



THE PUBLIC FACE OF CRISIS

How sheriffs can protect their reputational ‘piggy bank’

By Rob Weinhold

When a crisis engulfs your office, you will appear in front of a bank of microphones, and—with white-hot TV lights glaring and cameras rolling—stare out into a sea of skeptical media faces and attempt to deliver a timely, coherent response on behalf of your organization. And with each community meeting, speech, or media interview, you will either make a small deposit into, or a heavy withdrawal from, your reputational “piggy bank”—whose balance you hope never reaches zero.

I have learned from many incredible communicators who perform spectacularly under duress. It is an art, not a science. As with wine, one gets better with age; there is no substitute for experience. The best communicators I know are obsessive about every syllable they utter, every piece of clothing they wear, and every message point they deliver. They call each reporter back, treat them fairly, and never compromise their integrity; they understand what reporters need and make themselves relevant to those who have editorial control.

The best communicators also learn how to steer clear of organizational jargon, are detail-oriented, and deliver news compassionately in a conversational manner that connects with those who consume their words emotionally. They are analytical, well-timed, and process loads of information almost instantaneously. And they are never too high or too low; they have a steady hand under pressure, no matter the gravity of the situation or the tightness of the deadline.

In the event they run into an aggressive reporter, they can manage the situation with the grace and humility of a 10th-level verbal judo artist. If they had the God-given talent to perform on the gridiron, they’d run two-minute drills with the game on the line. And like Peyton Manning, the best are prepared, informed, and always find a way to hone their craft. You want them on your team, because they understand the big picture and see the whole room. It’s what they do best.

THE DIGITAL DILEMMA

Many sheriffs can lead deputies and fight crime ferociously, but they also know that the toughest part of the job in a digital world is to be in front of the camera. Many sheriffs don’t love giving public

interviews, but it is absolutely vital to their short-, mid-, and long-term success. As sheriff, you are the most visible ambassador of your office’s brand. You are the reputational gatekeeper for your colleagues, your stakeholders, and your legacy. Bottom line? You better not screw it up; you can lose the next election and your job with a single syllable.

The pressure can be enormous with the 24-hour digital news cycle, where news breaks almost instantly. Anyone with an internet connection and recording device can wreak havoc on your brand. And today, everyone is a citizen journalist; they’d rather push the big red record button on their smartphone than dial 911. Some simply want to be the next YouTube sensation and monetize their efforts at the expense of you, your deputies, and the bank of trust you’ve grown over time.

Mishandled, a crisis will cost you time, money, stakeholder confidence, and perhaps your career. Make no mistake about it: The decisions you make today will be judged for years to come.

As the former public affairs director of the Baltimore Police Department, I’ve handled thousands of media interviews. And as a former local, state, and federal public safety executive, I understand innovative public policy and the need to communicate effectively; the most important message is the message received.

When an officer was killed in a traffic accident, and days later, another officer went down in a helicopter crash, I went from the gravesite of a police funeral to the University of Maryland Medical Center’s R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center, where the second officer was clinging to life. (He would die shortly after.) At a hastily-called news conference, a veteran FOX reporter said, “Rob, this is unimaginable. Can you describe the feeling of the department right now?”

What an immense responsibility that was—to be asked, off the top of your head, to define how 3,000 or 4,000 men and women feel in the wake of such devastating losses. I was momentarily speechless. It was a question I wish I never had to answer and the closest I ever came to shedding a tear on camera. All I could think about were the families of the officers and the horrible news they’d just

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received, as I had worn the same badge. I quickly snapped out of it, since lots of people were depending on me to capture the moment—not to cry on camera.

I would be asked to do something similar many times as my career moved forward—to provide perspective to people who didn't live in the law enforcement world or understand life on the street, to bridge the gap between the tragic reality of whatever crisis was occurring and people's perceptions of it. That's what a good ambassador does; he or she takes the complicated and unbelievable and makes it easily consumable for others to understand, no matter how grim, to build trust.

When Baltimore Police Lt. Owen Sweeney was shot through a door and killed, just months before his retirement; when a two-year-old named Aja Nicolas was shot in the head by her father during a domestic dispute; when Walter E. Loch, a retired Johns Hopkins physician, and his wife, Mary, were beaten to death with a baseball bat as they slept in their home (their grandson would eventually confess to the crime)—in all of those senseless, high-profile crimes, I was the face delivering horrific news to the public.

I had to deliver that news in a credible, professional, articulate way, while also being the voice of reason and humanizing the events so people not only understood the facts, but also how each incident impacted the community within the context of larger public policy discussions and debates. As sheriff, you must be compassionate and commanding in everything you do.

A NO-SPIN ZONE

In my view, you don't "spin" your way through crisis; you lead your way through it. It's not about shallow window-dressing; it's about long-term, sustainable change. Anyone can lead when crime is down and community trust is high. Real leaders emerge when the chips are down and the stakes are at their highest. After decades of helping people during life's most critical times, I've come to realize that crisis is not to be feared. In fact, crisis is a growth strategy. That's right—a growth strategy!

Let's face it, the issues sheriffs face on camera may be so controversial as to have national consequences, such as a bad shooting, corruption, racism, profiling, labor dissent, political upheaval, controversial legal stances, community unrest, and many other issues of sensitivity, adversity, or crisis. Sheriffs must be prepared for every eventuality—you must be *60 Minutes* ready!

The trusted voice of a sheriff is not just someone who regurgitates facts. It's someone who pays attention to the delivery, cadence, and voice inflection of his or her remarks—someone who can think on

his or her feet, who can take something technical and break it down so that the message is understood. In short, they tell a story in the most conversational of tones. The very best know how to humanize their message, put it into perspective, and gain trust. If the story is understood—truly understood, no matter how painful or joyful the news—then the sheriff has done their job.

A few tips to ensure that your reputational piggy bank continues to overflow:

Never erode your integrity. Misinformation breeds distrust. As a sheriff, there is, at times, an immense pressure to make your organization "look good." Many want you to press your nose up against the ethical window of truth and transparency. Do not cave in to others who would like you to lie, distort the truth, or leave vital facts behind that alter messaging and perception—this is tantamount to a lie. Once lost, you will never fully restore your integrity.

Be relevant. As the art of traditional and digital press relations evolves within a changing worldwide media landscape, I hear about more and more sheriffs not returning reporters' calls, delaying the release of information, and simply refusing to feed the media "monster." However, the monster will eat! And, as long as the monster eats, it will need access and information in order to tell its stories effectively.

If you, as sheriff, stick your head in the sand and fail to respond, you'll quickly make yourself irrelevant and ineffective. As an executive who must be ready to meet the moment, understand this principle and make yourself available. Remember my mantra: "If you don't tell your story, someone else will. And, when someone else tells your story, it certainly won't be the story you want told."

Know the facts. A common mistake of many who speak publicly is failing to prepare and gain a sound understanding of the facts before the interview. Too many times, I have seen professionals jump on camera with either no substantive information to deliver or rely only on the "I can't comment on that" or "I don't have that information" phraseology. This drives news consumers berserk. Not knowing the facts or saying "No comment" will quickly make you irrelevant to everyone; it is unacceptable.

A sheriff is elected, expected, and paid to know the facts. While you may feel you did your job by surviving the interview or press conference, you have done nothing to inform the audience and lend the perspective so sorely needed during life's most critical times. Sometimes, sheriffs cave to media requests ("I just need something on camera"), organizational pressure, or self-imposed deadlines. If you decide to step up to the podium, have something important to say.

Be predictive. When preparing to go on camera or prepping another spokesperson, be certain to plan for every question and eventuality. There's a tendency for folks to want to go on camera without fully preparing, because they are used to speaking publicly or know the organization very well—chief executives are good for this. Push back and demand ample preparation. List questions, answers, follow-ups, and counters; it is a mental chess game.

Train on camera relentlessly. Failing to plan is planning to fail. An eight to 15-second sound bite can ruin your career—just ask former BP CEO Tony Hayward, who recklessly uttered "I want my life back" after the Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill killed 11 people

in 2010. Don't wing it—prepare for every interview, no matter how mundane or harmless it may seem.

Build relationships with those who have editorial control. Know those who tell your story. You want to get the benefit of the doubt when a reporter tells the story—not an unfair advantage, but balance. Gather intelligence from reporters and news organizations; ask them what angle they plan to cover. They are under no obligation to tell you, but you'd be amazed at what they will tell you—particularly if there is an existing relationship or future mutual need. Often, the same reporters will cover your office over a lengthy period of time; the relationship pays both ways.

Video doesn't tell the whole story. A video account of what happened doesn't factor in many variables—what each party said, body language from all angles, and what transpired before and after the footage. In today's digital world, everyone is a citizen journalist with an opinion. More is recorded and shared than at any other point in history, and the emergence of video has changed every profession.

Be very careful when making a judgment or decision based solely on what video has to offer. There are many more aggravating and

mitigating circumstances to consider, whether it's a consumer's viral claim that they found a foreign object in their food or an officer taking someone's freedom. Treat video as what it is: another tool in the search for the truth.

Practice, practice, practice. It is imperative that you practice relentlessly on camera in an authentic, safe environment. As important to survival as honing your tactical skills and shooting your service weapon on the range, repetition on camera will save your career!

Seek advice from colleagues. Organizations like the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) are invaluable sources of knowledge and can serve as the single most important case-study resource. Be a student of your peers' experiences and learn from others' successes and missteps. Be a curious student of the game! 🌟

Rob Weinholt is chief executive of Fallston Group (fallstongroup.com), a global agency that builds, strengthens, and defends reputations. He served in the executive ranks of the Baltimore Police Department, the Maryland governor's office, and U.S. Department of Justice. Weinholt is a leadership, strategy, and communications expert, author of The Art of Crisis Leadership, and a member of the Dean's Advisory Council at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

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