

# The SCOOP

Media Relations Tips, Insights & Opportunities

[Home](#) [Letters](#) [Book Corner](#) [Interviews](#) [How to Pitch](#) [Features](#) [Awards](#) [Events](#)

## Features

### Prepare for the Crisis

By Janeen Lawlor, media analyst, [janeen.lawlor@lexisnexis.com](mailto:janeen.lawlor@lexisnexis.com)

It's 5:46 a.m. The morning papers have just hit your doorstep, and you are falling back into that five extra minutes that your snooze button allowed you. Suddenly, your phone rings—it's a reporter from the CNN, asking for a comment on the latest scandal to hit the news—your company. You put them on hold, unable to answer the question because you have no idea what the scandal could be. As you stumble to the front door to pick up the paper, your call waiting beeps—it's the CEO of your company, and she is yelling about a front-page story in the New York Times that is anything but complimentary towards her and your company. Your head is spinning, and you have no idea what to do next. And then your alarm rings.

This was all just a bad dream. But what is a PR professional's worst nightmare could very well be reality if you are not prepared for the worst. The Scoop spoke with **Joyce Newman, Founder of the Newman Group**, a New York-based PR firm that specializes in media training and crisis communications, to find out how PR professionals can best prepare for a crisis.

### Gain the Trust of Top Management

In order to prepare for a crisis, says Newman, the first step that you must take is to gain the trust of upper management, including the CEO of the company.

"It's human nature to say that (a crisis) is not going to happen," said Newman. However, in order to press the need for coming up with a crisis plan, a PR professional should gather up case histories of crises that have happened in your industry. Newman advises finding a case of when a crisis was handled well, and a case that was handled poorly, and to use that to point out the need for a crisis plan and media training.

Once you gain upper management's trust and gain their buy-in on developing a crisis plan, the next step is to actually follow through on anticipating something that could be impossible to imagine.

### Internalize the Crisis

The key to anticipating a crisis, according to Newman, is to "Prepare, prepare, prepare."

This preparation is fairly involved, and means thinking through the possibilities. But first, it's important to decide how a crisis will be handled internally. Some of the steps Newman advises PR professionals to take are:

- Create an internal list of contacts for emergencies, including e-mails, cell phones, pagers, etc, so that the people responding can be located;
- Decide on an internal chain of command: e.g. who is responsible for what, and who should handle their responsibilities if they are not available; and
- Have communication methods in place so that you know immediately how to get in touch with all of your audiences right away.

Newman recommends brainstorming on the types of crises that could happen, and how your company would handle them.

That way, no matter what the crisis is, you have a general game plan and an idea of how to handle it.

### Media Train the Management Team

"I don't come from the perspective that it's the spokesperson against the media," said Newman. "It's the job of the spokesperson to communicate to various audiences, and it's the job of the media to get the story out." Working with your management team to ensure that they are comfortable working with the media is a key element to preparing for a potential crisis.

When conducting media training for upper management, the following are tips from Newman to keep in mind:

- Express empathy and caring for the situation immediately;
- Respond in plain English, and not legalese;
- Never say "No Comment" as it is taken as an admission of guilt. Instead, find something that can be said, or say that information will be provided as soon as possible; and
- Bring the situation down to a human one-on-one level.

### Handle the Crisis

When a crisis happens, typically the legal team directs the response. Newman asserts that it is key for the public relations professional to have a lead role in handling the response, and that this will only happen if the work is done to establish your expertise from the beginning.

"If a PR person can go in as an outsider, hold a mirror up to the situation and not get caught up in the politics (of the crisis), then they are doing their job," said Newman.

*The Newman Group specializes in high-level presentation skills, speaker preparation and media training. Their crisis communications training focuses on two aspects of strategic message management: planning for potential crisis and reacting appropriately when a crisis occurs. Joyce Newman, founder of The Newman Group, has been helping professionals to improve their communications skills in a variety of speaking situations, from platform presentations to media interviews, since 1975. Contact her at [joyce@newmangroup.com](mailto:joyce@newmangroup.com), or visit their website at [www.newmangroup.com](http://www.newmangroup.com).*



**Get a FREE trial of PRanywhere**

The advanced web-based media relationship management and task automation tools from LexisNexis.