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# Dealing With a Crisis

## Communication Plan Needs to Be Included in Safety Drills

by Joanna Schroeder

An explosion killed two people in February at the Bio-com Energia biodiesel plant in Valencia, Spain during routine work that was being done on an empty tank. According to Lauri Freking, senior trainer with Wixted & Company, Des Moines, IA (515-226-0818), the incident should remind the biofuels industry about the importance of conducting safety drills that include communication plans.



Lauri Freking

“When it comes to emergency management and high quality drills and exercises, for any industry to prepare for a crisis, the important thing to keep in mind is that operations must lead communications,” Freking told *BioFuels Journal* in a telephone interview.

Many companies have a crisis plan but, too often, it is an operational plan only. In these situations, an employee will

know what switches and levers need to be pushed and pulled if different types of emergencies and crises occur, stated Freking.

### External Communications

“But what’s often forgotten or minimized is how critically important it is to communicate externally and add that communication piece so that what you’re doing operationally is being communicated,” she explained, adding that this is one void she and her company have seen consistently across a wide variety of industries.



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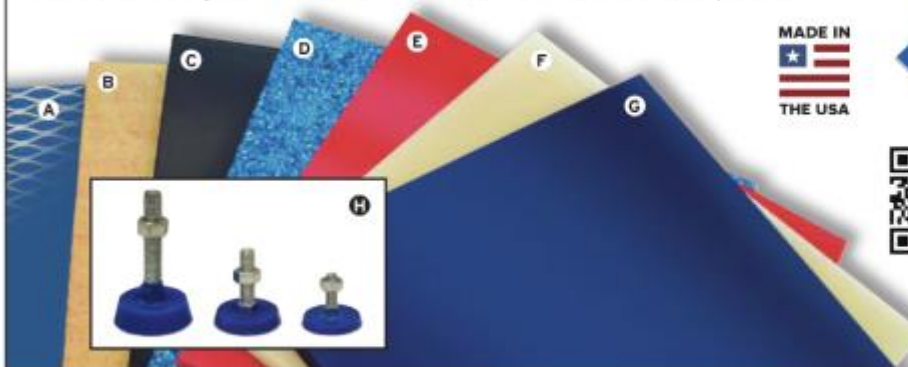
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*Safety drills should include communications training and following a plan to deal with the media in a crisis situation.*

"If you don't include the communication piece, you are then leaving a void and the media is going to cover the crisis and fill the in the void for you," commented Freking. "Your neighbors who may be upset will fill that void for you as will regulators who have an opinion about your lack of communication with key stakeholders. All of these other people and voices are going to be heard."

In the case of the deadly accident in Spain, the biofuels industry was under a microscope as the news traveled around the world in a matter of minutes.

#### **Social Media**

Freking remarked that with social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube often acting as the first platform of communications, a company can quickly lose control of its reputation and brand if it doesn't have a communication plan in its emergency preparation.

Wixted & Company has been working with energy companies for more than 25 years, stated Freking, and has been assisting companies not only with developing crisis communications plans, but also in assisting during a plant's

*"But what's often forgotten or minimized is how critically important it is to communicate externally and add that communication piece so that what you're doing operationally is being communicated."*

**- Lauri Freking, Wixted & Co.**

safety drills to ensure that the crisis plan works when it is put into action.

"It is so important that, if you're going to train and practice and prepare how to handle things operationally, you do the very same thing for the very same reasons from a communications perspective," Freking stated. "We have seen time and again that in an actual crisis, clear thinking does not prevail. What you have are people who are in a state of distress and disbelief. That is why it

is so important to practice what you've learned, practice your talking points, and test the plan."

#### **Best Time**

The best time to conduct a safety drill is while your plant is operational so your team members are in the right state of mind and doing their everyday tasks. During a safety drill, it is critical to include all the parties who would be involved in the crisis, including mock media contacts. ▶

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Freking noted that, during a drill, you're not only testing the plan, but you're testing your employees and testing yourself. During and after the drill, employees must ask several questions. For example, the person who serves as the lead spokesperson should ask, "Am I the right spokesperson? Should someone else be doing this? How are messages resonating with stakeholders, neighbors, and the media?" If the answer to any of

these questions is no, Freking advised that it is wise to bring in outside assistance.

### 'Perception Is Reality'

"Perception is reality," explained Freking. "If you don't practice, you're going to go out cold in an actual crisis and that increases risk considerably." She added that crises, and especially media interviews, are a high-risk, low-control situation.

"They are high risk because you

don't know what the reporter is going to ask you. You're not going to get a list of questions ahead of time. You don't know what preconceived notions that reporter has about your company, the industry, and what happened. So, we're all about controlling what we can and the best way to control communications, net impressions, the brand, and the reputation during a crisis is to get out there and communicate and participate in the process effectively, and the only way you can participate in the process effectively is to practice."

She also points out that if a crisis is mishandled by one ethanol plant, it could create an even greater uphill battle for the rest of the industry. As such, she stressed it is critically important that ethanol plants, in the position they currently are in, should be prepared for anything.



*Because of social media, a company can quickly lose control of its message if it doesn't have a communication plan in its emergency preparation.*

### Four-part Message Model

Freking outlined a four-part message model that Wixted and Company teaches all its clients for practicing during training sessions and drills.

**Step 1: Care and concern.** Care and concern must go first because emotions always trump data. It is critically important to acknowledge the feelings that are going on. These set the tone for what happened that day and also for how your stakeholders are going to perceive the problem.

**Step 2: Responsible actions.** This means simply telling people what you're doing. In the absence of information, people will assume the worst. So, visually take them into the plant and share what is happening and what you are doing to fix the problem.

**Step 3: Cooperative efforts.** ►

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**- Lauri Freking, Wixted & Co.**

Tell your stakeholders who you are working with. This builds trust and credibility.

**Step 4: Resolve.** A concept developed by the Wixted team after 9/11 says: "We're bigger than this crisis. We will rebuild. We will move forward."

Freking stressed that when you are communicating in a crisis, the ultimate goal is to leave behind the net impression that you can fix the problem. Trust and credibility are earned over years, but they can be lost in a few minutes. So, she counsels that when a company is deciding whether to include communications



*Conducting a communications drill can help put out a fire when a real emergency occurs.*

and media relations into its plans and exercises, keep in mind that plans are only as good as they play out and drills are only as effective as they are realistic.

"Here's the bottom line," Freking stated. "The crisis is really an opportunity to show the world what you're made of. Bad things happen to good companies every day but, if something bad happens

at an ethanol plant, if a crisis occurs, then a company has to get out there and own what they need to own, needs to work well with the agencies and partners they have in emergency management, and should communicate early, often, and well by expressing care and concern. A well-handled crisis, in the long run, can improve peoples' trust and credibility in your company." ■

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