

## **When the Press Calls: Developing Talking Points for a Positive COVID-19 Test in Your Facility**

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An employee(s) at one of your facilities tests positive for COVID-19. What happens if the press calls?

First – be prepared. You’ll need to be able to anticipate the questions reporters will ask and answer them truthfully and stand up for your company and the industry. This document will help you do that.

Open up your facility emergency response plan and make sure your team is following its procedures. You’ll use some of those procedures to inform your talking points to the press.

*(If your facility doesn’t already have one – create one. At some time or another, nearly every manager can expect to be faced with the sudden challenge of an incident, whether it be responding to a fire, explosion, ammonia spill, or... pandemic. See GCCA’s Crisis Communications Manual, available to members at no charge at [gccca.org](http://gccca.org), for information you can use to create a plan.)*

Next – write out your statement using your plan as well as the guidelines below before calling the press back or returning an email – but do this in advance if possible, you’ll want to promptly respond to reporters.

Then – promptly return the call or answer the email. Do not avoid reporters. Be calm, sincere, and confident as you assertively tell your story. Be brief, transparent, and stick to the facts.

### **Preparation**

With a little bit of preparation, you can better present the facts and share your side of the story, helping to bolster the reputation of your company – or at least mitigating any damage.

GCCA published a Crisis Communications Manual that addresses many of the issues that may arise. An excerpt of that manual is included below. Please review that information before preparing your statement.

In speaking with reporters or others asking about the situation, your goals should be:

- to remind the public and other stakeholders that you have always followed industry protocols when it comes to the safety and sanitization of your facility – but that you are stepping up efforts now
- to reassure the public, customers, employees, investors, and other stakeholders that you are well-equipped to handle a positive COVID-19 test
- to share that you have taken all appropriate measures to ensure the health and safety of your employees as well as safety of the food products in your facility

- to ease concerns of a stoppage of, or risk to, the food supply chain, an “essential infrastructure” for national health

With these goals in mind, here are some recommended talking points. You will have to customize these to your particular situation.

## **Suggested Talking Points to Adapt to Your Situation**

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- Food production facilities, distributors and wholesalers are part of our nation’s “critical infrastructure” and must remain operational to feed the country. We take our responsibility to maintain the safety and health of all our employees and those visiting on-site seriously in order to keep the food supply chain safe and operational.
- On X date, the X facility located at X had X number of workers test positive for the COVID-19 illness.
- As a company, we have an immediate response for these events based on the food industry’s standard protocols, and have implemented them here:
  - The individual(s) involved have been asked to stay home and self-isolate, as have any employees who worked in close contact. Follow-up procedures have been implemented to establish when it is safe to return to work. Reference: [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/return-to-work.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fhealthcare-facilities%2Fhcp-return-work.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/return-to-work.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fhealthcare-facilities%2Fhcp-return-work.html)
  - We have contacted the local health department and are working cooperatively with any additional direction given by them.
  - We are undertaking additional cleaning and sanitation protocols throughout the facility (or “affected places in” the facility).
  - We also continue to follow and maintain CDC guidelines; namely practicing handwashing, honoring social distancing to the degree we can and upholding cleaning and sanitizing protocols.
  - Lastly... the food that’s on your table, is on ours too. We work hard every day to protect the foods that families love.

Only volunteer additional information if it is to your advantage – if you want to make a specific point. If pressed for details, here are some common talking points you may wish to adapt for use:

- We do/do not expect to close the facility for X length of time to complete our cleaning and sanitization efforts. (NOTE: check your local health department protocols to determine if closure or similar actions are required).

- We expect to reduce or alter our operating hours to complete our cleaning and sanitization efforts.
- Coronaviruses are generally thought to be spread from person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Currently, there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 by food.
- We do not anticipate that food products would need to be recalled or be withdrawn from the market because of COVID-19, as there is currently no evidence to support the transmission of COVID-19 associated with food or food packaging.
- Current health guidelines state that people who have not been in close contact with a sick person are at low risk for infection.
- If your facility is FDA-regulated, food manufacturers are required to follow Current Good Manufacturing Practices (CGMPs) and many have [food safety plans](#) that include a hazards analysis and risk-based preventive controls.

We also recommend being familiar with the *Food Industry Recommended Protocols When Employee/Visitor/Customer Tests Positive for COVID-19* document, which details what food facilities should do in the event of a positive COVID-19 test, in case of follow-up questions. This document is available on GCCA's coronavirus webportal: [www.gcca.org/coronavirus](http://www.gcca.org/coronavirus).

## **Communicating with Others**

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You will also want to communicate with your other employees, suppliers, and other stakeholders. See GCCA's Rapid Response Guide (available at [gcca.org/coronavirus](http://gcca.org/coronavirus)) for some ready-to-use templates you can customize.

With preparation and a cool head, you can successfully inform the public via the media while you continue your operations in a healthy and safe way.

## **Excerpt from GCCA's Crisis Communications Manual**

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### **CRISIS MEDIA MANAGEMENT**

*Steve Bassett, The Communications Workshop, LLC*

Of all of the tools used to influence public opinion, effective use of the news media could be the most important. The American public is so conditioned to "the news" that it is almost impossible to manage an issue without being able to understand and influence the media. During a crisis, how the media coverage is managed will determine how the public and key officials will perceive the company, its professional capabilities, and its

ability to adequately handle the crisis. Mess this up and the impact on your company could be devastating.

What is “news” is subjective. One individual’s news is another person’s fluff. Each of us has our own personal opinion about news. The dictionary defines the word “news” as “A report of recent events. Material reported in a newspaper, news periodical, or on a newscast. Newsworthy matter.” The dictionary further defines the word “newsworthy” as “Sufficiently interesting to the general public to warrant reporting.” However, the fact is that often news may simply be anything that piques the interest or curiosity of a reporter, assignment editor, or news editor.

The American public typically obtains the preponderance of their news from three primary sources—television, radio, and newspapers. But, the news presented on television, radio, or in the newspapers can only be as accurate as the information on which it is based and only as complete as time and space limitations permit.

Typically and increasingly, those time and space restrictions place such severe restraints on news coverage that what is seen, heard, or read is only a small fraction of the news which is available. Consequently news must be, in the opinion of those who select the news to be covered and reported on, more than just sufficiently interesting to the general public. It must be significantly interesting in order for news organizations to give it a second thought.

## Reporters

Reporters conduct interviews for two fundamental reasons. Reporters go to school on interviews. They receive much of their background knowledge from the interview process. They plan it that way. The tighter the schedule the more the actual interview becomes a source for background information for the journalist. Often the reporter is searching for that one or possibly two statement(s) which will support the focus of the story as determined by the journalist based on a wide variety of influences as previously discussed. Recognize what is occurring during the interview and try within the context of your answers to separate background information from the point you wish to make publicly. Don’t give a lengthy answer to a question and then be surprised if the segment of the interview you wanted used is not what appeared in the final story. People typically love to talk but are the first to complain that they were misquoted or that what they said was taken out of context.

Your role in the news process is no less important than the journalists’. If the end result of the story is inaccurate or misleading, you may be just as guilty as the reporter. You can influence the accuracy and the tone of the story. Taking the time to understand their world is the only way they can be expected to understand yours.

## Interviews

Good news reporting requires journalists to invest much time and effort in practicing and mastering good reporting skills and techniques. This includes mastering the skills of conducting effective interviews.

As a spokesperson for your company, you must invest just as much time and effort. Successfully protecting your company in a crisis situation requires skill and savvy. It also requires practice.

The following are some of the more important Dos and Don'ts of being an effective spokesperson:

- **Know the subject**—Always have a thorough understanding of the topic the reporter wants to discuss. The last thing you want to have happen is to be fully prepared to discuss one subject or one piece of a subject and suddenly be blindsided by a reporter who is focusing on something entirely different than what you expected and spent hours preparing for.
- **Be prepared**—Never enter into an interview session unprepared to discuss the topic. If the subject at hand is not your specialty, recommend a replacement for yourself.
- **Talk with the reporter**—Spend ten or fifteen minutes free time prior to the formal interview to discuss the issue with the reporter. Use this time to help the reporter with background information and in general help them to learn the issue. Reporters typically ask questions based on what they think they know. Educational time up front can help a reporter avoid questions which are irrelevant, inaccurate, or simply off the mark and focus their thoughts as well as yours on the topic at hand.
- **Be honest**—If you do not know the answer to a particular question, again be honest. Explain this to the reporter and offer to get the answer as soon as possible.
- **Be smart**—Once a question is asked pause for as long as it takes for you to gather and organize your thoughts prior to opening your mouth. Think first, then speak. Then answer in brief, but complete thoughts.
- **Be positive**—Answer all questions and make all statements in a positive, aggressive manner. This displays strength which translates into knowledge, and credibility. Credibility is a spokesperson's greatest asset and must be protected at all times.
- **Lead the interview** in the direction you want it to go. Experienced spokespersons are masters of this technique. Politicians use it to perfection. Leading an interview means moving the discussion in the direction you want it to go. The key to making this work is being able to sell what you want to discuss as the more important subject. Keep in mind that this is your interview, not the reporter's. You are the one who will be exposed. You are the one hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of people will be reading about, hearing, or watching. It is your credibility and professionalism and that of your

- company that will be under public scrutiny. Therefore, conduct the interview the way you want it conducted.
- **Whenever possible record the entire interview.** This will allow you the opportunity to critique yourself and will also give you an accurate record of exactly what was said and in what context it was said.
  - **No “off the record.”** Remember that there really is no such thing as “off the record.” You are always on the record. You may not be directly quoted as having made a statement, but everything you say will impact a reporter’s thinking about a particular subject and will influence the final story. Use that to your advantage.
  - **only volunteer** additional information if it is to your advantage.
  - **Never get visibly upset** or angry with a reporter. Rest assured that such a display will impact the final story.
  - **Go to school on others.** Watch television news. Listen closely to radio news. Read interviews in newspapers carefully. Take note of what others say and how they say it. Also take note of how reporters treat stories and interviews. Such insight can be helpful.
  - **Never lie!** Once caught in a lie, knowingly giving out inaccurate information, credibility is lost for you personally and for the issue you represent. There is absolutely no substitute for honesty—period!

## Developing Procedures to Handle the News Media

Media relations is more than just knowing someone in the news media. Media relations is the mutual development of trust between the media and your organization. It is the wise selection of issues to bring to the attention of the media. It is the crafting of themes and messages to get the media’s attention and focus them on the story you wish to tell. It is the fundamental difference between publicity and public relations.

Publicity is easy to get. For example, if you manage a refrigeration warehouse, all you have to do is leak toxic fumes into the air and you likely will get all the media attention you can handle. But it is unlikely this is the kind of attention you want.

Public relations, as it applies to your company’s relationship with the news media, means creating the ideal public opinion climate to ensure that the media attention you get is the kind of media attention you want.

## Using Public Relations Professionals

The press will approach any member of your staff they can find, particularly in the absence and even in addition to an official response to their questions. That practice must not be permitted when it comes to dealing with your company. Not everyone in your company is or should be expected to be a media relations expert. It takes a keen understanding of the media and skill to be able to develop effective working

relationships with the media. It should be handled by trained public relations professionals. Therefore, the first step in developing an effective media relations program is to put someone with public relations experience in charge of your media relations initiative.

All incoming and outgoing contacts with the news media should funnel through this department. This is not intended as a bottleneck, but a device to protect the organization. The last thing you want or need is for someone in your organization—well intended as they may be—to misspeak while talking with a reporter. The damage can often be insurmountable. Your company’s public relations director should serve as the main staff contact with news media. That person or department should be responsible for establishing and maintaining ongoing relationships with media representatives. Indeed, in many organizations, staff talking with news media is strictly prohibited. Everyone else in your company should understand that if they are approached by a reporter, their **ONLY** response is to send them to the media relations department or company spokesperson.

### Selecting PR “Experts”

The objective of developing a media relations program is to establish a proactive relationship with the media to deliver your messages to your target audiences. Central to that is to carefully select key individuals within your organization who can be utilized as “experts.” Though contact with the media should be handled directly through your public relations office, it is wise to have people on hand who can serve as subject specialists. Naturally, in any organization, the president is and should be the chief spokesperson. But others with special expertise should also be utilized.

Of course, no one should be permitted to speak with the news media unless they are knowledgeable, articulate, have received professional media relations training, and are well informed on the subject at hand. Additionally, it is always a good practice to have your public relations professionals take part in any interview session with a staff “expert.”

### Crisis Media Management

Finally, it is essential for your company to have a crisis media management plan in place. Though you will likely initiate most communications with news media, the time will come when an emergency occurs. A detailed media crisis management plan is essential. It should contain internal contacts, plans of action, procedures for managing outgoing information flow, procedures for developing news releases and holding news conferences, and a list of trusted media contacts who will help ensure that your story is told. Most important, if your company spokespersons have not undergone professional media training, you are asking for trouble. Get them trained. Now!

### Key Steps to Handling News Media During Crisis Situations

- Return All Media Calls Promptly
- Never Avoid The Press
- Put Your Company Spokesperson Front And Center
- Have Handouts Already Prepared
- Do Not Permit News Photographic Access To Your Facility
- Know The Format Of The Interview
- Ask Who Else Has Been Interviewed For The Story
- Never Respond To Speculation
- Remain Calm At All Times
- If Reporter Repeats The Same Question—Repeat The Answer
- Stand Up For Yourself, Your Company & Your Industry
- Take Your Time To Respond
- Always Tell The Truth—Never Mislead Or Be Dishonest
- Don't Volunteer Information Unless It Helps You Make A Point That You Want To Make
- Dress For Success (Conservative)
- Express The Demeanor Appropriate For The Occasion
- Record The Interview

### The Five “Bs” To Being An Effective Spokesperson

- Be Prepared to Discuss Topic
- Be Confident in your Knowledge
- Be Sincere, Honest & Credible—Never Lie!
- Be in Control—Lead The Interview
- Be Brief In Your Responses
- Remember—There Is No “Off The Record”