

# SEAPORTS

AAPA

» MAGAZINE

THE OFFICIAL  
PUBLICATION OF  
THE AMERICAN  
ASSOCIATION OF  
PORT AUTHORITIES

aapaseaports.com • aapa-ports.org

## » GUEST VIEWPOINT



### Crisis at the Port: Planning Ahead Makes the Difference

By Scott Summerfield and Sheri Benninghoven  
Principals  
SAE Communications

Your port is likely well-equipped to handle natural disasters. But these aren't the only situations that we should prepare and train for – in reality, there are significantly more human-caused crises that will grab the media's attention and threaten your port's credibility.

We've all seen the stories. Whether it's excessive spending on luxury travel, sexual harassment or embezzlement, the result is frighteningly similar: The port hasn't planned for a "non-traditional" crisis, and its slow response sets the stage for a lasting negative impact. Port crises take a variety of shapes, but all can completely disrupt normal operations, put public officials on defense, and erode long-earned goodwill and confidence.

Why does a strategic response matter? Imagine what your stakeholders will think the next time you ask them to support a fee increase or expansion if they believe you've wasted their money and haven't been straightforward.

As you face a crisis, it's helpful to follow three important communications principles:

- Tell the truth.
- Stakeholders have a right to know.
- Confidence in the port is essential.

Though the principles may seem obvious, think for a moment about all the times you've seen public officials ignore them – and the negative news coverage that results. That alone should be impetus for you to build these ideals into your port's organizational culture.

#### Learn from Others' Mistakes

Analysis of agencies that have suffered excessively from crises shows several consistent communications missteps that can easily be avoided by planning ahead. The first step is to identify a team of savvy port leaders who can use the concepts in this article and start the planning process now, before the crisis actually strikes. Assuming the worst won't be easy, but you'll soon have a good feel for the types of crises you may face and can begin crafting policies to deal with whatever comes your way. Understanding the pitfalls suffered by other ports will help you expose weaknesses and develop specific tactics to prepare your organization.

**Respond quickly and completely** – Wishful thinking that the problem will go away if you don't respond is one of the top blunders made by agencies under fire.

News coverage today is around-the-clock, and if a reporter unearths a juicy new nugget about your crisis, it will appear online and in social media almost immediately. The media must have 24/7 access to your spokesperson, who in turn must have 24/7 access to executive management and the latest crisis updates. Your response can't solely be reactionary – continually monitor every online, broadcast and social media news source that is covering you, modify your strategy if necessary, and actively get your message out through every available tool.

**Don't speak unless you're prepared** – Port representatives who consent to interviews without thoroughly thinking through their comments, or who speculate about the crisis, often make a bad situation worse. Interviews are tense settings under the best of circumstances, but when the port is under fire, it's impossible to think strategically. Worse, without preparation, multiple port spokespersons can inadvertently provide conflicting information and inject even more controversy.

**Keep your PIO/spokesperson in the loop** – Your spokesperson must have full access to top port decision-makers during the crisis – even in meetings from which

Wishful thinking that the problem will go away if you don't respond is one of the top blunders made by agencies under fire. News coverage today is around-the-clock, and if a reporter unearths a juicy new nugget about your crisis, it will appear online and in social media almost immediately.

they usually may be excluded – so they can understand the nuances of the crisis, offer media relations advice, and be fully informed when they conduct interviews or prepare statements. This is the time to break down the usual reporting relationships and organizational barriers and move into full crisis management mode.

**Get your information into the mix** – Reporters gather information from numerous places, with bloggers and other (sometimes wildly inaccurate) social media outlets adding immediate and abundant new details. The “good old days” when a port could attempt to control information are long gone, and progressive officials realize that there are plenty of internal and external sources that are eager to share everything they know about the issue. Make sure your information is always in the mix by being responsive and timely – through the media and through your own communications tools.

**Assume a crisis is around the corner** – Stuff happens, and at some point it will happen to you. It might be tomorrow or next month, but you'll inevitably find yourself knee-deep in a scandal that will turn your office upside-down. A crisis communications plan is the logical first step

in preparation, but ongoing training and updating are essential to the plan's success. Uncomfortable as it may be, assessing your port's vulnerabilities (for staff and elected/appointed officials) and drilling a simulated difficult situation with all key staff is the best way to test your readiness.

**You need the media to tell your story** – We all have war stories about perceived unfair treatment by the media, but clamping down on media access during a crisis is a guaranteed way to ensure that your side of the story never sees the light of day. A thoughtful, strategic response that is delivered consistently and professionally through numerous venues, including those that may oppose the port, ensures that your stakeholders hear your messages. There is simply no other way to rebuild confidence after a crisis. That's not to say that social media outlets are not vital – they'll help you reach audiences directly. However, most key stakeholders will get their information and form their opinions from traditional news sources – at least for now.

**Choose the right spokesperson** – Throwing an inexperienced staff member in front of the microphones and cameras

without training and preparation produces a predictably bad result. Anyone who represents the port must thoroughly understand the unique elements of an interview, how to deliver messages and not just answer questions, and how to manage the onslaught of interview requests. Also consider who will best connect with the public – the board chair, executive director or other spokesperson.

It isn't easy to think about scandals that could severely erode trust in your port and place you in the position of digging out of a deep credibility hole. But nobody ever claimed that innovative port management was easy, and a core responsibility is anticipating the worst, planning for it and executing in your darkest hours. You're now armed with a variety of tools to jump-start your crisis communications planning; the next steps may not be enjoyable, but they'll prove invaluable when “the call” comes into your office. ●

*Scott Summerfield and Sheri Benninghoven, principals of SAE Communications, have extensive experience in port strategic planning, crisis communications and messaging. They are frequent leaders of AAPA communications training sessions.*

*For more information or reprints of this article please contact:*



**Scott Summerfield**

▼ 2934 Victoria Meadow Ct.  
Pleasanton  
California 94566  
Office: 925-249-9320  
E-mail: ssummerfield@  
saecommunications.com

**Sheri Benninghoven, APR**

▼ 1737 Paterna Road  
Santa Barbara  
California 93103  
Office: 805-965-7024  
E-mail: sbenninghoven@  
saecommunications.com