

Outdated approach to crisis comms must change to shape future leaders

I dealt with my first major incident in 1987, the Kings Cross underground fire. In those days we were wholly reliant on the news media telling the public what was going and relying on newsrooms to support the *warning and informing* agenda. Even with the 7/7 bombings in 2005 where I led the communication response for all blue light services in London, we were still relying on the media to tell the story and deliver that 'call to action'.

Yet in this digital age we now have a multitude of channels at our disposal to communicate with the public, to *warn and inform* and assist in preserving life. I have long been concerned that on some of the biggest crisis management courses in the country, it seems to be commonplace that crisis comms training focuses on how to deliver a good media interview and press conference? I am afraid that such thinking is old school and outdated, and sadly crisis management courses have not kept up with the pace of change. A view reinforced by senior leaders from many first responding organisations that I talk to.

Although the content on crisis management courses has changed and adapted as technology, processes and learning have advanced, the same cannot be said for crisis communication. Many courses seem to be stuck in the past, training on practices that were perfectly acceptable in the 80, 90s and early 2000s, but do not have the same relevance in this modern age.

I am not saying that media interviews and press conferences do not have their place as part of a broader crisis comms approach, but they are not the be all and end all. In fact, by just focusing on one medium and not familiarising senior officers and leaders from the emergency services with the full range of communication tools at their disposal, we are not only letting them down, but we are letting the public down too, and leaving first responding agencies open to criticism at future public inquiries.

At EPICC our crisis comms training is completely different. Our team of experts, with years of experience in dealing with emergencies and disasters, is drawn from different sectors. We deliver training that helps GOLD commanders and strategic and tactical leaders to understand how they can use comms to shape outcomes and change behaviours during major incidents. We help them to understand the different levels of information that is required by individual's given their proximity to an incident. We help them appreciate the different channels they have at their disposal, including news and social media, to communicate and engage with the public. We help them to develop key messages and that vitally important 'call to action' that will help to save lives and deliver their legal duties to warn and inform as set out within the Civil Contingencies Act.

Ultimately, we work with them to develop the skills needed to ensure that their comms approach is having the desired impact, that it can change direction without compromising the response, and it will stand up to future scrutiny.

The reality is that the emergency services are no longer telling the story as they were 15 years ago. Within minutes of the terrorist attacks on London Bridge in 2017 and subsequently in 2019, commentary, photos and videos were appearing on social media channels. I didn't need a media interview or press conference from London's emergency services to tell me what was going on several hours later, because the public were telling the story. What I needed was that public reassurance and that 'call to action' to tell me what I needed to do. I needed that information quickly through channels I had trust and confidence in.

In fact, recent research from Ofcom shows that the vast majority of people aged 45 and under do not get their news from the news media, but from social media and digital platforms. So, why do we keep adopting a one size fits all approach? By concentrating on just one medium, we risk failing to engage with enormous parts of the population, which could have disastrous consequences when a disaster strikes.

EPICC's training ensures that those who are charged with delivering an effective response to emergencies and major incidents know how they can best use comms to their advantage and how they can utilise the full range of communication tools to support their overall operational aims and objectives, even when budgets are squeezed.

Effective crisis management is about equipping those in command positions with the necessary skills to deliver best outcomes. We are failing to do that if we just focus on one particular specific area when it comes to communicating with the public. If we are really serious about making a difference, we must change our training approach. Otherwise, we not only risk letting first responders and the public down, but we ultimately risk costing lives too.

Chris Webb (MCIPR) is a Director of EPICC and was the former Head of Media for the Metropolitan Police Service. He chaired the London Resilience Forum (LRF) Crisis Comms Group with Cat 1 responders for 10 years.