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## Chapter 17

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### Negative News and Crisis Communication

You don't hear things that are bad about your company unless you ask. It is easy to hear good tidings, but you have to scratch to get the bad news.

- Thomas J. Watson Sr.

One day, today, is worth two tomorrows.

- Anonymous

## Getting Started

### INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

1. Write a brief description of an experience when someone shared negative news with you in person or in writing. How was it presented? How was it delivered? How did it make you feel? After all this time, how do you still feel about it? Share your response and compare with classmates.
2. Write a brief description of an experience when you shared negative news with someone in person or in writing. How did you present it? How did you deliver it? How did you feel, and what was your perception of how it was received? How do you feel about it now? How do you perceive the recipient of the negative news may feel about it today? Share your response and compare with classmates.
3. Locate the emergency plan where you work or go to school. What would you do in the case of an emergency? Discuss with classmates.
4. Can you think of one company that has had a scandal, a major problem, or a crisis in the last year? Indicate the company and your perception of how the situation was handled. Discuss with classmates.
5. Find five examples of press conferences and create a table with the product or service and the message.
6. From Introductory Exercise 5, add a third and fourth column to your table, noting whether you thought the message was effective or ineffective.

Communication is constant, but is it always effective? In times of confusion or crisis, clear and concise communication takes on an increased level of importance. When an emergency arises, rumors can spin out of control, emotions can run high, feelings can be hurt, and in some cases lives can tragically be lost. In this chapter we will examine several scenarios in which negative news is delivered or received, and examine ways to improve communication. We will conclude with a discussion of a formal crisis communication plan. Whether you anticipate the necessity of being the bearer of unpleasant or bad news, or a sudden and unexpected crisis occurs, your thoughtful preparation can make all the difference.

## 17.1 Delivering a Negative News Message

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List and discuss seven goals of a negative news message.
2. Write an effective negative news message.

The **negative news message**<sup>1</sup> delivers news that the audience does not want to hear, read, or receive. Delivering negative news is never easy. Whether you are informing someone they are being laid off or providing constructive criticism on their job performance, how you choose to deliver the message can influence its response. Bovee, C., & Thill, J. (2010). *Business communication essentials: A skills-based approach to vital business English* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Some people prefer their bad news to be direct and concise. Others may prefer a less direct approach. Regardless whether you determine a direct or indirect approach is warranted, your job is to deliver news that you anticipate will be unwelcome, unwanted, and possibly dismissed.

In this section we will examine several scenarios that can be communicated internally (within the organization) and externally (outside the organization), but recognize that the lines can be blurred as communication flows outside and through an organization or business. Internal and external communication environments often have a degree of overlap. The rumor of anticipated layoffs may surface in the local media, and you may be called upon to address the concern within the organization. In a similar way, a product that has failed internal quality control tests will require several more tests and improvements before it is ready for market, but if that information leaves the organization, it can hurt the business reputation, prospects for future contracts, and the company's ability to secure financing.

Communication is constantly present, and our ability to manage, clarify, and guide understanding is key to addressing challenges while maintaining trust and integrity with employees, stakeholders, and the public.

There are seven goals to keep in mind when delivering negative news, in person or in written form:

1. News that the audience does not want to hear, read, or receive.

1. Be clear and concise in order not to require additional clarification.

2. Help the receiver understand and accept the news.
3. Maintain trust and respect for the business or organization and for the receiver.
4. Avoid legal liability or erroneous admission of guilt or culpability.
5. Maintain the relationship, even if a formal association is being terminated.
6. Reduce the anxiety associated with the negative news to increase comprehension.
7. Achieve the designated business outcome.

Let's examine our first scenario:

You are a supervisor and have been given the task of discussing repeated tardiness with an employee, Chris. Chris has frequently been late for work, and the problem has grown worse over the last two weeks. The tardiness is impairing not only Chris's performance, but also that of the entire work team. Your manager has instructed you to put an end to it. The desired result is for Chris to stop his tardiness behavior and improve his performance.

You can

1. stop by Chris's cubicle and simply say, "Get to work on time or you are out";
2. invite Chris out to a nice lunch and let him have it;
3. write Chris a stern e-mail;
4. ask Chris to come to your office and discuss the behavior with him in private.

While there are many other ways you could choose to address the situation, let's examine each of these four alternatives in light of the goals to keep in mind when presenting negative news.

First, you could approach Chris in his work space and speak to him directly. Advantages include the ability to get right to the point right away. Disadvantages include the strain on the supervisor-employee relationship as a result of the public display of criticism, the possibility that Chris may not understand you, the lack of a formal discussion you can document, and the risk that your actions may not bring about the desired results.

The goals include the desire to be clear and concise in order not to require additional clarification. This possible response does not provide the opportunity for

discussion, feedback, or confirmation that Chris has clearly understood your concern. It fails to address the performance concern, and limits the correction to the tardiness. It fails to demonstrate respect for all parties. The lack of tact apparent in the approach may reflect negatively on you as the supervisor, not only with Chris but with your manager as well.

When you need to speak to an employee about a personnel concern, it is always best to do it in private. Give thought and concern to the conversation before it occurs, and make a list of points to cover with specific information, including grievances. Like any other speech, you may need to rehearse, particularly if this type of meeting is new to you. When it comes time to have the discussion, issue the warning, back it up in writing with documentation, and don't give the impression that you might change your decision. Whether the issue at hand is a simple caution about tardiness or a more serious conversation, you need to be fair and respectful, even if the other person has been less than professional. Let's examine the next alternative.

Let's say you invite Chris to lunch at a nice restaurant. There is linen on the table, silverware is present for more than the main course, and the water glasses have stems. The environment says "good job" in its uniqueness, presentation, and luxury. Your word will contradict this nonverbal message. The juxtaposition between the environment and the verbal message will cause tension and confusion, which will probably be an obstacle to the receiver's ability to listen. If Chris doesn't understand the message, and the message requires clarification, your approach has failed. The contrast between the restaurant setting and the negative message does not promote understanding and acceptance of the bad news or correction. Furthermore, it does not build trust in the relationship, as the restaurant invitation might be interpreted as a "trap" or a betrayal. Let's examine yet another approach.

You've written Chris a stern e-mail. You've included a list of all the recent dates when he was late and made several statements about the quality of his work. You've indicated he needs to improve, and stop being late, or else. But was your e-mail harassment? Could it be considered beyond the scope of supervision and interpreted as mean or cruel? And do you even know if Chris has received it? If there was no reply, do you know whether it achieved its desired business outcome? A written message may certainly be part of the desired approach, but how it is presented and delivered is as important as what it says. Let's examine our fourth approach to this scenario.

You ask Chris to join you in a private conversation. You start the conversation with an expression of concern and an open-ended question: "Chris, I've been concerned about your work lately. Is everything all right?" As Chris answers, you may

demonstrate that you are listening by nodding your head, and possibly taking notes. You may learn that Chris has been having problems sleeping, or that his living situation has changed. Or Chris may decline to share any issues, deny that anything is wrong, and ask why you are concerned. You may then state that you've observed the chronic tardiness, and name one or more specific mistakes you have found in Chris's work, ending with a reiteration that you are concerned. This statement of concern may elicit more responses and open the conversation up into a dialogue where you come to understand the situation, Chris sees your concern, and the relationship is preserved. Alternatively, in case the conversation does not go well, you will still keep a positive attitude even as you document the meeting and give Chris a verbal warning.

Regardless of how well or poorly the conversation goes, if Chris tells other employees about it, they will take note of how you handled the situation, and it will contribute to their perception of you. It guides their expectations of how you operate and how to communicate with you, as this interaction is not only about you and Chris. You represent the company and its reputation, and your professional display of concern as you try to learn more sends a positive message. While the private, respectful meeting may not be the perfect solution, it is preferable to the other approaches we have considered.

One additional point to consider as you document this interaction is the need to present the warning in writing. You may elect to prepare a memo that outlines the information concerning Chris's performance and tardiness and have it ready should you want to present it. If the session goes well, and you have the discretion to make a judgment call, you may elect to give him another week to resolve the issue. Even if it goes well, you may want to present the memo, as it documents the interaction and serves as evidence of due process should Chris's behavior fail to change, eventually resulting in the need for termination.

This combined approach of a verbal and written message is increasingly the norm in business communication. In the next two sections, we'll compare and contrast approaches, verbal and written, and outline several best practices in terms of approach. But first, we'll outline the four main parts of a negative news message:

1. Buffer or cushion

Figure 17.1



*Performance evaluations usually involve constructive criticism.*

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2. Explanation
3. Negative news
4. Redirect

The first part of a negative news message, verbal or written, involves neutral or positive information. This sets the tone and often serves as a buffer or cushion for the information to come. Next, an explanation discusses why there is an issue in the first place. This may be relatively simple, quite complex, or uncomfortable. In a journal article titled “Further Conceptualization of Explanations in Negative News Messages,” Limaye, Mohan R. (1997, June 1). Further conceptualization of explanation in negative messages. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60(2), 38–50. Mohan Limaye makes the clear case that not only is an explanation a necessary part of any negative news message, it is an ethical and moral requirement. While an explanation is important, never admit or imply responsibility without written authorization from your company cleared by legal counsel. The third part of the negative news message involves the bad news itself, and the emphasis here is on clarity and accuracy. Finally, the redirect may refocus attention on a solution strategy, an alternative, or the subsequent actions that will take place. [Table 17.1 "Negative News Message Sample Script"](#) provides an example that might apply in an external communication situation.

Table 17.1 Negative News Message Sample Script

| <b>Parts of the Negative News Message</b> | <b>Example</b>  |
|---|---|
| Buffer or Cushion                         | Thank you for your order. We appreciate your interest in our product.   |
| Explanation                               | We are writing to let you know that this product has been unexpectedly popular, with over 10,000 requests on the day you placed your order.   |
| Negative News                             | This unexpected increase in demand has resulted in a temporary out-of-stock/backorder situation. We will fulfill your order, received at 11:59 p.m. on 09/09/2009, in the order it was received.  |
| Redirect                                  | We anticipate that your product will ship next Monday. While you wait, we encourage you to consider using the enclosed \$5 off coupon toward the purchase of any product in our catalog. We appreciate your business and want you to know that our highest priority is your satisfaction. |

In [Table 17.1 "Negative News Message Sample Script"](#), the neutral or positive news comes first and introduces the customer to the overall topic. The explanation provides an indication of the purpose of the communication, while the negative message directly addresses how it affects the customer. The redirect discusses specific actions to take place. In this case, it also includes a solution strategy enhanced with a **soft sell message**<sup>2</sup>, a subtle, low-pressure method of selling, cross-selling, or advertising a product or service. Whether you are delivering negative news in person or in writing, the four main parts of a negative message can help you meet all seven goals.

Before we move to the verbal and written delivery of the negative news message, we need to offer a word of counsel. You want to avoid legal problems when communicating bad news. You cannot always predict how others are going to respond, but you can prepare for and deliver your response in ways that lower the risk of litigation in four ways:

1. Avoid abusive language or behavior.
2. Avoid contradictions and absolutes.
3. Avoid confusion or misinterpretation.
4. Maintain respect and privacy.

Sarcasm, profanity, shouting, or abusive or derogatory language is an obstacle to clear communication. Furthermore, such language can be interpreted as defamatory, or harming the reputation of the person, possibly having a negative impact on their future earnings. In written form, it is called libel. If you say it out loud, it is called slander. While slander may be harder to prove, no defamatory remarks should be part of your negative news message. Cell phones increasingly serve to record conversations, and you simply never know if your words will come back to you in short order. Represent yourself, the business, and the receiver of your message with professionalism and avoid abusive or defamatory language.

You also want to avoid contradictions, as they only serve to invite debate. Make sure your information is consistent and in agreement with the general information in the conversation. If one part of the information stands out as a contradiction, its importance will be magnified in the context and distract from your main message. Don't provide more information that is necessary. Polarizing, absolute terms like "always" and "never" are often part of sweeping generalizations that are open to debate. Instead of saying, "You are always late," choose to say, "You were late sixteen times in May." To avoid confusion or misinterpretation, be precise and specific.

2. A subtle, low-pressure method of selling, cross-selling, or advertising a product or service.

Always maintain respect and privacy. Making a negative statement about an employee in front of a group of coworkers can be considered ridicule or harm, and in the coming cases may be actionable and involve legal ramifications. In addition to the legal responsibility, you have the overall goal of demonstrating professionalism as you represent yourself and your company in maintaining the relationship with the employee, even if the end goal is termination. Employees have retaliated against their organizations in many ways, from discouraging remarks to vandalism and computer viruses. Your goal is to avoid such behavior, not out of fear, but out of professionalism and respect for yourself and your organization. Open lines of communication present in a relationship can help reduce the risk of relational deterioration or animosity. The sidebar below provides a checklist for delivering a negative message.

### Negative Message Checklist

1. Clear goal in mind
2. Clear instructions from supervisor (legal counsel)
3. Clear understanding of message
4. Clear understanding of audience/reader
5. Clear understanding of procedure and protocol
6. Clear, neutral opening
7. Clear explanation without admission of guilt or culpability
8. Clear statement of impact or negative news
9. Clear redirect with no reminders of negative news
10. Clear results with acceptance or action on negative news

### Presenting Negative News in Person

Most of us dislike conflict. It may be tempting to avoid face-to-face interaction for fear of confrontation, but delivering negative news in person can be quite effective, even necessary, in many business situations. When considering a one-on-one meeting or a large, formal meeting, consider the preparation and implementation of the discussion.

The first step involves a clear goal. Stephen Covey (1989) recommends beginning with the end in mind. Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. Do you want your negative news to inform, or to bring about change, and if so what kind of change and to what degree? A clear

conceptualization of the goal allows you to anticipate the possible responses, to plan ahead, and to get your emotional “house” in order.

Your emotional response to the news and the audience, whether it is one person or the whole company, will set the tone for the entire interaction. You may feel frustrated, angry, or hurt, but the display of these emotions is often more likely to make the problem worse than to help solve it. Emotions can be contagious, and people will respond to the emotional tone of the speaker.

If your response involves only one other person, a private, personal meeting is the best option, but it may not be available. Increasingly people work and contribute to projects from a distance, via the Internet, and may only know each other via e-mail, phone, or videophone/videoconferencing services. A personal meeting may be impractical or impossible. How then does one deliver negative news in person? By the best option available to both parties. Written feedback may be an option via e-mail, but it takes time to prepare, send, receive, process, and respond—and the written word has its disadvantages. Miscommunication and misinterpretation can easily occur, with little opportunity for constructive feedback to check meanings and clarify perceptions.

The telephone call allows both parties to hear each other’s voices, including the words, the inflection, the disfluencies, and the emotional elements of conversation. It is immediate in that the possibility of overlap is present, meaning not only is proximity in terms of voice as close as possible, but both parties may experience overlaps as they take turns and communicate. Telephone calls allow for quick feedback and clarification questions, and allow both parties an opportunity to recycle and revisit topics for elaboration or a better understanding. They also can cover long distances with reasonable clarity. Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) allows you to do the same with relatively little cost.

While there are distinct advantages, the telephone lacks part of the nonverbal spectrum available to speakers in a live setting. On the telephone, proximity is a function of response time rather than physical space and the degree to which one person is near another. Time is also synchronous, though the telephone crosses time zones and changes the context as one party may have just arrived at work while the other party is leaving for lunch. Body language gets lost in the exchange as well, although many of us continue to make hand gestures on the phone, even when our conversational partners cannot see us. Paralanguage, or the sounds we hear that are not verbal, including pitch, tone, rate, rhythm, pace, articulation, and pronunciation are all available to the listener. As we can see, the telephone call allows for a richer communication experience than written communication, but cannot convey as much information as would be available in person. Just as a

telephone interview may be used for screening purposes while a live interview is reserved for the final candidates, the live setting is often considered the best option for delivering negative news.

Live and in person may be the best option for direct communication with immediate feedback. In a live setting time is constant. The participants may schedule a breakfast meeting, for example, mirroring schedules and rhythms. Live, face-to-face communication comes in many forms. The casual exchange in the hallway, the conversation over coffee, and the formal performance review meeting all have interpersonal communication in common.

If you need to share the message with a larger audience, you may need to speak to a group, or you might even have to make a public presentation or speech. If it needs a feedback loop, we often call it a press conference, as the speech is followed by a question and answer session. From meeting in the hallway to live, onstage, under camera lights and ready for questions, the personal delivery of negative news can be a challenging task.

### **Presenting Negative News in Writing**

Writing can be intrapersonal, between two people, group communication, public communication, or even mass communication. One distinct advantage of presenting negative news in writing is the planning and preparation that goes into the message, making the initial communication more predictable. When a message is delivered orally in an interpersonal setting, we may interrupt each other, we sometimes hear what we want to, and it often takes negotiation and listening skills to grasp meaning. While a written message, like all messages, is open to interpretation, the range of possibilities is narrowed and presented within the frame and format designed by the source or author.

The written message involves verbal factors like language and word choice, but it can also involve nonverbal factors like timing and presentation. Do you communicate the message on letterhead, do you choose the channel of e-mail over a hard copy letter, or do you compose your written message in your best penmanship? Each choice communicates meaning, and the choice of how you present your written message influences its reception, interpretation, and the degree to which it is understood. In this section we consider the written message that delivers negative news.

Let's consider several scenarios:

1. A community disaster such as illness (e.g., a swine flu epidemic), earthquake, wildfire, plane crash, or a terrorism incident
2. An on-the-job accident with injuries or even death
3. A product defect resulting in injuries, illness, or even death to consumers
4. An unsuccessful product test (e.g., a new software system that isn't going to be ready for launch as planned)
5. A company merger that may result in reductions in force or layoffs

In business communication we often categorize our communication as internal or external. **Internal communication**<sup>3</sup> is the sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the same business. **External communication**<sup>4</sup> is the sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the business and parties outside the organization. Across the five scenarios we'll consider each of these categories in turn.

The confirmation of swine flu (H1N1) may first occur with a laboratory report (itself a written document), but it is normally preceded by conversations between health care professionals concerned over the symptoms exhibited by patients, including a high fever, a cough, sore throat, and a headache. According to Sally Redman, a registered nurse at Student Health Services at Washington State University–Pullman, over two thousand students (of nineteen thousand total student population) presented symptoms on or around August 21, 2009. Yardley, William. (2009, September 6). 2,000 Washington state students report signs of swine flu. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/health/06flu.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/health/06flu.html?_r=1)

Communication will predictably occur among students, health care professionals, and the community, but parents at a distance will want to know not only the status of their child, but also of the university. A written message that necessarily contains negative news may be written in the form of a press release, for example, noting important information like the number of students affected, the capacity of the health care system to respond, the experience to date, and whom to contact for further details and updates. This message will be read over and over as parents, reporters, and people across the country want to learn more about the situation. Like all business communication, it needs to be clear and concise.

3. The sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the same business.

4. The sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the business and parties outside the organization.

Our next scenario offers a learning opportunity as well. An on-the-job accident affects employees and the company, and like our previous example, there will be considerable interest. There may be interpersonal communication between company representatives and the individual's family, but the company will want to

communicate a clear record of the occurrence with an **assurance**<sup>5</sup>, or statement that the contributing factors that gave rise to the situation has been corrected or were beyond the control of the company and its representatives.

In addition to a statement of record, and an assurance, the company will certainly want to avoid the implication or indication of guilt or culpability. In the case of a product defect resulting in injuries, illness, or even death to consumers, this will be a relevant point of consideration. Perhaps a voluntary recall will be ordered, proactively addressing the risk before an accident occurs. It may also be the case that the recall order is issued by a government agency. Again, a written statement delivering negative news, in this case the recall of a product that presents a risk, must be written with care and consultation of legal counsel.

If your company is publicly traded, the premature announcement of a software program full of bugs, or programming errors that result in less than perfect performance, can send the company's stock price plummeting. How you release this information within the organization will influence how it is received. If your written internal memo briefly states that the software program development process has been extended to incorporate additional improvements, the emphasis shifts from the negative to the positive. While the negative news, the delay of release, remains, the focus on the benefits of the additional time can influence employees' views, and can make a difference in how the message is received outside the organization.

The awareness of a merger, and the possibility of a reduction in force or layoffs, will be discussed along the grapevine at work, and will give rise to tension and anticipation of negative news. You could simply write a short memo "To All Employees," not include any contact information, and have an assistant walk around and place copies on everyone's chair or desk during the lunch hour. But let's look at the message this would send to employees. The written communication includes nonverbal aspects like timing and presentation as well as verbal aspects like language and word choice. The timing itself suggests avoidance of conflict, and a reluctance to address the issue with transparency. The presentation of a memo in hard copy form on your chair from an unidentified company representative will certainly cause confusion, may be mistaken for a prank, and could cause considerable stress. It will contribute to increased tensions rather than solidarity, and if trust is the foundation for all effective communication, it violates this principle.

5. Statement that the contributing factors that gave rise to the situation has been corrected or where beyond the control of the company and its representatives.

Negative news may not be easy to deliver, but it is necessary at times and should be done with clarity and brevity. All parties should be clearly identified. The negative news itself should be clear and concise. The presentation should be direct, with

authority and credibility. Communication occurs between people, and all humans experience concern, fear, and trepidation of the unknown. The negative news message, while it may be unwelcome, can bring light to an issue.

As we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, some people prefer their bad news to be direct and concise, while others prefer a less direct approach. Let's weigh the pros and cons of each approach. Table 17.2 "Direct and Indirect Delivery" contrasts the elements of the two approaches.

Table 17.2 Direct and Indirect Delivery

| Direct Delivery                       | Direct Example   | Indirect Delivery     | Indirect Example   |
|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
|                                       |  | Positive introduction | Thank you for your request for leave.                        |
| Negative news message as introduction | Your request for leave has been denied.                      | Negative news message | We regret to inform you that your request has been denied.   |
| Conclusion                            | Please contact your supervisor if you need more information. | Conclusion            | Please contact your supervisor if you need more information. |

The direct approach places the negative news at the beginning of the message, while the indirect approach packages the negative news between a positive introduction, sometimes called a “buffer” or cushion, and a conclusion. Your negative message may include the rationale or reasons for the decision.

The direct approach is often associated with a message where the audience values brevity and the message needs to be concise. A positive introduction often introduces the topic but not the outcome. An effective negative news statement clearly states the message while limiting the possibility of misinterpretation. An effective closing statement may provide reasons, reference a policy, or indicate a procedure to follow for more information.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Delivering negative news involves a buffer or cushion statement, an explanation, the negative news itself, and a redirecting statement. Whether you choose a direct or an indirect approach, the message should be delivered clearly and concisely, with respect for the receiver and the organization.

### EXERCISES

1. When should you use an indirect approach in delivering a negative news message? Explain your answer to the class.
2. Ask five friends which they would prefer: negative news in a direct or indirect format? Why? Discuss your results with a classmate.
3. Sales have decreased for two consecutive quarters at your business. You have been instructed to inform your sales team that their hours, and base pay, will be reduced by 20 percent. While you may have a few members of your sales team that are underperforming, you want to retain the entire team. Write a negative news message in a direct or indirect approach informing your sales team of the news.
4. You have observed and documented an employee being late and taking long breaks for the past two weeks. Write out a brief summary of the conversation you need to have. You may be assigned to another classmate for a role-playing exercise. Share and compare with your classmates.

## 17.2 Eliciting Negative News

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of feedback, even if it is negative.
2. Describe and demonstrate the effective use of open- and closed-ended questions.

How do you know when you are doing a good job? How do you know when, where, and how you could do a better job? What makes the difference between business or organization that is stagnant and one that is dynamic? Often the response to all these questions involves one key, but often overlooked, company resource: feedback. **Feedback**<sup>6</sup> is the verbal and/or nonverbal response to a message, and that message may involve a company product or service.

Employee surveys, for example, may be completed online, in written form, in small focus groups, and can involve both oral and written communication. In the same way, customer satisfaction surveys may involve similar options and both provide a valuable opportunity to take a critical look at what we are doing, how it is perceived, and what areas we can identify for improvement. They often measure opinions, satisfaction, attitude, brand affiliation, preference, and engagement of customers and employees. In this section we will consider negative news as a valuable tool in self, team, company, product, and service improvement.

Across the years there have been extensive studies on how to improve businesses and companies, from Total Quality Improvement to the Six Sigma approach to excellence. Regardless of the theory, approach, or label, they all rest on a foundation of effective communication. One way that communication is often described involves **customer relationship management**<sup>7</sup>, Bauer, J. E., Duffy, G. L., & Westcott, R. T. (2006). *The quality improvement handbook*. New York, NY: ASQ Quality Press. or the relationship between the organization (sometimes represented by the product or service itself) and the customer.

6. The verbal and/or nonverbal response to a message.

7. The relationship between the organization (sometimes represented by the product or service itself) and the customer.

This leads us to our first point: who is the customer? You might be tempted to say the end-user, the purchaser, or the decision-maker, but customers are often categorized as internal and external. Employees themselves represent internal customers, and their relationship with the business, product, or service has value to the organization. External customers may include the end-user, but can also include vendors and related businesses that are part of the supply chain. This expanded,

global view of communication and customer service relationships will guide our discussion as we explore ways to effectively elicit negative news, critical feedback, and praise for a job well done.

Positive news is part of feedback, and indeed the difference between positive and negative news often lies more in the interpretation of information than the information itself. For example, if a software product that your company has been testing for some time, scheduled for a release date in the near future, has failed several tests, the tendency to view the news as negative is understood. The fact that the problems and issues were identified prior to release, however, provides an opportunity to correct them before their impact is magnified by negative news in the press, customer rejection of an inferior product, and a diminished view of your brand, all of which could ultimately damage customer loyalty and even your stock value. The chain reaction doesn't stop there; these effects could in turn limit your ability to get additional financing as an organization, the perceived risk could elevate interest rates on your company debts, and this could reduce budgets across the organization, limiting the very research and development budget that gives rise to the new, innovative, or breakout products that will gain market share.

Viewed in this light, it could be a very positive development that the faults in the software were detected before release. In addition, by learning to view information in a dispassionate way, noting that there is more than one way to interpret much of what we gather as data, you as a business professional can enhance your ability to see new approaches to products or services.

Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996), Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. states that communities operate on a set of beliefs. These beliefs form the foundation of the community, business, and organization. Employees and customers alike become socialized, learning the values, meaning, behaviors, cultural customs, expectations for excellence, and brand associations through interaction with the community. In business, we can clearly see the example of new employees becoming socialized into the company culture; they are training, learning about their jobs, and getting to know their coworkers.

We can also see how a customer interacts with a product or service, and comes to associate feelings, ideas, and expectations with a brand or company. This foundation or set of actualized beliefs becomes the norm or the status quo, and can become static or fixed. If a certain process is successful and an individual or company is rewarded, the process is often repeated. If a customer buys a certain product that works as they anticipate it will, they are more likely to make a similar purchase decision in the future.

Kuhn discusses research and the scientific method as a process that can affirm the status quo, but can also produce an **anomaly**<sup>8</sup>, or something that doesn't fit, challenges the existing norm, or stands apart from the anticipated results. Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. This anomaly can challenge the status quo, and may not be greeted with open arms. Instead, it may be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant, but nothing could be further from the truth. As Kuhn (1996) Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. notes, this outlying information that challenges the norm is precisely the necessary ingredient for a paradigm shift, or a change in overall view. The view itself can be as simple as the new awareness that a product has more uses than originally anticipated, or as significant as a new awareness of the brand and the company focus.

Is there a better way to produce a product? Is there a new feature that customers want? You'll never know if you don't ask, and you'll never improve or change if you don't listen to the feedback.

One story that articulates this power of the anomaly, of unanticipated information that results in a change in view, involves a common business product. A research chemist for the 3M Company, Spencer Silver, was used to trial and error as he pursued his goal of a new superglue. Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. By mixing simple organic compounds in unusual ratios, he tried to create this superstrong glue, but one result in particular was a spectacular failure. This particular result, a polymer, would stick to many surfaces, but it was also easy to remove, leaving no trace of itself. This odd substance was considered useless until Arthur Fry, a fellow 3M scientist, found a new use for it: removable paper notes that could be used to mark pages in his hymnal when he sang in his church choir. Minor modifications resulted in sample note pads that were passed around at 3M, and soon a new form of written communication and information organization was created: the now-famous Post-it brand note. 3M Company. (2009). A NOTE-able achievement. Retrieved from [http://www.3m.com/US/office/postit/pastpresent/history\\_ws.html](http://www.3m.com/US/office/postit/pastpresent/history_ws.html) Silver and Fry could have dismissed the negative result as a failure to reach the established goal of inventing a super glue, but by undergoing a paradigm shift, they revolutionized business communication. Learning to be open to information that challenges your views is a key business skill.

This now brings us to the question of how we elicit negative news, critical feedback, and assessment information. How do you learn more about the people around you? You watch, listen, and ask questions. Asking questions while watching, listening, and learning is the foundation of eliciting feedback. We can ask questions in interpersonal interviews, in small groups, and even large groups in person. We can use technology to help gather and process information, categorizing and classifying

8. Something that doesn't fit, challenges the existing norm, or stands apart from the anticipated results.

it. We can also create surveys with questions designed to elicit specific types of information.

Academic research often uses the terms “qualitative” and “quantitative” to categorize two types of information gathering. **Qualitative research**<sup>9</sup> involves interactions, which by their very nature are subject to interpretation and, as a result, are less reliable and statistically valid. Their strength is in the raw data, the proximity to the source, and the possibility of unexpected results. The weakness in the results is often the inability to replicate the results the same way again. An example may be a focus group, where participants try a new beverage and report their experience in words and nonverbal expressions. By recording the group, we can replay and study their response to the new drink, and learn that many of the participants perceive it to be sour from their facial gestures. The written responses may not indicate this response to the same degree, and the recorded responses may portray a different story. If you replicate the focus group with new participants, you may very well have a different outcome.

Over time, patterns may emerge that produce reliable results, and indeed double-blind studies for many pharmaceuticals use a similar approach, but the number of participants has to be significantly increased while the **confounding factors**<sup>10</sup>, or factors that can alter the results, must be anticipated and controlled. All of this involves a cost, and not every product, service, or study needs this type of investigation.

**Quantitative research**<sup>11</sup> involves investigation and analysis of data and relationships between data that can be represented by numbers. The categorization and classification from the moment the investigation means that some aspects of the raw data will be necessarily lost in the process, but the information that remains will have a reliability and validity that compensates for this loss. Indeed, quantitative measures and representations of data are increasingly the norm in business communication, and are used to make decisions at all levels.

9. Involves interactions, which by their very nature are subject to interpretation and, as a result, are less reliable and statistically valid.

10. Factors that can alter the results; must be anticipated and controlled.

11. Investigation and analysis of data and relationships between data that can be represented by numbers.

If your company produces automobiles, you may want qualitative information from potential consumers on their impression of the placement of the cupholders, but you will probably prefer quantitative information when it comes to engineering and safety. As you stress-test the steel in crash tests, assessing the force of the impact, the displacement of parts of the car as the crumple zones deform to absorb the energy, and the relative location of the crash-test dummy driver to the crush zone, you will measure it in terms of numbers. Each time you repeat the test, you should see similar results. If you don't, you may need to test the welds and examine the production process to determine why there is an inconsistency. You may even need to test the steel itself to see if it is a materials issue, rather than a process and

production problem. All this information would be measured in terms of numbers and symbols, representing velocity, tensile strength, and related factors.

Another factor in gathering feedback is confidentiality. Before you consider how to ask questions, you may want to consider to what degree you want identifying information in the process. If you are designing a campaign where employees submit suggestions to save the company money, increase production, or improve quality, and want to offer a financial incentive for ideas that are adopted, you will need to be able to identify the contributing employee for the reward. On the other hand, if you want a feedback system for employees to report coworkers who are under the influence or have substance abuse problems on the job, threatening the safety of all, then you would want an anonymous 1-800 number to give out, and to encourage its use by assuring employees that it carries no identifying markers.

Anonymous surveys can elicit information that would not be revealed otherwise, but they can also be a place for employees to vent, exaggerate, or invent responses. The validity is an issue, but the opportunity for insight may outweigh the risks. You can also provide an optional opportunity for the employee or customer to self-identify by providing a place where they could indicate contact information. A customer that completes a postpurchase survey may be offered a coupon if they register, and that contact information may be useful for follow-up contacts. Some customers will prefer, however, to write a direct complaint without identifying themselves. When designing a survey, brochure, or procedure to elicit feedback, you need to consider identification and anonymity.

In order to gather information, we often ask questions. For this application there are two types of questions: open and closed. Fink, A. (1995). *How to ask survey questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. **Open-ended questions**<sup>12</sup> allow for interpretation and a range of responses in the respondent's own words. **Closed-ended questions**<sup>13</sup> limit the responses to a preselected range of options or choices. Your choice of open or closed questions depends on what type of information you plan to gather.

Open-ended questions may sound like the following:

12. Allow for interpretation and a range of responses in the respondent's own words.

13. Limit the responses to a preselected range of options or choices.

1. What do you like about the product?
2. How was the service today?
3. How does the product make you feel?
4. What does our brand mean to you?
5. Why did you choose our product?

In each case, the question can be answered many ways, depending on the word choice of the respondent. The value is placed on the personal response and the range of data gathered may well be quite diverse, presenting challenge to categorize and group. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no response.

Closed-ended questions, however, can be answered with a yes/no response. Here are five examples of closed-ended questions:

1. Have you purchased our product previously?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

2. Why did you choose our product?

- a. Price/low cost
- b. Quality
- c. Reputation
- d. Previous experience

3. How was the service today?

|      |               |         |      |           |
|------|---------------|---------|------|-----------|
| 1    | 2             | 3       | 4    | 5         |
| Poor | Below average | Neutral | Good | Excellent |

4. What do you like about the product? (Please indicate in rank order.)

- \_\_\_ Low cost
- \_\_\_ Quality
- \_\_\_ Reputation
- \_\_\_ Features
- \_\_\_ Low maintenance

5. Please indicate the year you were born.

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14. Limit the responses to two categories.

The first closed-ended question is simply a closed question with its yes/no response options, but it is also an example of a categorical question. **Categorical questions**<sup>14</sup>

limit the responses to two categories. For example, you may ask a customer to indicate their sex in the response survey, allowing them to choose from two categories: male or female. **Multiple choice questions**<sup>15</sup> allow for specific choices and limit the range of options. **Likert Scale questions**<sup>16</sup> allow for the conversion of feelings, attitudes, and perceptions into numbers in a range. **Ordinal questions**<sup>17</sup> request the respondent to rank order specific options. **Numerical questions**<sup>18</sup> request a specific number, often a birth date or a serial number, that itself carries meaning. For example, age may be correlated to disposable income, and while the respondent may not be willing to respond to a direct question about their income level, they may be willing to indicate their year of birth.

To summarize the pros and cons of the two basic question types: open-ended questions are best when you want all possible responses in the respondent's own words. Closed-ended questions limit the responses to a few choices, and they can be categorized, placed in order, assess degrees of attitudes and feelings, and request specific information. Fink, A. (1995). *How to ask survey questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Eliciting negative news through feedback is an important way to avert problems, safeguard valuable relationships, and achieve paradigm shifts. Feedback may be qualitative or quantitative and may be requested through open-ended or closed-ended questions.

### EXERCISES

15. Allow for specific choices and limit the range of options.
16. Allow for the conversion of feelings, attitudes, and perceptions into numbers in a range.
17. Request the respondent to rank order specific options.
18. Request a specific number, often a birthdate or a serial number, that itself carries meaning.

1. Describe a time when you received negative feedback in time to correct your error. How did you feel about the correction at the time? Looking back, how do you feel about it in retrospect? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
2. Find a negative message online and write a brief review. Share and compare with classmates.
3. Prepare a sample customer satisfaction survey with at least ten questions. Make sure you include a couple of questions to learn more about your audience as well as their opinions of the product or service. Post your results in class and compare them with classmates.

## 17.3 Crisis Communication Plan

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand how to prepare a crisis communication plan.

A rumor that the CEO is ill pulls down the stock price. A plant explosion kills several workers and requires evacuating residents on several surrounding city blocks. Risk management seeks to address these many risks, including prevention as well as liability, but emergency and crisis situations happen nevertheless. In addition, people make errors in judgment that can damage the public perception of a company. The mainstream media does not lack stories involving infidelity, addiction, or abuse that require a clear a response from a company's standpoint. In this chapter we address the basics of a crisis communication plan.

Focus on key types of information during an emergency: Mallet, L., Vaught, C., & Brinch, M. (1999). *The emergency communication triangle*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Research Laboratory.

- What is happening?
- Is anyone in danger?
- How big is the problem?
- Who reported the problem?
- Where is the problem?
- Has a response started?
- What resources are on-scene?
- Who is responding so far?
- Is everyone's location known?

Figure 17.2



*Crisis communication requires efficiency and accuracy.*

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You will be receiving information from the moment you know a crisis has occurred, but without a framework or communication plan to guide you, valuable information may be ignored or lost. These questions help you quickly focus on the basics of “who, what, and where” in the crisis situation.

## Developing Your Crisis Communication Plan

A **crisis communication plan**<sup>19</sup> is the prepared scenario document that organizes information into responsibilities and lines of communication prior to an event. With a plan in place, if an emergency arises, each person knows his or her role and responsibilities from a common reference document. Overall effectiveness can be enhanced with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities for an effective and swift response.

The plan should include four elements:

1. Crisis communication team members with contact information
2. Designated spokesperson
3. Meeting place/location
4. Media plan with procedures

A crisis communication team includes people who can

- a. decide what actions to take,
- b. carry out those actions,
- c. offer expertise or education in the relevant areas.

By designating a spokesperson prior to an actual emergency, your team addresses the inevitable need for information in a proactive manner. People will want to know what happened and where to get further details about the crisis. Lack of information breeds rumors, which can make a bad situation worse. The designated spokesperson should be knowledgeable about the organization and its values; be comfortable in front of a microphone, camera, and media lights; and be able to stay calm under pressure.

Part of your communication crisis plan should focus on where you will meet to coordinate communicate and activities. In case of a fire in your house, you might meet in the front yard. In an organization, a designated contingency building or office some distance away from your usual place of business might serve as a central place for communication in an emergency that requires evacuating your building. Depending on the size of your organization and the type of facilities where you do business, the company may develop an emergency plan with exit routes, hazardous materials procedures, and policies for handling bomb threats, for example. Safety, of course, is the priority, but in terms of communication, the goal is to eliminate confusion about where people are and where information is coming from.

19. The prepared scenario document that organizes information into responsibilities and lines of communication prior to an event.

Whether or not evacuation is necessary, when a crisis occurs, your designated spokesperson will gather information and carry out your media plan. He or she will need to make quick judgments about which information to share, how to phrase it, and whether certain individuals need to be notified of facts before they become public. The media and public will want to know information and reliable information is preferable to speculation. Official responses help clarify the situation for the public, but an unofficial interview can make the tragedy personal, and attract unwanted attention. Remind employees to direct all inquiries to the official spokesperson and to never speak “off the record.”

Enable your spokesperson to have access to the place you indicated as your crisis contingency location to coordinate communication and activities, and allow that professional to prepare and respond to inquiries. When crisis communication is handled in a professional manner, it seeks not to withhold information or mislead, but to minimize the “spin damage” from the incident by providing necessary facts, even if they are unpleasant or even tragic.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Because crises are bound to happen despite the best planning, every organization should have a crisis communication plan, which includes designating a crisis communication team and spokesperson.

## EXERCISES

1. Locate the crisis communication plan where you go to school or work, or find one online. Briefly describe the overall plan and please note at least one part, element, or point of emphasis we have not discussed. Post and compare with classmates.
2. When people don't know what to do in a crisis situation, what happens? How can you address probable challenges before the crisis occurs? Discuss your ideas with classmates.
3. As a case study, research one crisis that involves your area of training or career field. What communication issues were present and how did they affect the response to the crisis? Compare your results with classmates.
4. Locate a crisis communication online and review it. Share and compare with classmates.
5. Do you always have to be on guard with members of the media? Why or why not? Explain your answer to the class as if they were members of the media.

## 17.4 Press Conferences

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss the purpose of a press conference.
2. Discuss how to prepare and conduct a press conference.

Holding a press conference when you are unprepared can feel like standing in front of a firing squad, where all the journalists are armed so no one will carry the guilt of the winning shot. It can make you nervous, scared, and reluctant to speak at all. It can take your fear of a misquote, or a stumble, or a misstatement replayed across the Internet thousands of times in the next twenty-four hours and make you wish for a blindfold and a cigarette, but that won't help. The way to calm your nerves is to be confident in your material. This section discusses the press conference, from preparation to execution (pun intended).

A **press conference**<sup>20</sup> is a presentation of information to the media. It normally involves a written statement that is read exactly as written and is followed by questions and answers. The press conference normally requires a seasoned representative of the company or business with established credibility and integrity. It also requires a sense of calm in the confidence that you know your material, know how to tactfully say you don't know or don't wish to comment, and a sense of humor to handle the "gotcha" questions.

Press conferences can be held for positive news like the announcement of a new hospital wing that will increase the health care services available to the community. It can also be held to clarify information regarding the CEO's trip to Chile with an alleged mistress, the recent law enforcement sting operation on the illegal sale of controlled substances from the hospital, or to announce the layoff of employees as part of a reduction in force.

Positive or negative, your role as a speaker at a press conference is to deliver the prepared message and to represent the business or organization in a professional manner. You understand that there may be moments of tension, but you also know you have a choice in how to respond. First we'll examine preparation, then discuss the actual press conference.

20. A presentation of information to the media.

You should have a good reason for holding a press conference. Wasting the media's time on a frivolous issue will only set you up for challenges later on. You should also have a brief prepared statement that you will read and restate if necessary. Today's press conference messages are often drafted by someone in public relations or media, and reviewed by legal counsel when warranted. If the task falls to you, keep it short and simple, addressing the following:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- How?
- Why?

As a follow-up to why the press conference needs to occur in the first place, you need to consider the location. If it is a ribbon-cutting ceremony, the choice is obvious. If the announcement is less than positive, and you've been instructed by your supervisors or counsel to not offer additional remarks, you'll want a podium strategically located next to a stage exit. Your press release or invitation to the media will contain the time, date, and location of the press conference, and may contain a title or subject line as well as contact information for follow-up information.

As you prepare your background materials, learning as much as needed for the announcement, you may also want to consider using a moderator. Perhaps that will be your role as you introduce senior management to read the prepared statement. A moderator can serve to influence the process and redirect if questions go off topic or if a transition is needed. A moderator can also call a formal close the press conference and thank everyone for attending.

Finally, visual aids are an excellent way to reinforce and communicate your message. They need to be big, they need to be relevant (not just decorative), and (from a technical standpoint) they need to work. If they will be projected onto a screen, make sure the screen is available (not stuck), the laptop has power (as well as battery backup), the presentation or visual aid is on the laptop, and that the projector can and does project what you want it to. Don't forget sound equipment if necessary, and make sure everything works the day of the presentation.

### **Holding a Press Conference**

Someone should be designated as the greeter for the media. Be ready at least fifteen minutes before the scheduled time of the event. Provide each member of the media

with a print copy of the actual statement that will be read before or after the event. If there is an element of surprise, you may want to hold the copies of the statement back until after the press conference has been concluded, but otherwise distributing them beforehand is standard.

The moderator opens the press conference with a welcome, indicates the purpose of the press conference and reminds everyone that there will (or will not) be an opportunity for questions following the press conference. The moderator introduces the spokesperson who will read the statement and welcomes him or her to the podium. The moderator may need to assist with sound equipment but otherwise stands back but near the speaker.

The speaker will read the statement. If there are to be no questions, the moderator will retake the podium and indicate that press kits, containing background material, fact sheets, the news release, sample photos, or related materials will be available; or simply indicate that copies of the press release are available at the back of the room. If there are questions, the moderator may still take the podium and outline ground rules for questions such as: they should pertain to the subject, be brief, and may or may not include follow-up questions. Members of the media will often ask a question and state that they have a follow-up question as a way of reserving two turns.

The moderator may indicate which member of the media is to ask a question, and typically they will stand and address the speaker directly. The speaker can take notes, but this isn't common. Instead, they should be aware that every movement is being recorded and that by maintaining eye contact, they are demonstrating that they are listening. They may reiterate the statement from the press release or refer to the background material, but should limit the scope of their response. Your team may have anticipated several questions and the speaker may have several sound bites ready to deliver. Visual media will want it visual, audio will want clarity, and print will want descriptive quotes. Meet the needs of your audience as you deliver your message.

Invariably the “gotcha” question, or the question that attempts to catch the speaker off guard, will be asked. “We’re not ready to discuss the matter at this time,” “When more information becomes available we will let you know,” “Our company has no position on that issue,” or “We’re not prepared to speculate on that issue at this time” are all common response phrases. Don’t use “I think,” “I believe,” or “I don’t know” comments as they invite speculation, and refrain from “no comment” if at all possible as it is increasingly perceived as if the company or representative is “hiding something.”

You want to appear professional, knowledgeable, and credible—not as if you are sneaking or hiding something. Don't display a nonverbal gesture or make a face at a question, as this can also be misinterpreted. Keep your poise and balance at all times, and if you are the speaker and the question puts you off, establish eye contact with the moderator. Their role is to step in and they may move to the conclusion.

Never say anything you wouldn't want the world to hear, as microphones are increasingly powerful, video captures lips movement, and there will be a communication professional available to analyze your nonverbal gestures on the evening news. Being cool, calm, and collected is the best policy whether you are delivering positive or negative news.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

A press conference is an important presentation of information that requires you to anticipate questions and prepare possible responses.

## EXERCISES

Your role as spokesperson is to write and present a prepared statement, and respond to no less than five questions. You will select one of the scenarios below based on your birth month, and prepare your statement. You are allowed to improve on facts, but should recognize that each scenario is serious and treat the assignment with professionalism.

### 1. January—Healthcare, Inc.

A hacker illegally accessed thousands of the new digital health care records on file with Healthcare, Inc. and posted them directly to the Internet in an early morning protest against invasion of privacy. The hacker has not been identified, but local law enforcement is on the scene investigating the incident and the offending Web sites have been taken offline. Your company has received hundreds of calls concerning the incident. The federal government required the conversion to digital records last year, and your company complied with the order. Your company used a government-approved vendor for a no-bid installation of hardware and software to secure the digital records. You represent Healthcare, Inc.

### 2. February—Educational Services, Inc.

Half the senior class in your private magnet high school cheated on the graduation exam, and the rest were apparently aware of the cheating, as were many of the parents. An employee, a secretary with several employee passwords, allegedly gained access to the exam before its release and provided the questions and responses to her son, who then provided it to his friends. The employee was often provided login names and passwords to facilitate records processing for several administrators when they were off site, often at conferences. Headquarters wants to minimize the publicity but cannot in good faith issue diplomas to students who cheated. The employee has been dismissed for conduct, and an investigation is underway, but graduation is next week and the evidence against the cheating seniors is clear. They won't be receiving their diplomas unless they pass an alternate version of the test that won't be ready for sixty days. You represent Educational Services, Inc.

## EXERCISES (CONT.)

### 3. March—Software, Inc.

Your company recently released its latest version of a popular business and industry software program. Programs always have a few bugs or problems upon release, even after the most rigorous laboratory testing, but this program is apparently infested with bugs. Stories are popping up across the Internet about how the program doesn't work, or specific features don't work, and your customer service team has been responding to customer complaints. The software designers report it is an exaggeration to say "infested," and point out that in all the trial tests it has worked perfectly. Your company is working on finding and addressing the issues, and is ready to create patch programs and issue refunds if necessary, but wants to prevent a recall and a loss of consumer confidence. You represent Software, Inc.

### 4. April—Electric Company, Inc.

An employee was consuming alcohol on the job and failed to adjust the voltage regulator. The voltage was increased by a considerable amount, causing several house fires, significant loss of property (appliances) and the death of an eleven-year-old child. The local media interviewed the employee's spouse who stated the employee was working a double shift, that they had called someone to relieve them, and no one came. Your company is investigating, but has no new information. You represent Electric Company, Inc.

### 5. May—Online Market, Inc.

An online marketplace company has been accused by law enforcement of knowingly allowing users to sell stolen goods on their Web site. Since the company never handles any of the goods themselves, and simply facilitates the exchange of goods between buyer and seller via the short-term creation of a Web page with text and images provided by the seller, the company denies all responsibility. You represent Online Market, Inc.

### 6. June—ABC Engineering, Inc.

A 4.2-million-dollar, two-lane bridge recently completed collapsed into the local Blue River, taking with it three vehicles. The loss of life included four men, three women, and one unborn baby. Local media has interviewed

workers who indicated they were rushed to complete the bridge to get a bonus for the construction firm. The construction firm indicates that their internal investigation points to a faulty design, but the architects, engineers, and government inspectors deny the charge. You represent ABC Engineering.

7. July—Package Delivery, Inc.

A class-action lawsuit has been filed in federal court against Package Delivery, Inc. A group of employees, all female, allege sexual harassment and discriminatory promotion practices against the company. They cite photos and calendars of a sexual nature hung in the workplace and allege that male colleagues with less seniority were promoted ahead of the female workers. You represent Package Delivery, Inc.

8. August—Hamburgers, Inc.

Hamburgers, Inc. is pleased to announce a new menu practice where the nutritional information and the calorie counts will be prominently displayed, helping consumers make healthy choices from the menu. Your supervisors have heard that there may be representatives of the Cow Liberation Group (which advocates vegetarianism) and several nutritionists (who perceive the company has not done enough to improve its products) at the press conference. You represent Hamburgers, Inc.

9. September—Headache Pills, Inc.

A person in New York died of cyanide poisoning, supposedly after taking a 200-mg Headache Pill made by your company. Your headache pills come in sealed, tamper-resistant packaging with child-proof protective caps. Some stores are voluntarily taking your product off the market. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has announced an investigation, and the family of the person who died has threatened to sue. You represent Headache Pills, Inc.

10. October—Maisy Mayflower, Star Actress

You represent Maisy Mayflower as her spokesperson. She has recently returned from Bolivia where she adopted a two-year-old child. She already has three adopted children representing several countries. She is not married. Upon her return, a man claiming to be the child's father came forward to the media in La Paz, Bolivia protesting the adoption, and the U.S. media has picked up on it. It is all over the Internet. The Bolivian

government issued a statement that while they cannot confirm the legitimacy of his claim, the father of the child did not present himself at court during the announced hearing, nor did he present himself in the six months preceding the adoption. The child was legally declared abandoned, and legally adopted. You represent Maisy Mayflower.

11. November—Fast Food Restaurants, Inc.

A customer reported finding a severed human fingertip in soup purchased from Fast Food Restaurants, Inc. The soup and sandwich package was purchased at a Fast Food Restaurant as a take-out order. Your company has several quality controls in place to prevent accidents like this. Local law enforcement is investigating. The customer has taken pictures and posted them all over the Web, and made both libelous and slanderous comments against your company in media interviews and blogs. The customer has never been an employee of Fast Food Restaurants or its affiliates. You represent Fast Food Restaurants, Inc.

12. December—Congressman “Honest” Abe Johnson.

The honorable Congressman from the State of Denial was apprehended in Ecuador for solicitation of a minor. The local media reports that a young girl approached him when he was with his traveling group and he offered to take a picture of her. The mother appeared, spoke to him, and slapped him in the face. She says the congressman offered her money for time alone with her daughter. The congressman stated to local law enforcement, according to a conversation with his spouse from jail, that all he did was compliment her on her daughter, something like “what a fine daughter you have,” in his best Spanish. You represent the Congressman.

## 17.5 Additional Resources

“Good Ways to Deliver Bad News” by Curtis Sittenfeld from *Fast Company*.  
<http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/23/buckman.html>

“How to Deliver Bad News to a Group” by Kevin Daley, a Harvard Business article.  
[http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/cs/2009/10/  
how\\_to\\_deliver\\_bad\\_news\\_to\\_a\\_g.html](http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/cs/2009/10/how_to_deliver_bad_news_to_a_g.html)

“How to Deliver Bad News” from SmallBiz.com. [http://www.smsmallbiz.com/  
bestpractices/How\\_to\\_Deliver\\_Bad\\_News.html](http://www.smsmallbiz.com/bestpractices/How_to_Deliver_Bad_News.html)

Development by Design offers an article on how to elicit feedback.  
[http://www.development-by-design.com/article\\_Tips.htm](http://www.development-by-design.com/article_Tips.htm)

“Top 7 Ways To Elicit Constructive Web site Feedback” by Adam Senour.  
<http://top7business.com/?id=555>

Visit this Northern Illinois University site for a guide to preparing a generic crisis communication plan and adapting it to your needs. [http://www3.niu.edu/  
newsplace/crisis.html](http://www3.niu.edu/newsplace/crisis.html)

To see an actual crisis communication plan, visit this North Carolina State University Web site. [http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/univ\\_relations/crisis.html](http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/univ_relations/crisis.html)

See the Crisis Communication Plan of Meredith College at this site.  
<http://www.meredith.edu/marketing/crisis-plan.doc>

Western Organization of Research Councils presents “How to Hold a Press Conference.” <http://www.npaction.org/resources/WORC/pressconf12.pdf>

“How to Hold a Press Conference” by Kori Rodley Irons. Press conferences aren’t just for the rich and famous. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/60465/  
how\\_to\\_hold\\_a\\_press\\_conference.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/60465/how_to_hold_a_press_conference.html)