

Tactical Messaging: The Strategy Behind Crisis Communications

By: Chris Mannino

As chief of police from 2017 to 2022, I traded letters with one of the first Park Forest Police Department officers who joined shortly after the village's founding in 1949. He had been retired out west for some time. He wrote that on his first day on the job he was given a gun and a tour around the village and then told to have at it, his "field training" consisting of little more than a few hours.

While that introduction to a law enforcement career sounds incredible from a 2023 perspective, a senior command staff position in law enforcement often still has elements of that trial-by-fire education. Budgeting, human resources issues, and regulatory compliance are all categories that often give the test before the lesson when it comes to responsibilities law enforcement leaders take on when moving up the ranks. But one of those tests which can be extremely costly for a leader and for the organization if not averted can come from the challenges of public messaging when it matters most.

Most law enforcement leaders are highly experienced in interpersonal communication through interviews and interrogations, calls for service, and attending community events but messaging to a wider public audience, especially in the days of 24-hour news and the endless feeds of social media platforms, can be full of unique challenges and surprising pitfalls. Yet there remains limited opportunities for formal education when it comes to strategies for messaging to the public through traditional media and social media for those who accept the mantle of command. And leaders so often avoid it until they no longer can.

When a crisis strikes, whether that crisis is something occurring in the community or the police department is the focus of attention, even the most public speaking-avoidant law enforcement leader may find themselves having to suddenly figure out public messaging. Waiting to think about communicating to your collective community audience until the "bad thing" has happened can lead to multiple negative outcomes, including pertinent public safety information not making it to those who could be helped by it, missing public assistance in locating suspects, vulnerable missing persons or providing eyewitness or video evidence, and simply appearing to be avoiding transparency at best and intentionally hiding something at worst. In fact, good law enforcement leaders have found themselves no longer in their positions, not because of any malfeasance on their part, but because they failed to message when things had gone wrong (or appeared to have gone wrong) and lost the trust of the community. In law enforcement, we can win a situation operationally but lose it in the court of public opinion. That can have real consequences, both organizationally and personally.

Public messaging, like any other operational function in public safety, should be *intentional and strategic*. That strategy begins with determining the goal of communicating to your community and beyond. What is the desired outcome? In a crisis or critical incident, the desired outcomes are often:

- Keeping the public safe through actionable steps they can take
- Gaining public cooperation that aids public safety
- Keeping your community and the media informed and dispelling misinformation
- Relieving fears, anxiety or anger
- Demonstrating transparency

- Building trust in the public safety response

Those desired outcomes should inform our public messaging strategies, both when crisis communications are needed *but also long before something has gone wrong*. When a law enforcement agency begins with the desired outcome of crisis communications, it then helps decide who will be the messenger, how they'll share information, and what information they'll share.

As a chief in a mid-sized law enforcement agency budgeted for 44 sworn officers, I did not have the luxury of a public information officer. This did not mean we abandoned this important role. Instead, we built a team of people who were able to fulfill the various duties of a PIO, including multiple people who could speak on camera, a team with crafting social media messages as ancillary duties, as well as additional team members who could issue community notifications via reverse 911-type technology. Given an unlimited budget, I would certainly have preferred a full-time PIO, but like so often happens in policing under budgeting constraints, we find a way.

When it comes to choosing the vehicle to get the message to your audience, law enforcement leaders should consider which methods are most effective at reaching the widest audience. Social media can be a strategic method of reaching a wide audience, but as many agencies have found, it is not as simple as logging on and creating an account. It takes intentionality, strategy, and an understanding of both liability and potential pitfalls. Those considerations are worth the effort given the majority of your audience is not only on social media, they likely receive most of their information through it. Yet law enforcement agencies should remember there will always be some among their desired reach that do not use social media. Reverse 911 systems and an active, updated website serve as solid supplements to mass messaging through social media. And while the traditional media is not law enforcement's primary audience, they continue to serve as a medium to reach a wide audience with your message. Just as we wouldn't deploy a less-lethal system into the field without ample training, we shouldn't employ the use of any communications means without fully understanding its capabilities and limitations and ensuring those empowered to use it are fully trained.

The thorny question of what information should be shared during a crisis is often the place where law enforcement leaders get bogged down. Afraid of saying too much or the wrong thing, they sometimes become entrapped in the failed strategy of saying nothing. Now retired from law enforcement and serving as a senior director for Julie Parker Communications, we offer a rubric that can help law enforcement leaders decide what information to share by first determining if it can pass through four gates.

- 1) Is it legally protected information by statute?
- 2) Will sharing it compromise an ongoing investigation or tactical operation?
- 3) Will sharing it invade a reasonable expectation of privacy or violate policy?
- 4) If it passes those gates, we then ask if the information is subject to change. If it is not certain but will aid in any of the desired outcomes such as keeping the public safe, we may consider qualifying language when sharing it: "At this time it is believed..." If it's mere speculation or unsubstantiated belief, it is not shared unless and until confirmed. But if it's not going to change, we then ask, "Will it eventually come out anyway?"

If we know that at some future point the information is going to be made public anyway, we consider it a green light to share with the public now, **understanding that in cases when the**

agency is the subject of the crisis, that decision will also be made with guidance of legal counsel.

Public messaging can seem daunting, but how do we serve a high-risk search warrant? We determine a desired outcome, assign roles to highly trained personnel, conduct extensive research and surveillance, develop a strategy and implement the plan. Messaging may seem less operational yet in reality, it's much the same. When we approach it strategically, it is another critical aspect of our operations that can be implemented like the other tasks with which we are much more familiar.

I'll be presenting on this topic for Julie Parker Communications at the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police Annual Conference on April 20, 2023 at the Westin-Lombard. I hope to see you there.

Author bio:

Christopher Mannino served for 25 years at the Park Forest Police Department in the suburban Chicago area, retiring as chief of police in 2022. He now works as the senior director for Julie Parker Communications, a firm that provides communications consulting and training to law enforcement and other clients across the country.