

Expert Crisis Communications & Crisis Management Begin with Managing Expectations



Gerard Braud

As the flooding disaster in Houston continues from Hurricane Harvey, and as I look back today, August 29th, on the 12th anniversary of my own experience with Hurricane Katrina, one element of crisis communications, crisis management, and disaster management looms heavy: Manage the expectations of your audience.

In the case of Houston, managing the expectations of your citizens before disaster strikes.

Numerous news reports are focusing on whether Mayor Sylvester Turner should have called a mandatory evacuation. I would raise a different crisis issue: Did Mayor Sylvester Turner fail to manage the expectation of his citizens? Did he fail to tell them the trauma they would experience if they failed to voluntarily evacuate?

Powerful communications and rapid communications before a crisis has the power to move people out of harms way.

A community does not need to spend millions of dollars and hours on rescues if you move people out of harms way in

advance of the storm.

The National Weather Service clearly predicted 40 inches or rain. A mandatory evacuation was not necessary, but more forceful communications about the impending danger and the need for an aggressive voluntary evacuation was needed.

In 1985 I started chasing hurricanes as a television reporter. In every hurricane and associated flood, humans immediately regret not evacuating and they are consistently in need of the same creature comforts: water, ice, and electricity.

Life and death are legitimate concerns for those close to the eye of a hurricane. But for most people, the way to appeal to them is to explain the misery they will experience. This is called managing their expectations.

Believe it or not, the fear of death doesn't frighten people enough. However, making them afraid of the misery they will live through can motivate them. (At the risk of sounding sexist, men especially think they can survive even the worst storm. I've interviewed many who lived to tell the story and the story they tell is that they were stupid to try to ride out the storm because of the misery they lived through.)

Motivating people to leave before a storm is an art form that frankly, I do not see politicians and elected officials learning, despite so many case studies, including Hurricane Katrina.

Millions of dollars and millions of hours do not have to be spent on rescue efforts if there is no one to rescue because you have successfully motivated people to leave by explicitly describing their future human misery.

Exhibit A: A television news report I aired in 1990. Fifteen years before Hurricane Katrina, the report explained the pain, problem, and predicament the New Orleans metro area would

face.

Officials in every parish in the area, except New Orleans, ordered timely, mandatory evacuations. Their residents were responsive. New Orleans, however, had a mayor who dropped the ball. He showed no concern when he needed to, and thousands died, while tens of thousands were stranded in their flooded homes. Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on rescue efforts required because people were not strongly encouraged to evacuate in a timely manner.

Here are some things I would have encouraged the mayors of Houston or New Orleans to say:

- *“Your life could get very miserable, very fast. You could be trapped in your home, with your children, with elderly family members, with sick family members. This is not something you want to do.*
- *If you stay, expect water to possibly enter your home without warning. Expect it first to ruin your floors. It will continue to rise and ruin all of your belongings on the ground floor of your house. For some of you, it will overtake your second floor as well.*
- *You won't really be able to save your personal belongings. You will be too busy wondering if you can save your own life and the lives of your family members as they panic and cry in terror.*
- *You'll likely live through it, but you might be standing in water up to your chest.*
- *Your neighborhood may have never flooded before. But it very well might flood this time. No two storms are alike. Do not think you will stay dry because you have not flooded in the past.*
- *Your neighborhood may be lucky and not flood, but your neighborhood may be surrounded by floodwaters without creature comforts.*

- *You will be trapped, without electricity in the hot August heat.*
- *Your water supply might likely become contaminated and unfit to drink.*
- *Your toilets and plumbing may not work. They might even overflow into your home.*
- *You may run out of food.*
- *You may run out of water.*
- *Your cell phone may not work.*
- *You may need emergency help and no one will be able to come for you.*
- *If you are willing to endure what might be great trauma, then stay. However, if you are wise and if you recognize the suffering that awaits you and your family, you should voluntarily leave now.*
- *Millions of people who have stayed behind in storms, only to regret their decision, would tell you just as I am telling you, a voluntary evacuation now is the smartest decision you could make."*

Regardless of whether your community is facing a hurricane, a tornado threat, a blizzard, an ice storm, or any of the many predictable disasters, moving people out of harm's way is much smarter than dealing with the crisis of responding and rescuing people.

Be an expert in **crisis communications** and disaster management: Manage the expectations of your citizens.

About the Author: Crisis communications expert Gerard Braud, CSP, IEC has been the go-to expert for organizations on five continents for nearly 25 years. He shares his passion for effective communications through his keynote speeches at conferences and conventions, as well as by helping organizations write an effective crisis communications plan.

Additionally, he media trains spokespeople around the world. Braud began his career in journalism in 1979. During his 15 year career on television, you may have seen him on CNN, NBC, CBS, The BBC or The Weather Channel. In 1994 he left television to venture out into the world of public relations. This video will help you get to know him better.