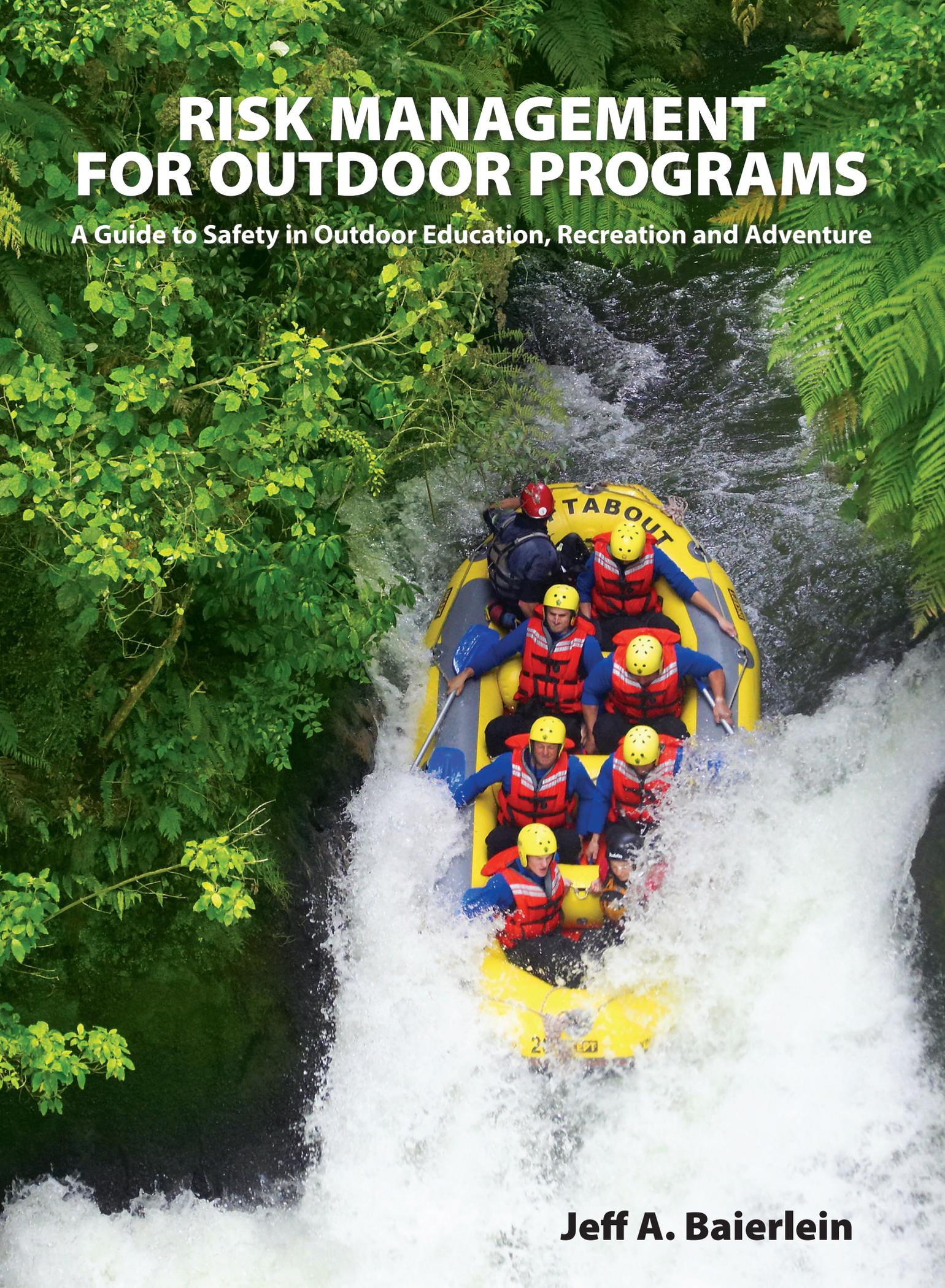


# RISK MANAGEMENT FOR OUTDOOR PROGRAMS

A Guide to Safety in Outdoor Education, Recreation and Adventure



**Jeff A. Baierlein**

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Viristar LLC  
Seattle, Washington



**VIRISTAR**

The background of the page is a light-colored topographic map with contour lines. At the bottom of the page, there is a photograph of a mountain range with several peaks, rendered in shades of blue and green, suggesting a misty or hazy atmosphere.

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# MEDIA RELATIONS



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. The differing priorities of news media and your organization
2. Consequences of not working effectively with news media
3. Information news media seek when a newsworthy incident occurs
4. How to help news media do their job
5. Selecting and training authorized spokespeople for your organization
6. Framing your story with messaging points
7. Projecting a caring image and telling the truth
8. Avoiding common media pitfalls
9. Writing press releases
10. Conducting interviews
11. Preparing for the media in advance
12. Bringing in external resources
13. Working with others who are providing news media content
14. The role of an emergency action plan and increased staffing in media response
15. State-controlled media

## 20.1. INTRODUCTION

When a major incident occurs, expect news media to pay attention. How the media portray the story, and how their story affects your organization, depends in part on how well you work with media outlets.

An aim of news businesses typically is to tell a compelling story about a newsworthy topic that draws in consumers (and ultimately advertisers). Their role is not to tell your side of the story, share the truth as you see it, or act exclusively in your best interests. The media may focus on the most sensational aspects of the story. They may omit information about your excellent safety record and risk management procedures, the inherent nature of some risks, or other items that you think are an important part of the story and that might help maintain a positive perception of your organization by the public.

Your organization's reputation and business interests can be unnecessarily damaged if media relations are not managed well.

If the story that emerges about your incident has negative elements and is not informed by the truthful and well-crafted information you have to share, expect that current and potential future customers may avoid your business. Permits or licenses necessary for business operations may be more difficult or impossible to get. Other problems may arise. The consequences of poor media exposure can range from a minor inconvenience to the termination of your outdoor program.

Of course, if an organization is accurately exposed by the press as grossly negligent, then the shutting down of the program and pursuit of legal penalties may be well-justified.

In this chapter, we'll cover ideas on how to work effectively with the media. (The focus is on environments with a free press; for situations involving state-controlled media, see the noted on state-controlled media at the end of this chapter.)

## 20.2. WHAT MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES WANT

The public has a right to know about important topics that might affect them. News media are an important conduit for sharing relevant information with the public. When a newsworthy event occurs, the media will want to know:

1. **What** happened
2. **Where** it happened
3. **When** it happened
4. **Who** was involved (that is, names and personal data, not only of those injured, but rescuers and caregivers as well)

Expect the media to want background information on your organization, your programs, and your safety record.

Reporters can be working on very tight deadlines, sometimes of just a few hours. A prompt response to media inquiries helps reporters get a well-rounded picture and share the story in a timely way.



Figure 20.1. When a major incident occurs, news media will want information.

## 20.3. GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

### 20.3.1. Assist the Media with Responsible Reporting

Responsible news outlets play a valuable role in society. You can help them do their job while looking after the legitimate interests of your organization by following these guidelines:

1. Provide the media the what, where, when and who of the incident.
2. Be accurate. Do not guess.

3. If you don't know the answer to a media inquiry, say so. Try to get back to the reporter promptly, ideally in the next few minutes, either with the requested information, or a referral to an alternate source who might be able to provide the information.
4. Ensure that all media outlets and reporters have equal access to information.
5. Correct factual mistakes promptly.
6. Cooperate with the media. If information cannot be released, explain why. For example, perhaps names of the injured cannot be released because relatives have not yet been notified. Or the physician's orders may prohibit an interview of a survivor.
7. Be respectful, courteous, and attentive to reporters' deadlines.

### 20.3.2. Select Your Messengers

Tightly restrict who is authorized to communicate with the media. Normally only a small number of top people in the organization, such as CEO and chief communications executive, would be authorized. Articulate and charismatic individuals who are well-informed and have the appearance of trustworthiness are ideal.

All staff should be clearly aware of this strict requirement. Measures helpful to ensuring staff are clear on restrictions might include documenting the policy in an employee handbook or similar document, and having staff sign an agreement that they have read the handbook and agree to abide by its contents. Periodically reviewing the requirement, for example annually, may be useful, as can be reiterating the policy when a major incident occurs.

### 20.3.3. Train Your Messengers

Consider providing specialized training on how to work with the media to those in your organization authorized to communicate with news media. A variety of resources, such as conference workshops and online material, are available for this.

This kind of training may not be realistic for organizations with significantly restricted resources. Larger organizations, on the other hand, may have on staff communications specialists who are career professionals with relevant degrees and extensive media experience.

### 20.3.4. Tell Your Story

*When to Communicate with Media Outlets.* If the incident is not a major event, for instance a relatively small-scale internal incident only involving your own staff, you might choose to only respond to media inquiries rather than take the initiative to disseminate information.

In the case of a major and clearly newsworthy incident, affecting the community beyond your organization, it can be useful to promptly and proactively reach out to relevant news media.

*Frame the Story.* If you do not tell your side of the story, someone else will tell theirs. In order to help ensure that reports are accurate and appropriately favorable to your organization, a well-developed and truthful message, thoughtfully crafted and delivered, is important.

*Develop Message Points.* Carefully craft message points—generally, three—and stick to them. Key points for initial response with a disaster involving ill or injured participants might be:

1. **Our primary concern is for our participants.** This sets a compassionate tone.
2. **Our Situation Response Plan worked as designed, and participants received medical care.** This highlights positive elements of the emergency.
3. **We are working with the authorities to determine the facts and cause.** This shows you have nothing to hide, and helps you avoid having to say ‘I don’t know.’

The answer, then, to every question you are asked is one of your three key points.

Reporters may pluck out the most interesting or unusual bits of what you say and repeat it out of context. It is therefore crucial that you have good discipline in sticking to your message points. If you don’t want it to be part of the story, don’t say it.

*Project Caring and Concern.* This can positively affect the tone of the story that appears. Emphasize any thoughtful, humanitarian acts taken by the organization. For example, you might talk about how the director visited the scene of the accident, how counseling is provided to those affected, or that the Board Chair visited the family.

*Tell the Truth.* Not only is this the moral imperative, but also a later investigation may uncover your deception with disastrous consequences. Telling the truth does not necessarily mean full disclosure.

*Provide Background.* Along with providing the what, where, when and who of the incident, provide background information on your organization. This generally includes the organization’s mission, history, activities, and risk management practices. This material should be prepared in advance of any incident.

### 20.3.5. Circumstances to Avoid

Practices for avoiding traps, minimizing unwanted liability exposure, and responding to errors include the following.

1. Avoid speculation, personal views and opinion, and emotional responses. Expect media to ask for them, however. Stick to the facts.
2. Don’t let reporters guide your language. If a reporter says, “So, you’re saying...” your best response may be, “No; let me be clear: ...” Do not repeat inaccurate information, even to dispute it.
3. Do not allow yourself to be provoked.
4. Do not assign responsibility for an incident; criticize conduct, policy or equipment, or provide estimates of property damage, before speaking with legal counsel.
5. Do not provide names of victims until family members are notified.
6. Do not provide information regarding the nature of injury or illness prior to diagnosis by a licensed medical physician.
7. If media has been given erroneous information, provide correct information as soon as possible. If a media report is in error, contact the relevant reporter and courteously provide the correct information.

### 20.3.6. Media Channels

*Press Release.* For major incidents likely to elicit the interest of the news media, proactively send out press releases, emphasizing your established talking points. Distribute the press release to your pre-established list of media contacts, typically via email or relevant messaging app.

A press release is an official statement written in a professional voice describing the who, what, why and where of a newsworthy item such as a major incident. It typically includes a bit of background information relevant to the topic (for example, about your organization, accomplishments, and safety record). It often contains one or more quotes. It is concise—usually no more than 500 words—and written in easy-

to-understand language in a standard press release format. A good press release provides a factual, ready-for-publication story about the news item.

Consider having text, image and any video information packaged in formats friendly for the news outlet's multiple platforms: website and various social media accounts, each of which has its own optimal format.

**Social Media.** Provide information via your website and social media accounts. This information might be distributed at the same time that your press material is to be released.

**Interviews.** A variety of approaches can help you have an effective interview. See Figure 20.2, Interview Tips.

1. **Prepare.** Ensure you have all the available information. Anticipate what questions might be asked. Practice.
2. **Use multiple ways to say the same thing.** For each of your three talking points, develop three concise responses that help communicate that point. This helps you get the same message across multiple times, in slightly different ways. Ensure the responses can be clearly, crisply delivered in fewer than 10 or 20 seconds.
3. **Key points first.** As with a news release, begin with what is most important.
4. **Use plain language.** Speak in terms people unfamiliar with your field can understand. Talking about Class III water and a single-pitch top-belay will just confuse and frustrate the audience.
5. **No "no comment."** This sounds evasive. Explain why you aren't able to comment: "We're currently gathering that information and will provide it as soon as we're able." "Our policy is not to comment on pending litigation."
6. **Don't speak off the record.** The information may be misused and traced back to you.
7. **Stay calm.** Don't argue, even if the reporter is provocative.
8. **Stay on message.** Stick to your messaging points. Even if an unrelated issue is brought up, guide the conversation back to your themes. "That's an interesting question, and I think that what's really important here is..." or "Well, first, let me say..."
9. **Use sound bites.** Develop memorable phrases and short, catchy ways of summarizing your main message. These can be used as quotes or as broadcast sound bites.

10. **Summarize.** Reinforce your three core messages by concisely restating them as the interview draws to an end.

**Figure 20.2. Interview tips.**

**Other Channels.** Press conferences, media advisories, and other formats for providing information can be used as appropriate. Press conferences are rare outside of major and widely publicized incidents.

### 20.3.7. Prepare in Advance

If possible, build relationships with media representatives and institutions well before a newsworthy incident occurs. Regularly send out press releases and other media communications about good-news stories. Invite reporters to events. This level of media contact may be unrealistic for smaller organizations. When reporters contact you, however, use that as an opportunity to build a collaborative, mutually beneficial, respectful, long-term relationship.

Assemble relevant media contacts in advance of a newsworthy incident. Contacts include reporters, editors, news directors, and producers for local newspapers, broadcast stations, and news agencies (newswires). Your list may also include industry media such as prominent bloggers or staff of industry publications. Keep a record of the names of media outlets and relevant staff along with their contact information. Since staff turn over and the media landscape is dynamic, regularly update the list.

As discussed earlier, prepare generic incident-related messaging points in advance of incidents. When an incident occurs, draft messaging points specific to the incident, and multiple ways of saying each messaging point.

Prepare background information to provide to news media. At a minimum, this would be a couple of paragraphs about your organization, risk management system, and safety record. A more extensive press kit might include a marketing brochure, organizational fact sheet, recent annual report, copies of recent press, and access to photo and video resources.

If members of the media visit the incident scene or your offices or facilities, have a plan to keep them away from sensitive areas and persons such as actively working emergency response personnel. Plan for conducting interviews in locations without visual, auditory, or other distractions or disturbances.

### 20.3.8. Aim for a Short Story

Provide as much detail as possible, as early as possible. This helps make the incident a short one-day story rather than something that continues for days. A continuing series of headlines and features dragging out over days and weeks keeps your unfortunate incident in the minds of the public longer.

### 20.3.9. Employ Outside Expertise

In complex situations, enlist legal counsel and public relations advisors to provide guidance on what information should be released, and how.

In a major incident, consider contracting with a crisis management company to provide expert guidance and communications support.

If your outdoor program is part of a larger institution—for instance, a recreation department within a larger government agency, an outdoor activities office of a major university, or a chapter or branch of a national outdoor organization—access communications, legal, and other specialists in that larger institution to support your media communications.

## 20.4. MANAGING OTHER MEDIA OUTLETS

If the incident occurs in an area (such as a national park or waters regulated by a maritime authority) managed by a government agency or similar authority, communications and public information officers from the agency may communicate with news media and the public regarding the incident. Search and rescue authorities, law enforcement agencies, and other authorities may release information as well. Be aware of what these agencies are communicating, respect their authority, and avoid providing conflicting information.

Personal social media posts from participants and bystanders can broadcast unedited information about an incident with great rapidity. Management of information flowing from a scene via social media and similar channels is important. Consider providing guidance to participants about what is and is not appropriate to share, and managing the scene to reduce unhelpful bystander social media.

Promptly contact parents, guardians, sending institutions (in the case of corporate, school group or similar customer types), and upper administrators in the outdoor program's parent institution (such as a university with an outdoor club), as applicable, with relevant incident information. This helps avoid a situation in which those persons learn about the incident from social media or from family members of participants posting on social media.

## 20.5. OTHER FACTORS

Emergencies are characterized by the presence of insufficient information. In order to best respond to requests for information from the media and others, it is useful to have a good emergency action plan. The plan should have provisions to provide for the best possible information flow between persons at incident sites and with those affected, and spokespeople.

Be prepared to rapidly increase your organizational capacity to manage communications through social media and other channels, work with parents, sending institutions, and concerned other customers. Adding additional staff resources to your communications efforts for as many hours or days as needed will help reduce stress, diminish confusion, and improve the flow of information.

## 20.6. CONCLUSION

News media play an important and valuable role in society. This does not extend, however, to a responsibility to help your organization, or present information about you in the most favorable light. But by working cooperatively and skillfully with media outlets, you maximize the probability that media exposure of your incident will be as accurate as possible and the most favorable to your organization.

News media is not best considered your friend or your enemy, but an important element in the business landscape. By managing interactions with media well, you can support their legitimate needs, the legitimate interests of your organization, and the public interest.

### **State-controlled Media**

The rules are different when news media are controlled by the state rather than acting as a free press not subject to direct government control. (Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index and others provide nation-by-nation rankings of press freedom.)

When the news media is state-controlled, the aims of the state may be to promote stability and ensure the state is perceived well—for example, by highlighting the quick and efficient response of rescue teams, or by publicizing a forceful crackdown on those immediately responsible for the incident.

In the case of a major incident, expect the police to conduct an investigation, the results of which may be influenced by state authorities. The state-controlled media may then release information from the police report that meets the state's aims for stability and civic harmony. At no point does your organization initiate contact with the news media.

## Chapter Summary

1. The media will be interested in your major incident, but their goals are different from yours.
2. Skillful interaction with news media can benefit your reputation and organization.
3. When an incident occurs, news media will want to know the what, where, when and who of the incident, and background information on your organization.
4. Help news media by providing accurate, timely information to all media agencies.
5. Carefully select and train media spokespeople.
6. In an incident, craft three main message points, and a few ways to communicate each one. Communicate only these message points.
7. Be truthful, and portray a compassionate, caring image.
8. Avoid speculation, opinion, or emotional responses.
9. Do not assign blame, provide names of victims prematurely, or make your own medical diagnoses.
10. Correct factual errors.
11. Distribute concise, factual press releases in standard format to media contacts.
12. Disseminate information via website and social media channels along with press releases.
13. In interviews, prepare in advance; focus on core messages; use easy-to-understand language; avoid “no comment,” and don’t speak off the record.
14. Prepare for news media in advance by building relationships with media representatives, developing messaging points, and creating background information.
15. Attempt to keep news reports to one day in length by promptly providing comprehensive information.
16. Employ legal, public relations, and other specialists as needed.
17. Coordinate with government authorities who are communicating with the media, and manage unofficial social media posters as possible.
18. Develop plans for good communication between the incident scene and administrative headquarters during emergencies.