystal Harmony Stranded Near Panama*

\$200 million Crystal Cruises' luxury liner Crystal Harmony experienced a fire in the ship's auxiliary engine room Oct. 1, 1990. No deaths or injuries occurred, but the ship lost all power. Approximately one and a half hours later, the cruise line's public relations director Darlene Papalini was called and the crisis communication plan sprang into action. (Sklarewitz 34)

The company detailed crisis communication procedures in a 61-page "Crisis Communications Manual." Papalini called the designated crisis management team, finding several members unavailable. Backup members were called, as planned. While the crisis communication team assembled, the ship's crew notified the passengers of the fire, and tried to make the guests as comfortable as possible. (ibid.)

Luckily, the ship's position, so far away from the U.S., limited any film crews from covering the event, and all passengers were denied access to telephone calls so Papalini's team reached the media first via a news release. The team prepared tailored advisories and sent them to various port agents. The team also briefed travel agents. They briefed employees through a news release and memo when they arrived to work the following day. (ibid. 35)

The team prepared three follow-up releases, first covering the status of the ship (then using its own power); the second reflected the safe arrival of the ship in port; and the third addressed resumption of normal sailings. (ibid.)

Crystal Cruises' PR team did not host a news conference, instead working one-on-one with key media via phone calls. The company received minimal press coverage, typically using the information supplied by the crisis communication team. No television

or radio networks carried the story. Travel trade publications featured follow-up stories dealing with future sailings. (ibid.)

“We blanketed the media and it paid off. People told us they had never seen a cruise line respond this way. We had nothing to hide and we wanted to avoid rumors floating around. The result was a minimum of editorializing, just what I wanted,” Papalini said. (ibid.)

### *Charleston Convention and Visitors Bureau Addresses 9/11 Tourism Decline*

The events of Sept. 11, 2001 affected all tourism providers. The Charleston Area Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CACVB) had a crisis plan prepared and their crisis management team convened that afternoon, soon realizing that their plan was virtually useless as it never addressed such a catastrophe. So, the team spent the rest of the day and many afterwards crafting a new plan. (Litvin 188, 190)

The team immediately addressed the need of passengers trapped in Charleston due to the air traffic system closure. They assisted passengers with accommodations and alternate travel arrangements. Simultaneously, the team realized that no visitors would subsequently come to Charleston by air (ibid 190). Therefore, they decided to target the drive market, expanding their target radius from a six- to a ten-hour radius. Charleston’s strong family-oriented reputation assisted, supporting the concept that Charleston was a safe family vacation destination reachable without an airplane. (ibid. 191)

The team also reallocated advertising dollars to this new plan, pulled and changed print advertising copy to reflect the new strategy, and worked closely with hotels and attractions creating pre-packaged vacations. (ibid. 192)

The CACVB crisis management team's proactive decision to maintain a positive tone, extolling Charleston's many virtues while suggesting to Americans that it was appropriate to travel and enjoy themselves, intangibly aided in the city's post 9/11 recovery. (ibid. 193)

Although the approach was not a new one, the CACVB received high marks for recognizing the challenge and taking appropriate and rapid action. The numbers reflected that while visitors were lost from total lack of travel, and lack of travel by plane, the CACVB cultivated replacement markets that more than compensated for the losses. (ibid. 196)

### ***Literature Review Summation***

The amusement industry, as part of the travel and tourism industry, adheres to the same crisis management procedures as any other industry. The principles outlined earlier in this chapter remain constant throughout the industry. While exact response procedures may vary from amusement company to amusement company, the goals remain the same – effectively manage the crisis, minimize damage to the park's reputation and turn negatives into positive opportunities.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Data Types*

This thesis focuses on crisis management, the amusement industry, amusement park public relations managers' influence on the crisis lifecycle, media (print and television) and their practices, media's role in society, relationships between amusement park public relations professionals and news gatekeepers, whether geography affects media relations, and media sensationalism.

Formal and informal research was conducted through personal, phone and e-mail interviews, and content analysis. This qualitative research, using conceptual and operational variables, determines typical park public relations and media interaction during crises, attitudes on constructive and destructive crisis management actions, information relating type and duration of crises, and opinions on media sensationalism and fairness of crisis coverage.

Formal research also included a park crisis content analysis, identifying the types of information included in crisis stories, importance of visuals and the general duration of media interest in the story. This analysis produced qualitative and quantitative data.

This qualitative and quantitative research produced nonprobable data pertaining to the amusement industry that cannot be generalized to other industries, or other representatives of the same industry.

All of the data collected were interwoven to create the final thesis document, offering empirical data regarding amusement park crisis management and its effect on the

crisis news life cycle.

### ***Source of the Data***

Interviews were conducted using a purposive sample of amusement park public relations practitioners; television, print and trade media; and amusement park public relations practitioners who formerly worked in media.

Ten amusement park industry public relations practitioners were interviewed, including public relations managers and executives from Six Flags Inc., Anheuser-Busch Entertainment, Walt Disney World, Paramount Parks and Cedar Fair LLC. These respondents represented major parks in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West Coast, Middle-Atlantic and Southern United States. Practitioner interviewees met three criteria:

- Practice amusement park public relations
- Serve as amusement park primary or secondary spokespersons
- Manage amusement park crises

Seven members of the media were interviewed. Three writers and editors from daily and national newspapers such as New Jersey's *Asbury Park Press* and *The Record*, and *USA Today* were interviewed. One amusement industry trade reporter from *Amusement Business* was interviewed. Three television reporters/editors/planners from national news outlets and local news affiliates in New York and New Jersey, such as CBS evening news, WABC New York and Fox 5 New York, were interviewed.

Media satisfied these criteria:

- Prior or current experience planning/selecting news stories



- Members of the local or national television media - and/or - daily or national print media
- Worked with at least one amusement park during a crisis

Five former members of the media who now practice amusement industry public relations were interviewed, whose past included television and/or print media experience in Texas, Ohio, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma and Kentucky. This group also included an amusement industry trade reporter who continues to write national stories while practicing public relations. These individuals satisfied both park public relations and media criteria.

A content analysis of print coverage following a roller coaster incident at Six Flags Great Adventure during the summer of 2003 was also conducted. The incident involved the Batman & Robin: The Chiller roller coaster, which stopped partially upside down during the ride cycle, leaving 8 passengers upside down for nearly 20 minutes. The public relations department supplied the materials, which included print clips gathered by Bacon's media services and television clips compiled by Broadcast Monitors.

### ***Means of Acquiring the Data***

Informal research was conducted through three types of in-depth interviews: face-to-face interviews, phone interviews or e-mail interviews – whichever method a respondent preferred.

Protocol varied based on interviewee job function, present or past: amusement park public relations practitioner, member of the television or print media (including amusement trade reporters), or amusement park public relations practitioner who

formerly served as a member of the television or print media.

Initial questions establish interviewees' credibility and frame of reference for answering subsequent questions. The next series of questions measure effective and ineffective crisis management practices, and identify methods to shorten the crisis news life cycle. The final questions focus on media practices gauging ethical and/or sensational reporting, and whether reporting differs based on geography.

### **Interview Questions for Park PR Professionals and Crisis Experts**

1. How long have you worked in PR?
2. What are some of your previous positions?
3. What type of information do you release on the first phone call from the media following an incident?
4. How do you typically respond to requests for visuals of an incident?
5. Beyond the initial story, what types of ride incidents/accidents (that you've handled, or that you know of) have produced follow-up calls and subsequent stories?

*("Types" could include actual incidents and their descriptions, i.e. Chiller stuck upside down for 20 minutes, no injuries – press called for 3 days with follow-up stories; or just descriptions of the events without naming the ride, such as "spinning ride collapsed, 20 guests sent to the hospital. Satellite trucks on property broadcasting live for 5 days, press called for 3 weeks following up.")*

6. What types of ride incidents have NOT produced follow-up calls and subsequent stories? Why do you think the media didn't follow up?
7. Do you think that actions the park PR manager takes can help stop follow-up stories, shortening the crisis life cycle to just one day? If so, what actions?
8. Are there actions a PR manager can take that can worsen a crisis situation, and possibly prolong the story? If so, what actions?
9. Do you think that the relationship between the amusement park PR manager and the media affects coverage of a ride incident? If so, how?

10. Based on your experience, do you think that media coverage of crisis situations differs based on geography, i.e. are certain media markets more interested in this type of news, or might certain markets focus longer on this type of story, carrying it beyond day 1, into day 2 or 3 follow-up stories?
11. You've probably heard the saying, "If it bleeds, it leads." Do you think sensationalism plays any role in the coverage of amusement ride incidents?
12. Do you think that the typical TV and print media coverage of amusement ride incidents is fair and balanced?

### **Interview Questions for Media Professionals**

1. How long have you worked in the media?
2. What are some of your previous positions?
3. What are your main criteria for choosing which stories to cover/criteria for being assigned a story?
4. How do you typically learn that a crisis has occurred, i.e. scanner, internet, phone tip (hotline), AP wire?
5. Regarding amusement park ride incidents, what type of information do you want to know from a park PR manager on your first call?
6. How important is a visual of the incident, and how do you decide whether to assign/request a photographer/camera crew, or send a helicopter (if applicable)?
7. Beyond the initial story, what types of ride incidents do you feel warrant follow-up calls and subsequent stories?
8. What types of ride incidents do you feel do NOT warrant follow-up calls and subsequent stories?
9. In your opinion, are there actions a PR manager can take that can "improve" a crisis situation, i.e. minimize damaging coverage for the park and/or shorten the duration of coverage?
10. Are there actions a PR manager can take that can worsen a crisis situation?
11. Do you think that the relationship between the amusement park PR manager and the media affects the coverage of a ride incident? If so, how?

12. Based on your experience, do you think that media coverage of crisis situations differs based on geography, i.e. are certain media markets more interested in this type of news, or might certain markets focus longer on this type of story, carrying it beyond day 1, into day 2 or 3 follow-up stories?
13. You've probably heard the saying, "If it bleeds, it leads." Do you think sensationalism plays any role in the coverage of amusement ride incidents?
14. In your opinion, do you think that typical media coverage of amusement ride incidents is fair and balanced?

### **Interview Questions for Media/PR Professionals**

1. How long did you worked in the media? How long have you worked in public relations?
2. What are some of your previous positions?

#### ***Regarding your past as a member of the press...***

3. What are your main criteria for choosing which stories to cover/criteria for being assigned a story to cover?
4. How did you typically learn that a crisis has occurred, i.e. scanner, internet, phone tip (hotline), AP wire?
5. Regarding amusement park ride incidents, what type of information did you want to know from a park PR manager on your first call?
6. How important was a visual of the incident, and how did you decide whether to assign/request a photographer/camera crew, or send a helicopter (if applicable)?
7. Beyond the initial story, what types of ride incidents did you feel warranted follow-up calls and subsequent stories?
8. What types of ride incidents did you feel did NOT warrant follow-up calls and subsequent stories?

#### ***Regarding your role as a current PR practitioner...***

9. What type of information do you release on the first phone call from the media following an incident?
10. How do you typically respond to requests for visuals of an incident?
11. Beyond the initial story, what types of ride incidents (that you've handled, or that you know of) have produced follow-up calls and subsequent stories?

*(“Types” could include actual incidents and their descriptions, i.e. Chiller stuck upside down for 20 minutes, no injuries – press called for 3 days with follow-up stories; or just descriptions of the events without naming the ride, such as “spinning ride collapsed, 20 guests sent to the hospital. Satellite trucks on property broadcasting live for 5 days, press called for 3 weeks following up.”)*

12. What types of ride incidents did NOT produced follow-up calls and subsequent stories? Why do you think the media didn’t follow up?
13. In your opinion, are there actions a PR manager can take that can “improve” a crisis situation, i.e. minimize damaging coverage for the park and/or shorten the duration of coverage?
14. Are there actions a PR manager can take that can worsen a crisis situation?
15. Do you think that actions the park PR manager takes can help to stop follow-up stories, shortening the crisis life cycle to just one day? If so, what actions?
16. Do you think that the relationship between the amusement park PR manager and the media could affect the coverage of a ride incident? If so, how?
17. Based on your experience, do you think that media coverage of crisis situations differs based on geography, i.e. are certain media markets more interested in this type of news, or might certain markets focus longer on this type of story, carrying it beyond day 1, into day 2 or 3 follow-up stories?
18. You’ve probably heard the saying, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Do you think sensationalism plays any role in coverage of amusement ride incidents?
19. Do you think that the typical media coverage of amusement ride incidents is fair and balanced?

### ***Method of Analyzing the Data***

The first form of primary research included 22 interviews with amusement park PR practitioners and media. Interviewee responses were provided in writing, or transcribed from oral interviews. A content analysis of the responses was conducted. Data were categorized and then ranked by frequency of mention or importance the

interviewee placed on the issue. Outcomes were transformed into a comprehensive matrix, then refined into several charts for ease of interpretation.

The second form of primary research featured a print and television news content analysis of the Batman & Robin: The Chiller ride incident. Items examined included types of information in crisis stories, importance and frequency of visuals, spokesperson role, story coverage duration, sensationalism and fairness of coverage. Data were ranked by type and frequency of mention, and transformed into four charts displaying “Day 1” television coverage, “Day 1” print coverage, “Day 2” television coverage, and “Day 2 and beyond” print coverage.

In sum, all data were analyzed using content analysis. Charts were created to visually represent all significant findings and more clearly convey trends and/or patterns interpreted from the data.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Methodology Review*

Formal research was conducted through personal, phone and e-mail interviews. This qualitative research, using conceptual and operational variables, determines typical park public relations and media interaction during crises, attitudes on constructive and destructive crisis management actions, information relating type and duration of crises, and opinions on media sensationalism and fairness of crisis coverage.

Interviews were conducted using a purposive sample of current and former amusement park public relations practitioners; television, print and trade media; and current amusement park public relations practitioners who formerly worked in media.

Interviewee responses were provided in writing, or transcribed from oral interviews. A content analysis of the responses was conducted. Data were categorized and then ranked by frequency of mention or importance respondents placed on the issues. Outcomes were transformed into charts to more easily interpret data.

Respondents include:

- Ten amusement park industry public relations practitioners representing major parks (Disney, Six Flags, Busch, Cedar Fair) in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West Coast, Middle-Atlantic and Southern United States.
  - Three respondents with 1 to 5 years of experience
  - Two respondents with 6 to 10 years of experience
  - Three respondents with 11 to 15 years of experience

- Two respondents with 20 to 25 years of experience
- Seven members of the media were interviewed. Three writers and editors were interviewed from *Asbury Park Press*, *The Record* and *USA Today*. One amusement industry trade reporter was interviewed from *Amusement Business*. Three television news veterans were interviewed from CBS evening news, WABC New York and Fox 5 New York.
  - Two respondents with 10 to 15 years of experience
  - Three respondents with 25 to 30 years of experience
  - Two respondents with 30 to 40 years of experience
- Five former members of the media who now practice amusement industry public relations were interviewed, whose past included television and/or print media experience in Texas, Ohio, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma and Kentucky. This group also included an amusement industry trade reporter who continues to write national stories while practicing public relations. These individuals satisfied both park public relations and media criteria mentioned earlier.

Formal, quantitative research also included a park crisis content analysis, identifying park message consistency, the types of information included in crisis stories, and the general duration of media interest in the story.

Television and print coverage followed a roller coaster incident at Six Flags Great Adventure during the summer of 2003. The incident involved the Batman & Robin: The Chiller roller coaster, which stopped partially upside down during the ride cycle, leaving



approximately eight passengers upside down for nearly 20 minutes. The park's public relations department supplied the materials, which included print clips gathered by Bacon's media services and television clips supplied by a New Jersey monitoring service.

This qualitative research produces nonprobable data pertaining to the amusement industry that cannot be generalized to other industries.

### ***Study Influencers***

Factors that potentially influence the data include:

- Purposive sample selected for interviews
- Respondents' experience level and relative work experience
- Relationship between the author and respondents
- Method of garnering interview – in person, via phone, via e-mail
- Geographic representation of media markets from which respondents hailed
- Size, scope and tone of media markets from which respondents hailed
- Relationship of amusement park public relations practitioners to their local media
- Author's professional experience influencing the respondents' questions
- Author's interpretation of the data
- Particular crisis event chosen for analysis

### ***Data Presentation***

Respondent data were analyzed through content analysis. Key issues were extrapolated and inductively summarized for each question. In-depth summaries with insight were crafted and introduced on each page.

## ***Data Results***

### **In-depth Summary and Insight**

#### ***Q 1: Main criteria for choosing stories to cover or criteria for story assignment.***

Response from media and media/PR practitioners: overwhelming response includes timeliness, effect on audience, dramatic or compelling visuals and emotional impact. Many agree that great visuals are essential to good stories, and that strong sound bites enhance stories.

#### ***Q 2: Crisis source, i.e. scanner, internet, phone tip (hotline), AP wire.***

Response from media and media/PR practitioners: media cite AP or Reuters wires as the most common tip source, followed by personal contacts, phone tips and the internet. Media/PR rely heavily on police scanners, phone tips, and proactive tip calls to police.

#### ***Q 3: During amusement park ride incidents, information first sought from a park PR manager.***

Response from media and media/PR practitioners: both groups agree that the basic information – who, what, where, when, why and how – is most vital. Deaths and serious injury also rank highly. Respondents seek information on crisis management methods, investigation procedures, and on-site contacts who facilitate visuals and sound bites.

Category	Criteria for choosing stories?	Crisis sources?	Info sought first from PR during ride incident?
<b>Media</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News of the day – what’s going on (timely)</li> <li>• Effect on audience</li> <li>• Dramatic and unusual to attract and interest viewers</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>News can be assigned to the reporter, or the reporter can suggest stories that affect the public, are timely, and dramatic to interest viewers.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AP wire or Reuters wire</li> <li>• Contacts – personal or police, phone tips</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Media use all resources available for crisis tips, although AP and Reuters wire services are the most common.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 Ws and How</li> <li>• How park is handling the crisis/investigation</li> <li>• Info for interviews and visuals – where to go, who to talk to</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Media want to know the “basics” (5ws and how), crisis prevention and management efforts, and if media send crews, who will coordinate on-site.</p>
<b>Amusement Park PR</b>	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
<b>Media/ Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significance/relevance to public - will it inform, educate, protect, help them</li> <li>• Compelling visuals and great sound bites</li> <li>• Emotional impact – does it touch people</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Stories must impact viewers/readers and elicit an emotional response. Good stories must contain great visuals, enhanced by strong sound bites.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police scanners</li> <li>• Phone tips</li> <li>• Personal sources</li> <li>• AP wire</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Media rely heavily on scanners. Hotlines and personal sources also provide useful tips. Media proactively call police for “newsworthy” or interesting items.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details – what, how and when it happened, who is involved, cause of incident, how are they rectifying situation</li> <li>• Deaths or injuries</li> <li>• Sound bite source</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Media want to know the 5 Ws and how. Priorities include deaths and injuries, and locating an on-site park contact to facilitate visuals and sound bites.</p>

## In-depth Summary and Insight

### ***Q 4: Importance of incident visual, and criteria for assigning or requesting a visual.***

Response from media and media/park PR: Both sets of respondents agree that visuals are extremely important to TV, and slightly less important to print media. Visuals help illustrate a story and elevate the story in the broadcast or publication. Media/park PR point out that helicopters and “tower cams” prove great photo resources.

### ***Q 5: Types of ride incidents that warrant follow-up calls and stories beyond day 1.***

All three respondent groups agree that death and serious injury warrant the greatest follow-up. Ride malfunctions causing operating delays or trapped customers, and events captured with dramatic visuals, deserve follow-up. Media offer that they cover any park happening contrary to the “fun” parks promise. Park PR practitioners point out that when media capture dramatic visuals, stories receive extensive coverage even without rider injury or death. Media/park PR relay that stories remain newsworthy until parks complete their investigations.

Park PR and media/park PR were asked to identify types or examples of incidents that produce follow-up calls and subsequent stories. Responses echo answers offered for question 5: deaths, injury, dramatic visuals and events that disappoint guests. These responses also include timing as a cause for follow-up, such as other safety stories or park incidents. Media will attempt to connect unrelated incidents and localize a story to their markets.

***Q 6: Types of ride incidents that do not warrant follow-up calls beyond day 1.***

All three respondent groups agree that low-impact events with minor effects on customers (no injuries, localized event, no fault) do not warrant follow-ups, such as ride stoppages. Park PR and media/park PR agree that two criteria typically end follow-ups: lack of dramatic visuals or sound bites, and incidents resolved by the time media call.

Park PR and media/park PR practitioners were asked what incidents do not produce follow-ups. Their responses echo answers to question 6: events without death, serious injury, sensation, controversy or dramatic visuals. Events that conclude before media call, or before they reach the park, rarely receive follow up.

Category	Importance of the visual and criteria for sending a crew or photographer?	What ride incidents warrant follow-up beyond day 1?	What ride incidents do not warrant follow-up beyond day 1?
<b>Media</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very important to TV, important to print</li> <li>• Elevate story in newscast or placement in paper</li> <li>• Helps to tell the story</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Visuals are crucial to TV and important to print media, helping to tell a story. Visuals also enhance story placement on a newscast or in a newspaper.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Injury, death</li> <li>• Operator or customer error causing injury or malfunction</li> <li>• “News” – new, unusual, rare information until it has been exhausted</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Death warrants the greatest amount of follow-up. Since amusement parks sell fun, anything to the contrary is “news” and will be covered.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minor incidents where safety systems function properly</li> <li>• Something localized</li> <li>• Low severity/impact</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>“Incidents” can refer to ride stoppages that inconvenience, but are resolved by properly functioning safety systems. They have low impact and a minor effect on customers.</p>
<b>Amusement Park PR</b>	<p>Not applicable</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incidents causing death, serious injury or multiple injuries to riders</li> <li>• Ride malfunctions that cause delays of operation</li> <li>• Visual stories</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Agree that serious incidents causing death or injury will produce follow-ups, as well as dramatic visuals of ride delays or malfunctions, even when no one is injured.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coasters stopped on lift hills (or “stuck” rides)</li> <li>• Stories that are resolved – no sensation or controversy</li> <li>• Stories without visuals</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>When media call and an incident has already been resolved or is near resolution, they will not continue to follow-up. Without visuals or drama, the story has no legs.</p>
<b>Media/ Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good visual is key</li> <li>• Will typically send a crew or photographer to check it out</li> <li>• Choppers and Tower Cams are great photo resources</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Good visuals are critical to a story, and elevate the story’s importance. Even without crews on the ground, other cameras can capture the drama (helicopters and tower cameras).</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serious/multiple injuries, death</li> <li>• People trapped/ride being closed for several hours</li> <li>• Cause, prevention efforts, anniversaries</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Death and injury stories typically produce follow-ups. Media seek incident cause and prevention efforts. The longer the investigation, the longer the media will cover it.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No injuries, no one upset, no one at fault</li> <li>• No pictures</li> <li>• Ride stoppages for short period of time, no injuries</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Stories cannot survive without dramatic visuals or sound bites. If the event is resolved by the time media arrive, there is no story.</p>

## In-depth Summary and Insight

### ***Q 7: Information released on the first media phone call following an incident.***

Response from park PR and media/park PR: respondents agree to release the basics – who, what, where, when, why and how – without elaboration or speculation. Park PR practitioners stress the lack of injury, if applicable. Media/park PR practitioners note that elaborating beyond the basic facts could produce additional stories.

### ***Q 8: Amusement park PR's typical response to requests for incident visuals.***

Response from park PR and media/park PR: respondents agree that they typically deny media requests for visuals, but often media find their own visuals without assistance (such as helicopters, tower cams and filming from exterior roads). In cases when visuals are inevitable, media/park PR suggest that it is better to help media and steer them toward neutral backgrounds. Park PR practitioners agree that access, if allowed, should be highly controlled.

### ***Q 9: Actions PR managers can take to “improve” crises, i.e. minimize damaging coverage for the park and/or shorten the duration of coverage.***

All three respondent groups say that truthful, immediate, accurate, well-prepared responses are best. Media and media/park PR agree that reporters will wrap a story more quickly if they feel all important information has been supplied quickly. Park PR practitioners note releasing only necessary information (nothing extra), and media/park PR also comment on rehearsing messages for content and sincerity to shorten coverage.

Category	Information released on first media call?	How do you respond to requests for visuals?	How can PR "improve" a crisis and shorten coverage to one day?
<b>Media</b>	Not applicable	Not applicable	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Truthful, open, straightforward response</li> <li>• Timely response</li> <li>• Be prepared</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Media will most likely wrap a story if they feel that all important information has been supplied in a timely fashion.</p>
<b>Amusement Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The basics, but not too much information - who, what, where, when, why and how, if known</li> <li>• No speculation</li> <li>• Stress if no injuries, or minor injuries</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>PR must be open and honest, but not release too much information. Present the facts without conjecture.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically no visuals allowed at the site</li> <li>• Media usually can find their own visuals without park's help, i.e. helicopters or shooting from the road.</li> <li>• If allowed, control access to site</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Best to limit, control or deny visuals to the incident site. However, media will usually "get around" park rules and find their own visual.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediate action, honest and accurate response</li> <li>• Good relationship with press</li> <li>• Not providing too much information</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Immediate, accurate media response is critical. Providing honest, open answers without revealing too much information is key.</p>
<b>Media/ Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basics – 5Ws and how – what is known and confirmed at the time</li> <li>• No elaboration, no speculation</li> <li>• What's being done to rectify the situation</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Parks release what is known as fact, without elaborating to stop additional stories that can arise from what's released. Parks prepare a statement and stick to it.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deny requests, keep media away from site</li> <li>• Respect guests' privacy during incident</li> <li>• Assist if visuals are inevitable</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Parks try to limit or deny visuals to protect company and victims. But sometimes visuals cannot be stopped. In those cases, assist media and steer toward neutral backgrounds.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be honest, factual, helpful, timely</li> <li>• Prepare messages and stick to them</li> <li>• Good delivery - rehearse for content and sincerity</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Prepare the right messages and deliver them correctly and quickly. Help reporter and simultaneously score for the park.</p>



## In-depth Summary and Insight

### ***Q 10: Actions a PR manager can take to worsen or lengthen a crisis situation.***

All three respondent groups agree that lying, stonewalling, stalling, speculating, misleading and being unhelpful only leads reporters to “dig deeper” into a story because they feel the park is hiding something. Park PR practitioners note that correcting mistakes creates second day stories. Media/park PR practitioners say mishandling media worsens crises, ruins reputations and valuable media relationships.

### ***Q 11: Affect of the relationship between the amusement park PR manager and the media during ride incident coverage, if any.***

Nineteen of 22 respondents agree that relationships build trust and credibility into the crisis message, producing more balanced, fair coverage with less speculation, dramatization and suspicion. Media and media/park PR attest that incidents still receive coverage regardless of the relationship, but media more strongly believe and fairly present the park’s message.

### ***Q 12: Media crisis coverage and geography - whether certain media markets carry this type of news beyond day 1, into day 2 or 3 follow-up stories.***

Sixteen of 22 respondents agree that geography plays a role in crisis coverage. Most state that smaller media markets, and markets with prominent parks, retain crisis coverage longer and with more sensationalism than in larger, more competitive markets. Smaller markets also follow larger market reporting trends. Media are split on the issue (three agree, three do not), and attribute longer crisis coverage to media culture and professionalism rather than geography.

Category	How can PR “worsen” crisis coverage into day 2, 3 and beyond?	Does the relationship between PR & media affect coverage and how?	Does media crisis coverage differ based on geography?
Media	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No comment” – stalling, stonewalling, hiding info</li> <li>• Blaming, overreacting</li> <li>• Speculating or misleading</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> PR make media dig deeper when they feel ignored, misled, stonewalled or treated unprofessionally.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 yes, 1 no, 1 maybe</li> <li>• Good relationship leads to trust and balance</li> <li>• Bad could lead to twisting, blowing out of proportion or alternate sources of info</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Mutual trust can positively affect coverage – PR message will be heard and believed, but not stop story.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 yes, 3 no, 1 probably</li> <li>• Smaller markets cover longer, larger markets have more news</li> <li>• Depends on media culture and professionalism</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Although split, most agree smaller markets linger on crises. Also, media culture plays a role in any size market.</p>
Amusement Park PR	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lying, stonewalling</li> <li>• Inaccurate info that must be corrected</li> <li>• Not responding or responding rudely</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Mishandling media creates mistrust, which can further the story. Media think the park is hiding something and only dig deeper. Mistakes also create second-day stories when they’re corrected.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, 9 of 10</li> <li>• Builds trust and credibility for PR</li> <li>• Coverage is more fair, less speculation and sensationalizing</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Relationships with media build valuable trust and credibility into the crisis message and help produce more fair coverage of incidents with less speculation, suspicion and dramatization</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, 8 of 10</li> <li>• Smaller markets play stories longer/more drama</li> <li>• If park is prominent in market, coverage is stronger for good and bad news</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Smaller markets have less news and equal space as larger markets, leading them to sensationalize and draw out stories. Parks with greater presence in their market receive more coverage.</p>
Media/ Park PR	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lying, speculating, leading reporters to speculate</li> <li>• Stonewalling, being generally unhelpful</li> <li>• Giving wrong information</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Not assisting reporters, or mishandling reporters, will worsen a crisis and forever ruin a reputation and valuable media</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All 5 – yes</li> <li>• If trustworthy, likable and fair, will believe what park says &amp; receive fair coverage</li> <li>• Story will still be covered no matter what, but park’s side will be better represented</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> If park PR has been trustworthy and fair, media will present their side fairly and work harder to ensure park’s side is heard, believing their message.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All 5 – yes</li> <li>• Smaller markets cover crises longer and follow larger cities’ leads</li> <li>• If park is prominent in market, receives more coverage for good and bad news</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b> Smaller markets have equal space as larger markets and less news. They mimic larger markets, sensationalize and lengthen stories. Parks with greater market presence receive more coverage.</p>

### In-depth Summary and Insight

#### ***Q 13: Sensationalism and whether it plays a role in the coverage of amusement ride incidents, i.e. “If it bleeds, it leads.”***

Nineteen of 22 respondents agree that media sensationalize ride incidents from the pressure to sell papers or generate ratings, using more opinion and drama rather than facts. 5 of 7 media note comments like reporters “dig up dirt,” “satisfy voyeuristic desires,” and “bad things happening at a place where good things are supposed to will pique peoples’ interest. All it takes is a little editorial ‘flourish’ to ‘sell’ the story even harder.” However, most respondents agree that ride incidents are newsworthy because parks maintain strong safety records. Ride incident stories are rare, but sometimes rehashed beyond newsworthiness.

#### ***Q 14: Whether typical media coverage of amusement ride incidents is fair and balanced.***

Eleven yes/usually, 1 maybe, 2 sometimes, 6 no, 1 balanced but not fair, 1 don’t know. Opinions are split relatively equally among groups. Respondents attribute unfair coverage to media agendas that vary by outlet. Many agree that ride incidents are newsworthy and receive as fair coverage as most news receives (given some degree of media sensationalism that remains ever present). Park PR practitioners cite media’s time pressure to complete stories (not enough time to fully research) as both positive and negative – sometimes pressure leads reporters to use more drama than fact, and sometimes reporters simply repeat exactly what the park has given them, leading to fair and balanced coverage.

Category	Does sensationalism play a role in coverage of amusement ride incidents?	Is media coverage of amusement ride incidents fair and balanced?
<b>Media</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 yes, 2 depends on "sensationalism"</li> <li>• Anything that shatters image of fun time at amusement park is news</li> <li>• Some reporters "dig up dirt," use visuals to satisfy voyeuristic desires, and embellish stories to "sell"</li> <li>• Pressure to gain viewers/readers</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>"Sensationalism" is subjective, but incidents are news. Media handle the incidents differently and sometimes use them to generate ratings or sell papers.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 yes, 1 maybe, 1 yes balanced &amp; not fair, 1 don't know</li> <li>• Overall, accidents are dramatic and don't need sensationalism</li> <li>• Some media have agendas, others don't</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Mixed bag among media. Some are ethical and report without sensation; some have agendas and use incidents to sensationalize. Depends on culture of outlet.</p>
<b>Amusement Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All – yes</li> <li>• Ride incidents typically produce dramatic visuals – make for great TV/stories</li> <li>• Fierce competition and need for breaking news leads to sensationalizing – "danger" to families, drama</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Parks are safe, so when things go wrong they make news. Competitive media use dramatic stories for ratings.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed – no, sometimes, usually</li> <li>• Unfair coverage due to need for ratings/sell papers and drama (victims are highlighted), media don't have time to research</li> <li>• Reporters repeat info given by park, coverage is fair</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Varied response. Coverage is deserved and fair to some, and sensationalized and unfairly extended to others.</p>
<b>Media/ Park PR</b>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 yes, 1 sometimes</li> <li>• Pressure to garner ratings leads to sensationalizing – more opinions and drama, not facts</li> <li>• Stories are news, but rehashed beyond newsworthiness</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Ride incidents are news, but the drive for ratings and sales leads to sensationalizing and carrying the story too long.</p>	<p><b>Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 usually, 2 no</li> <li>• Most news isn't fair and balanced, and parks are "teased" as unsafe – although coverage is usually balanced</li> <li>• Ride incidents are rare, and therefore news. Most minor incidents aren't mentioned, and major ones are – and should be.</li> </ul> <p><b>Consensus</b></p> <p>Parks are safe, so incident coverage is deserved. Although some feel coverage is unbalanced and sensationalized.</p>

### *Respondent Group Summary*

All respondent groups provided valuable information to assist amusement park public relations managers handle ride crises.

#### **MEDIA**

- In times of death, serious injury or major guest impact, media want basic information (who, what, where, when, why, how) in a timely, straightforward and accurate manner, plus a reliable, knowledgeable park contact.
- Want visuals of the incident, and will use all available resources to get them – regardless of whether parks assist. Helicopters and tower cameras provide a bird’s eye-view as dramas unfold.
- More fairly and accurately present the park’s position if pre-existing trusting relationships exist between public relations managers and reporters. Reporters will not kill stories because of good relationships but they may wrap them more quickly, shortening the crisis news life cycle.
- Can use sensationalism to generate viewers and sales. Inherent sensationalism exists within amusement ride incidents, and that drama can be enhanced or overused to benefit newspapers or television stations. Whether this occurs, or the degree to which it occurs, depends on the news outlets’ culture.

#### **AMUSEMENT PARK PR**

- Must prepare for day 1 response to all visual and dramatic incidents, and must expect day 2 and beyond stories involving death, serious injury and major guest

impact. Dramatic, visual incidents often receive coverage beyond day 1 due to media sensationalism even without injury or death.

- Can shorten the crisis news lifecycle by providing open, honest, timely responses without releasing “too much” information. Denying visuals and resolving the crisis before media call also shortens the lifecycle.
- Can lengthen crises by mishandling, stonewalling and lying to media, correcting errors in day 2 stories and providing too much information, giving a story “legs.”
- Sometimes receive fair crisis coverage, and sometimes fall victim to sensational news outlets, slow news day, or connection to a trend or national story. Smaller media markets are more greatly influenced by these factors than larger markets.

#### **FORMER MEDIA/PARK PR**

- Know the industry’s strong safety record and acknowledge that ride incidents are unusual, therefore qualify as news and will be covered.
- Understand the importance of visuals, therefore deny or limit visuals when possible, or steer media to neutral backgrounds to shorten the crisis news lifecycle. Sound bites must also be limited or controlled when possible.
- Understand the importance of upfront, honest information, therefore provide basic information to maintain strong relationships, but without elaboration to limit day 2 and beyond stories.
- Feel “teases” of park incidents are more sensational than actual incident coverage, which is usually fair and balanced thanks to strong relationships with reporters.

### *Crisis Coverage Content Analysis*

Roller coaster incident news coverage was analyzed to measure important media messages, usage of visuals and inflammatory words, balanced reporting and length of crisis news lifecycle.

On July 25, 2003, Six Flags Great Adventure's *Batman and Robin: The Chiller* roller coaster stopped mid-cycle, leaving nearly 20 passengers dangling upside down. The ride was lowered to the ground within 20 minutes and no passengers were injured. One rider was taken to the hospital for complaints of asthma. Two days later, it was determined that a malfunctioning "photo eye" caused the incident, by sending an incorrect message to the ride's computer launching the ride at a lower-than-normal speed. The part was replaced, and the ride was inspected and reopened July 31.

The event was covered by regional print and television media beginning later that evening through July 31, when the ride reopened.

"Day 1" print coverage (which ran July 27) was featured in the following daily newspapers (Table 1):

- Asbury Park Press, Neptune, NJ
- Home News Tribune, E. Brunswick, NJ
- Ocean County Observer, Toms River, NJ
- Gloucester County Times, Woodbury, NJ
- Burl. County Times, Willingboro, NJ
- Carroll County Times, Westminster, MD
- Intelligencer, Central Bucks Ed., Doylestown, PA
- Star-Ledger, Newark, NJ
- Daily Record, Morristown, NJ
- The Times, Trenton, NJ
- Today's Sunbeam, Salem, NJ
- Courier-News, Bridgewater, NJ
- Express-Times, Easton, PA

**Table 1**  
 “Day 1” print stories - Sunday, July 27, 2003.

Topic		APP	HNT	SL	DR	GCT	TT	TS	BCT	CN	OCO	CCT	I	E-T
Source	A. Paper	A	A	A										
	B. AP				B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Photo	C. Yes										C			
	D. No	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D		D	D	D
	E. Scene													
	F. Stock										F			
Where	G. Park name	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G
	H. No name													
	I. Town name	I	I		I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I
	J. No town			J										
When	K. Date & time	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K	K
	L. No date & time													
Who	M. # riders	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
	N. no #													
What	O. Descr.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	P. No desc.													
	Q. Ride name	Q	Q	Q		Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q		Q
	R. No name				R								R	
Why	S. Ignore				S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
	T. Say unknown	T	T	T										
Spokes person	U. Quoted	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U
	V. Not quoted													
Injuries	W. Mention	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W		W	W	W	W
	X. No mention									X				
Investigation	Y. Mention	Y	Y	Y			Y		Y	Y	Y			
	Z. No mention				Z	Z		Z				Z	Z	Z
History	AA. Mention			AA		AA	AA	AA	AA		AA	AA		AA
	BB. No mention	BB	BB		BB					BB			BB	
Inflammatory words*		M,S	H, A, MF	D, MF, ST	MF, D	MF, D	MF, D	MF, D	MF, D	SU, MF, D	MF, ST, D	D, MF	MF, D	P, ST, MF, D

\*Inflammatory Words:

MF = malfunction

D = dangling

M = mishap

ST = stranded

P = problem

H = hung

A = accident

SU = stuck



“Day 1” television news coverage was featured July 25 on the following stations

(Table 2):

- KYW (CBS) Philadelphia, 11 p.m.
- WPVI (ABC) Philadelphia, 11 p.m.
- WCAU (NBC) Philadelphia, 11 p.m.
- WWOR (UPN) New York, 10 p.m.

**Table 2**

“Day 1” television news stories – July 25, 2003.

Topic	CRITERIA	KYW	WPVI	WCAU	WWOR
Video	A Yes	A	A	A	A
	B No				
Live	C. Yes				
	D No	D	D	D	D
Footage	E Scene	E	E	E (wrong ride - Medusa)	E
	F Stock				
Where	G. Park name	G	G	G	G
	H. No name				
	I Town name	I	I	I	I
	J. No town				
When	K Date & time	K	K	K	K
	L. No date & time				
Who	M # riders	M	M		M
	N no #			N	
What	O Descr.		O	O	O
	P No desc	P			
	Q Ride name	Q	Q	Q	Q
	R. No ride name				
Why	S Ignore		S	S	S
	T Say unknown	T			
Spokes.	U Quoted		U		
	V. Not quoted	V		V	V
Injuries	W. Mention	W	W		W
	X No mention			X	
Investigation	Y Mention				
	Z No mention	Z	Z	Z	Z
	AA. Mention		AA		
	BB. No mention	BB		BB	BB
Inflammatory words		Scare, stuck stranding	Stuck 3x	Problems stuck	Scare, Stuck 2x
Video Source		Chopper	Chopper	Weather cam	Chopper

“Day 2 and Beyond” print coverage was featured in the Asbury Park Press (Table 3):

- July 28, 2003
- July 31, 2003

**Table 3**  
 “Day 2 and beyond” print coverage – July 28 – 31, 2003.

Topic		APP 7/28	APP 7/31
<b>Source</b>	A. Paper	A	A
	B. AP		
<b>Photo</b>	C. Yes		
	D. No	D	D
	E. Scene		
	F. Stock		
<b>Where</b>	G. Park name	G	G
	H. No name		
	I. Town name	I	I
	J. No town		
<b>When</b>	K. Date & time	K	K
	L. No date & time		
<b>Who</b>	M. # riders	M	M
	N. no #		
<b>What</b>	O. Descr.	O	O
	P. No desc		
	Q. Ride name	Q	Q
	R. No ride name		
<b>Why</b>	S. Ignore		
	T. Reason	T	T
<b>Spokesperson</b>	U. Quoted	U	U
	V. Not quoted		
<b>Injuries</b>	W. Mention	W	W
	X. No mention		
<b>Investigation</b>	Y. Mention	Y	Y
	Z. No mention		
<b>History-problems</b>	AA. Mention	AA	
	BB. No mention		BB
<b>Article topic</b>	CC. investigation continues	CC	
	DD. investigation complete		DD
<b>Inflammatory words</b>		Stranding	Malfunctioned

These stations featured “Day 2” television news coverage July 25 (Table 4):

- KYW (CBS) Philadelphia, 6 a.m.
- WPVI (ABC) Philadelphia, 6 a.m.
- News 12 New Jersey, 5 p.m.
- WNYW (FOX) New York, 6 p.m.

**Table 4**  
“Day 2” television news coverage – July 25, 2003.

Topic		KYW	WPVI	News 12 NJ	WNYW
<b>Video</b>	A. Yes	A	A		A
	B. No			B	
<b>Live</b>	C. Yes				
	D. No	D	D		D
<b>Footage</b>	E. Scene	E	E		
	F. Stock				F (wrong ride: BTR)
<b>Where</b>	G. Park name	G	G	G	G
	H. No name				
	I. Town name		I	I	
<b>When</b>	J. No town	J			J
	K. Date & time	K	K	K	K
	L. No date & time				
<b>Who</b>	M. # riders				M
	N. no #	N	N	N	
<b>What</b>	O. Descr	O	O	O	O
	P. No desc				
	Q. Ride name		Q	Q	Q
	R. No ride name	R			
<b>Why</b>	S. Ignore	S	S	S	
	T. Say unknown				T
<b>Spokesperson</b>	U. Quoted				
	V. Not quoted	V	V	V	V
<b>Injuries</b>	W. Mention		W	W	W
	X. No mention	X			
<b>Investigation</b>	Y. Mention				Y
	Z. No mention	Z	Z	Z	
<b>History-problems</b>	AA. Mention		AA		
	BB. No mention	BB		BB	BB
<b>Inflammatory words</b>		Stranded, more chills than thrills	Stuck 3x malfunction	Malfunction	Wild. Ride Hanging on for dear life, stuck
<b>Video source</b>		Chopper	Chopper	Logo	File footage

## *Content Analysis Summary*

### **PRINT COVERAGE**

- 10 of 13 newspapers that cover the story use the AP wire as their information source.
- 14 of 15 stories do not contain a photo – one contains a file photo.
- Only one newspaper ran follow-up stories – the park’s local daily newspaper.
- Nearly all stories contain the basic “who, what, where, when, why,” featuring the park’s name and location, the ride’s name, how many people were involved, how many people were injured and how, what time the incident happened and how long it lasted.
- All 15 stories attribute information to a park spokesperson.
- 7 of the “day 1” stories mention the park’s investigation, 6 do not.
- 9 stories mention the ride’s problematic history, 6 do not.
- Common dramatic words used to describe the incident include: “malfunction” (13), “dangling” (11), “stranding/stranded/strands” (5), “mishap”, “accident”, “hung” and “problem” (1 each).

### **PRINT COVERAGE CONSENSUS**

Print coverage analysis supports in-depth interview findings:

- The AP wire is a common news source
- Media desire “the basics” for background information and spokespeople for quotes.
- Dramatic photos sustain a story. Without them, even dramatic stories can end after “day 1.”
- Print sources do not have the vast visual resources of television outlets, and therefore run crisis stories even without photos.

- Parks' local media are most interested in incident follow-ups and most likely follow the story through the resolution phase.
- Many print media present "balanced" coverage featuring the parks' side and another side, mentioning parks' investigative efforts and any negative historical ride data.
- Media use dramatic or inflammatory words in headlines and body copy to describe park incidents and attract reader attention.

### **TELEVISION COVERAGE**

- 7 of 8 stories contain ride footage. 2 stations' videos feature the wrong coaster. 1 features only the park's logo.
- 5 stories contain video shot by a helicopter, 1 by a tower camera (filming the wrong ride), and 1 with file footage (showing the wrong coaster with a similar name).
- Given their shorter format, many television news stories delete certain details like park location, number of riders involved, why it happened, and even the ride's name.
- All reports mention park name, time and duration of incident.
- 7 of 8 fail to mention an investigation into the cause, and 6 of 8 do not acknowledge a cause at all.
- While all stations spoke to the park's public relations department, only 1 of 8 mention a spokesperson.
- Inflammatory words include "stuck" (10), "scare" (2), and more creative phrases like "more chills than thrills," "wild ride," and "hanging on for dear life."

## **TELEVISION COVERAGE CONSENSUS**

- Video is imperative to good television news stories, and helicopters and tower cameras provide great aerial shots when on-ground shots are not possible or cannot be obtained in a timely manner.
- TV news stories are shorter and more imbalanced than print stories, providing the news that an incident happened and that people were injured or inconvenienced using dramatic video and language, but little “why” or follow-up showing the park’s responsible acts and resolution.

## **“DAY 1” vs. “DAY 2 AND BEYOND” COVERAGE COMPARISON**

Consistent messages among “Day 1” print and television reports include park name and location (16 of 17 stories), incident date and time (all 17), number of affected riders (16 of 17), incident description (16 of 17), ride name (15 of 17), number and type of injuries (15 of 17).

Media stories vary pertaining to investigation reports (7 mentioned, 10 did not), and noting the ride’s historical problems (9 did, 8 did not). 12 of 13 newspapers do not run photos, while all four television reports include aerial ride footage.

“Day 2” television coverage aired early the morning following the incident, so park public relations did not supply additional information to the press from the night before. Print stories ran on the third and fifth day after the incident, so park public relations did supply additional information for these updates.

“Day 2” coverage includes park name, incident description and incident date and time (all 6), 4 of 6 include park location, and 5 of 6 include ride name and number of injuries.

Three outlets report the number of riders, the investigation, and question why it happened, while three do not. Two mention the ride’s troubled history, while four do not. Four outlets feature visuals, while two stories do not. The splits pertain to print versus television media, rather than “Day 1” versus “Day 2” coverage.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Lessons Learned - Media*

Major differences were determined when dealing with print versus television media. Print media rely less on visuals, and produce more thorough, balanced stories given additional time to research and write stories and additional space to print them. Television media rely heavily on visuals, and produce less thorough, less balanced stories given their 24-hour news cycle, urgency to report stories before other news outlets, and limited airtime to run stories.

The study also revealed that larger market media contain more news than smaller market media, but possess the same space and time to report it. Therefore, smaller markets sometimes run and repeat stories longer than larger markets, and mimic or localize larger market stories to follow larger market trends.

Media sensationalism depends more on outlet tone rather than market size. Television media sometimes enhance sensationalism during “sweeps weeks” when ratings prove crucial, and when negative relationships exist between reporters and their subjects.

### *Lessons Learned – Amusement Park Public Relations*

For amusement park public relations practitioners, preparation ranks as the single greatest crisis tool. Amusement park incidents are newsworthy and will receive coverage. Therefore, park public relations practitioners must prepare for crises. Crisis preparation involves:



- Complete familiarity with park and personnel
  - Knowing its greatest assets and weaknesses, historical shortcomings and future developments
  - Two-way communication with all park decision makers
  - Awareness of all possible crises and methods to solve them
  - Rehearsing crisis response procedures annually with other park departments
  - Crafting and regularly updating park crisis communication plans
  - Crisis media training and course refreshers for park spokespersons
  - Building relationships with key third-party sources such as local police, fire and rescue squads and industry experts
- Media expertise
  - Fluency with core and national media including decision makers and outlet tone
  - Knowing media deadlines and anticipating their needs
  - Building relationships during noncrisis times to receive more fair and balanced coverage

Pertaining to amusement park crisis coverage length and tone, practitioners can expect longer coverage with dramatic visuals, and shorter coverage without visuals. Coverage also depends on “news of the day” and competing stories. Given the inherent sensational nature of amusement crises (negative occurrences at positive, fun places),

park practitioners can expect enhanced crisis sensationalism from sensational news outlets and smaller news markets.

### *Hypothesis*

The author hypothesized that proper crisis management of an amusement park ride incident shortens the crisis news life cycle, often by overcoming media zest for sensationalism. Amusement park public relations managers can employ specific strategies and tactics to prepare for crises and properly manage crises once they happen, thereby counteracting media attempts to sensationalize the story and shortening the crisis news life cycle. A positive public relations manager's reputation forged among media will also help the manager during crises, adding credibility to the company's message and the messenger who delivers it.

The author believed that geography plays a role in the building of personal relationships between media and amusement park public relations practitioners. The part of the country in which public relations practitioners practice their craft affects their relationship with media. Media ranked among the top 10 local advertising markets, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Dallas, face strong competition and therefore use more sensationalism to attract readers/viewers and drive sales. The sales drive also leads media in the top 10 markets to thoroughly cover ride incidents (given the inherent drama and potential for compelling visuals) with little positive news balance, while smaller markets offer more balanced coverage of positive park news stories and crisis coverage.

However, the author asserted that these rules have exceptions. Certain factors

virtually guarantee prolonged accident coverage regardless of how the crisis is handled, such as a dramatic visual, death of a rider, multiple riders' injuries, inflammatory sound bites from riders or bystanders, and outside influences like a "slow news day." To media, such factors typify the meaning of "news" – what is "new."

This study alleged that common media practices and the evolving "business of journalism" sometimes overcome proper crisis management, garnering the park significant media coverage.

The study proves most assertions. Park public relations practitioners can shorten the crisis news lifecycle by employing specific strategies. Pre-crisis media/PR relationships aid park messages acceptance and foster balance coverage. However, the "business of journalism" and "slow news days" can overtake positive strategies and result in prolonged coverage.

The study disproves the author's hypothesis that larger media markets use more sensationalism than smaller markets. Rather, smaller markets use more sensationalism, and sensationalism relies less on geography and more on outlet tone. The study also disproves the author's hypothesis that larger markets provide more relationship-building challenges than smaller markets. Larger market media and park PR practitioner respondents cited relationships as often and strongly as other respondents.

### ***Research Design***

The study's research design was effective. The purposive interview sample produced vast, in-depth qualitative data from media and amusement park public relations practitioners on the subject of crisis communication management that a random sample

would not have produced.

The method of collecting interviews via three different methods proved convenient and effective to both respondents and author.

The amusement ride incident content analysis effectively supported the qualitative interview findings and many of the author's assertions through qualitative and quantitative data.

### *Study Replication*

This study can be replicated. Interview respondents prove the most critical study aspect. All study respondents maintain relationships with the author, and therefore openly and willingly shared their time and insight. Effective study replication might therefore rely on a knowledgeable, experienced and willing respondent set.

If replicated, several interview questions should undergo revision or addition. Amusement park public relations practitioners were asked to identify actual crises or types of crises that received prolonged coverage beyond day 1. While responses produced valuable data, the way respondents phrased their answers showed varying degrees of question comprehension.

Responses indicated unclear understanding of whether they should note incidents that created follow-up, or incidents that created lengthy follow-up beyond day 1 stories. The question can be clarified: "What types of ride incidents that you manage, or occur at other parks, typically receive media follow-up beyond day 1 coverage, into day 2 and beyond?"

Two questions were difficult for some respondents. The “crisis coverage relative to geography” question was challenging, given that some respondents’ work experience covered just one market. The “amusement crisis coverage – fair and balanced” question was difficult for media who said they never really paid attention to the coverage and could not provide educated responses.

None of the questions addressed media coverage other than crisis coverage. One or more questions should be added to gauge positive park story coverage and provide comparisons with crisis coverage, examining frequency, tone, visuals and media relationships.

### ***What to Expect from Amusement Ride Crises***

This study provides valuable information to help amusement park public relations practitioners manage ride incidents.

Certain crisis criteria create high volume and frequency of coverage, and the likelihood of continuing coverage. The chart below (Table 5) helps amusement park PR practitioners understand what criteria typically cause day 1 follow-up, or carry into day 2 and beyond.

**Table 5**  
Criteria for Crisis Coverage Length

<b>Day 1 Criteria</b>	<b>Day 2 and Beyond Criteria</b>
No injury(ies)	Injury(ies)
No death(s)	Death(s)
Dramatic incident visuals, but no death or injury – any market	Dramatic incident visuals but no death or injury on a slow news day in any market
No visuals, no injury or death	Dramatic incident visuals but no death or injury with other news in a small market
Minor injury, but no visuals	Dramatic incident visuals with death and injury
Crisis resolved by the time media call to follow up	Media wait for investigation completion or crisis cause
Positive relationship with media	Negative relationship with media
Media feel all essential info has been supplied in a timely, honest manner	Media suspect cover-up or larger story
Media tone not sensational	Sensational media tone

***How to End the Crisis News Life Cycle Before it Begins***

The only way an amusement park public relations practitioner can truly avoid initiating the crisis news life cycle is if the park’s crisis management team anticipates and resolves all potential crisis situations before they occur.

Although crisis management teams diligently work to eliminate hazardous situations and out-smart (or out-dumb) careless park patrons who often cause their own injuries, they cannot always stop crises from occurring. Therefore, to mitigate crisis news life cycle initiation, parks must handle all first aid response and hospital transports internally so no alerts broadcast over scanners for media to hear. Without media knowing the incident happened, the news life cycle never begins.

However, today's cell phone technology and media tip lines chip away at parks' ability to keep crises off the air. Park patrons provide timely but often inaccurate media tip calls that pose increasingly greater challenges to park public relations practitioners. Therefore, practitioners must focus on how to shorten or end the crisis news life cycle once it begins.

### ***How to Shorten the Crisis News Life Cycle***

Amusement park public relations practitioners can employ certain strategies to shorten or end the crisis news life cycle. First, practitioners must establish the right foundation upon which they build crisis resolution. That foundation includes these axioms:

- Be available at a moment's notice 24 hours-a-day
- To be ahead of the story, train emergency park personnel to contact you when even the slightest incident occurs at any time
- Maintain a crisis communication team that helps craft responses, anticipates further issues and rehearses their roles
- Build positive media relationships long before crises occur to help ensure fair, balanced crisis coverage
- Know in-park and external resources, and critical third parties who can support park messages
- Know media contacts, what they need and how to satisfy them. Anticipate "troublemakers" (more sensational outlets) and plan to accommodate them.
- Use crises to further build and strengthen your reputation

Once practitioners create the foundation, they can employ these strategies to shorten or end the crisis news life cycle:

- Maintain a consistent voice throughout the incident – one spokesperson
- Prepare responses and respond quickly to media inquiries
- Provide open, honest information without providing unnecessary details that could create additional stories
- When stumbling across an unknown fact, do not offer follow up. Simply be honest and say, “I don’t know.” This helps limit details that further the story or create follow ups.
- When asked for more information, promise to follow up, and do it
- Deny visuals of the incident site, if possible
- If media are present, steer them toward neutral visual backgrounds without drama or icons to identify the park
- If helicopters and tower cameras can obtain video, cover or shield the site, if possible
- Protect victims’ identities - do not release names and other details. This helps stop follow ups and dramatic personal crisis accounts
- Evaluate release of follow-up information. Releasing new information produces follow-up stories, so if the information is not critical, do not release it
- Limit access to victims, witnesses and their sound bites, if possible



No two crises are the same. But preparation ensures control over any negative situation. When amusement park public relations practitioners exercise control over crises, they effectively manage crises. Ultimately, proper crisis management will uphold the park's reputation, foster fair and balanced coverage, strengthen practitioners' reputations and shorten the crisis news life cycle.

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