



Standby Statements: Flossing for Communicators©

September 2019 EEC Subscriber Exclusive



“If you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail.” Did you ever hear that managerial maxim? I used to, all the time when I worked in an energy company. Like other pithy sayings about management (such as “You can’t manage what you can’t measure”), the one about planning sometimes fell on deaf ears. “I was so busy ‘doing,’” I would say, “that I didn’t have time to plan.”

That’s never really true. There is a tension between “doing” and “planning,” but you decide how to spend your time.

The Dangers of Too Much “Doing,” Not Enough “Planning”

In my experience, energy-company communicators are particularly prone to err on the side of “doing,” and under-investing in “planning.” There’s always another inquiry from Executive Row to be answered, another meeting to attend, another email to answer.

Standby statements are a simple communications tool. Do you use them, perhaps by another name? **The very best standby statements are those that don’t get used!**

Standby statements are brief, internal documents prepared by a communicator to respond effectively and authoritatively when a controversial issue arises. When sensitive questions bubble up — whether it’s the latest internal rumor of a downsizing, a

news report that one of your power plants is exceeding its permitted emissions cap or gossip about sexual harassment in the workplace — communicators need to have answers. They need to be crisp and they need to be vetted, sometimes by C-suite executives.

At an industry conference, I spoke with an energy-company spokeswoman about standby statements. She said, “I know I need to do them, but something else always comes up.”

Standby statements are like flossing your teeth: You could spend 99 cents for a pack of dental floss and 2 minutes a night flossing, or you can pay thousands of dollars per year, and endure a fair amount of avoidable pain, for periodontal treatments.



Make Friends in Legal and HR – Before You Need Them

In our July blog post, [Media Relations: 10 Tips from Two Pros, Part 2](#), Randi Berris, a spokesperson for DTE Energy, talked about making friends with peers in Legal Services or Human Resources before there's a crisis. She's absolutely correct, and I directly experienced this as an energy-company spokesperson some years ago, when we were sued over a complex federal statute.

We had plenty of warning that a suit would be filed, which allowed me to meet with the company's senior in-house lawyer. I developed a pretty good, non-lawyer's understanding of this issue and our perspective. The statement I prepared was reviewed by the legal team and the general manager. When the suit was filed and the media called, we were ready to step reporters through the relevant federal statute and legal precedent.

I probably spent three or four hours gathering the background information and preparing the statement. But if we had not prepared that statement in advance, I likely would have

spent a couple of days chasing after staff trying to get the statement approved.

Murphy's Law almost always comes into play when time is short: the people who need to provide information or approve a statement are either in meetings, out sick, traveling or on vacation.

Because the issue facing my utility was complex, and we were prepared, the news story was contained. The article was balanced, it was a one-day wonder and the reporter did not revisit the topic again. A year later, when the lawsuit was decided (we won), the story was another one-day wonder. Subsequent market research uncovered no sign that this issue had damaged our reputation.

Reputational Damage at Click Speed

Having a standby statement approved and ready to go is even more important today, when information moves at the speed of a click. If you're not ready with a response, you lose the opportunity to shape the narrative and you're forced to play defense.

Standby statements are not just for the media relations team. They are just as necessary in employee communications. Employees should **never** learn something about their utility from the news media, especially if the issue is controversial.

I have seen other cases where solid preparation has helped energy companies contain, or even kill, a negative story in the media. A well-informed spokesperson has a better chance of convincing a reporter they have no story when they are not surprised by the reporter's text or call.

If you've done your homework and used a standby statement when a controversy arose, you know these statements also give you the opportunity to show (1) your company is not surprised by the announcement or event and (2) your company is taking concrete steps to fix the problem.



Any energy-company communicator looking to torpedo their career can go ahead and disregard the need for standby statements. That's a winning strategy — until it isn't.

Ready? Set? Go!