

A Proactive Response to 9/11 Removing Suspicion, Reestablishing Confidence, and Improving Awareness.

by Jay Wilson

Director of University Communication, Florida Tech

Florida Tech updated its official crisis communication plan in March, 2001. The plan is designed to foster proactive communication in all types of crises, including hurricanes, dormitory fires or serious crime on campus. As the office of University Communications finalized the document, however, we could not have envisioned how it would be used when the unthinkable happened on Sept. 11, 2001.

While stunned and saddened by the horrific events on that day, it took 24 hours for us to realize the threat they posed to Florida Tech's reputation and even the health and safety of our students. Florida Tech had three strikes against it in the aftermath of the terrorist strike: it is in the state of Florida (where many of the

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Florida Tech had three strikes against it in the aftermath of the terrorist attack: it is in the state of Florida (where many of the hijackers resided); it has a School of Aeronautics; and the student population includes Middle Eastern and Islamic students.

Eastern and Islamic students. We soon realized that the institution was suffering from a building crisis of confidence in the eyes of the public, that the media would soon place our international students and School of Aeronautics under a cloud of suspicion, and that we needed to move quickly to ensure the safety of Muslims on campus.

Plan of Action Developed

While the crisis situation was unique, the solution followed the same guiding principle stated in our crisis management policy statement. The statement reads in part, "univer-

sity communications will strive to ensure that information is disseminated to all publics, internal and external, in a timely and proactive manner.”

To achieve this general objective, Jim De Santis, vice president for external affairs, and Jay Wilson, director of university communications, put in place four related goals.

First, we would answer reporters’ queries firmly and truthfully, and do so without interfering with an ongoing FBI investigation on campus (the FBI was involved at every university in Florida following the 9/11 attacks.)

Second, we would use the queries, particularly those from national news organizations, **as a chance to educate the media about our School of Aeronautics**, which is certainly not a simple flight school.

Third, we would work with the local mosque, where many of our students are members, to protect these students from unwanted invasions of privacy. This was done to protect both the students and their families from violence.

Finally, we would be proactive in educating the public about dealing with trauma, about the historical significance of the event, and about the Islamic religion.

Plan Implementation

We’ve attached a summary of media queries related to 9/11. The questions ranged from the

straightforward (what is the admissions process for international students?) to the ridiculous (has Osama Bin Laden ever been a student at Florida Tech?). The queries came from local, regional and national organizations, including CNN, the *New Republic* and *Time Magazine*.

The most disturbing line of questioning began when the name of one of the hijackers matched the name of a former student, found in a year-old police report. Two news organizations, a local television station and our local newspaper, reported that the student and the terrorist were indeed one in the same. They did so despite our efforts to explain that the name was the Middle Eastern equivalent of “Joe Smith.” When the FBI later verified that those two reports were incorrect, the paper printed a retraction, the television station did not.

Most of the questioning we faced centered on our School of Aeronautics and international student population. We used questions about the school as an opportunity to educate the media. When answering a call concerning our “flight school,” we used the correct term for the school, and informed the reporter about the undergraduate and graduate degree programs, including a new Ph.D. program. We made it clear that Florida Tech was an unlikely choice for a would-be terrorist because of its academic standards and requirements and its strict admissions process.

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While we answered every question, the underlying message was simple: Florida Tech is not the kind of place a would-be terrorist likely would attend. The school's academic rigor was highlighted in every conversation. As a result of these efforts, Florida Tech was not included with the Florida flight schools scrutinized by the national media.

To protect our Muslim students from becoming targets of violence, Florida Tech did two things. First, we decided to not allow video or still photography of these students. Second, we worked closely with leaders of the local mosque to help them identify spokesmen that could speak for the Islamic community, including our students

This policy allowed us to work with these leaders to use the media to inform the local public about the positive aspects of Islam. We maneuvered several newspaper and television stories in this manner.

As the final piece of our communications plan, we used the university's WFIT radio program, "Inside Florida Tech," as a community outreach and education project. WFIT is the university's public radio station with a potential of 230,000 listeners. We included two programs on dealing with the trauma, two programs on the event's place in history, a program on the future of terrorism and two programs on the nature of Islam. In addition to these direct efforts,

we placed several experts on radio stations both locally and around the country to discuss these subjects, particularly the subject of Islam.

Summary and Final Thoughts

Through the four-fold implementation of this plan, we were able to steer the institution clear of any serious reputation damage. The national media ignored us (for once a good thing). The local media, while taking the occasional misstep, ultimately reported in a fair manner.

We were able to build lines of communication with the local Muslim community that should benefit us long into the future. In doing so, we used our expertise to help them better explain their role in the community at large.

Finally we accomplished a much-needed public service, providing psychological support, historical perspective and religious education. In the end, we feel that the public walked away with a positive image

of the people of Florida Tech and the institution itself. In a time of such dreadful crisis, that's really more than we could have hoped for.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jay Wilson is a 10-year veteran of journalism and public relations and is the Director of University Communications for the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, Fla. A former newspaper

editor, Wilson's present work focuses on media and community relations, as well as controlled media and publications. During his time at Florida Tech, his office has won several awards from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), including one for overall media relations. Jay and his wife, Michelle, a high school English teacher, reside in Melbourne.

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