

# Communicating Through a Crisis

By Pat Crawford

*The lesson learned from Ivan is the value of cultivating relationships with key players long before a crisis, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and following good public relations practices.*

As Hurricane Ivan roared onto shore just west of Pensacola in the early morning hours of September 16, 2004, the intensity of the storm took many by surprise.

A well-crafted crisis communication plan and strong relationships forged with key players in the community prior to the storm allowed WUWF-FM, the University of West Florida's public radio station, and the UWF Department of Marketing Communications to rise to the occasion.

WUWF's role in crisis communication is one component of a larger continuity of operations plan for the University of West Florida. As such, the radio station has the dual responsibility of performing a public relations function for the university in addition to its broader obligation of community service as mandated by the Federal Communications Commission. It might seem an enviable position to control both the message and the medium. In the case of WUWF, we take extraordinary measures to ensure that the close relationship is not exploited. The station has complete editorial independence in its

news coverage. The university is given no promotional preference nor permitted to dictate programming decisions. Making WUWF the most well-respected independent public radio station in the market is in the long run the best strategy for the university.

The radio station was essentially the only game in town both during and immediately following Ivan's landfall, being the last to go off the air and the first to return. Technology served us well. Years of dealing with coastal weather conditions resulted in a system of redundancy that anticipated the devastating effects of wind and water. Our main transmitter is located directly on the coast in a largely unprotected area. Experience taught us that it would be our Achilles heel. A secondary transmitter located at our studio provided the backup we needed when the time came. In spite of our preparations, the emergency generator at the studio failed during the peak of the storm. If not for the heroic efforts of two university maintenance supervisors who drove a back hoe through falling

trees to restart the generator, we would have been off the air far longer.

## Partnerships Are Key

An essential part of WUWF's crisis communication plan is a long standing partnership with the Escambia County Department of Emergency Management, WEAR-TV (ABC), the Pensacola News Journal, and Gulf Power Company. WUWF also operates Escambia County's public, educational and governmental access cable channel. Interconnecting the county's Emergency Operations Center and WEAR-TV with WUWF via ISDN lines allowed us to go live with reports and updates throughout the storm. Because cable and electricity are generally the first things to go in a hurricane, WUWF provided an outlet for the reports of WEAR-TV's large news staff as well as direct updates from the Emergency Operations Center. The Pensacola News Journal's main office is located in an evacuation zone, so the WUWF studios served as an alternate newsroom for their reporters to use. These partnerships were well publicized both on-air and through various publications and print pieces prior to hurricane season each year, directing viewers and listeners where to tune for information.

These strong partnerships are the foundation of our crisis communication plan. We do not have adequate resources to provide the full coverage needed in a widespread crisis. With newspaper reporters in our studio as well as television reporters in the field and the direct connection to the Emergency Operations Center, WUWF was literally at the center of the post-Ivan universe. Through our relationships with these key players, we were able to provide a valuable service to the community while reinforcing our own image as a reliable source of news and information. The trust developed between

news outlets that normally would be competing for audiences created a synergy that served the public well while enhancing the image of all involved. Despite Howard Stern's prediction of the demise of FM radio, there is little doubt that as long as we have hurricanes, we'll have local radio!

## Audiences and Message

An important consideration in crisis communication is adapting your message and media mix to the situation. This requires you to think about your audience and the challenges they may be facing. We knew that the majority of our publics were without power and would be for several days. This meant no television or Internet connectivity. The Pensacola News Journal was able to produce its paper from a remote location and maintain a reasonable delivery schedule. We focused our efforts primarily on the radio station and issuing releases to the newspaper. Once again, our pre-established partnership made it easy for us to get our messages in print. Knowing that much of our audience would be relying on battery operated radios, we scheduled critical updates at regular intervals with frequent repeats so that listeners knew when to tune in and could conserve battery power. We followed a similar schedule with the Emergency Operations Center, broadcasting their daily updates at regularly scheduled morning and evening times.

A phone bank was set up to field calls from listeners as well as organizations needing to get their recovery information disseminated. Using on-air personalities as facilitators, a dialogue between listeners was enabled. As calls came in requesting information about specific areas or recovery issues, listeners who had the answers were encouraged to call in. The information was then shared on-air. This proved to be a very effective method of getting

information out while simultaneously creating a real sense of community among the listeners. We continued to facilitate this dialogue for several weeks beyond the landfall of the storm. Commercial broadcasters understandably have to return to their regular program schedules as quickly as possible. It is the heart of their business. Public radio is not dependent on commercial sales and therefore has greater flexibility in programming. Going with a continuous format of local recovery information; pre-empting even popular national news programs, proved to be the most effective way to serve the public interest. Doing so was also a good public relations move. We established our position as the source for local news and information in the minds of our listeners. We also attracted many new listeners who have stayed with us long after hurricane season. It is a classic example of doing well by doing good.

As power and Internet connectivity began to be restored, we added our Web site to the media mix. This became an increasingly important vehicle to reach the university's campus community. Many students, faculty and staff had evacuated the area and were scattered throughout the Southeastern United States. An interactive Web site, "In Touch", was created for the various publics to view updates about the UWF campus and the Pensacola community as well as post messages for response from our communications staff. Listeners were also able to access WUWF on line for streaming audio coverage of recovery efforts.

A media tour of the UWF campus was set up within days of the storm to allay rumors being circulated about the extent of the damage to university facilities and grounds. Once a definite date for reopening the campus was determined, communications were issued through e-mail, media releases, the "In Touch" Web site, and WUWF. A university

general assembly was held on the re-opening day for UWF faculty and staff to reconnect, update the campus community on the status of the university and recognize the many employees who worked to get the campus up and running.

## How well did our efforts pay off?

Focus groups conducted three months after the storm consistently gave the highest ranking to the crisis communications efforts of WUWF and Marketing Communications. Arbitron audience estimates registered a sustained spike in listeners to the radio station. An on-air membership campaign was conducted by WUWF three weeks after Ivan with more than \$150,000 raised through listener contributions. This was a new record for the station. Most donors cited Ivan coverage as their primary reason for contributing. Editorial support and public accolades for the station continue six months after the storm.

A review of media indicate that UWF communication efforts reached approximately 12.1 million viewers, listeners and readers across the state of Florida and 114,000 individuals identified as UWF alumni/internal audience. Audiences received information about the closing, status and re-opening of the UWF campuses in more than 50 publications, 26 radio and 40 television stations across the state. Web traffic on the UWF "In Touch" site averaged 400 qualified users per day.

The lesson learned from Ivan is the value of cultivating relationships with key players long before a crisis, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and following good public relations practices. Combine this with sensitivity to your audience and their situation and the results will be well worth your effort.

## About The Author



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WUWF-FM and its public, educational and govern-

mental access television station. As Special Assistant to the President, he is responsible for the public relations functions within the Office of the President and serves as the university's primary spokesperson. He has served two terms as president of the Pensacola Chapter of FPRA and was named FPRA Member of the Year in 2004.

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