



School of VISUAL ARTS

Case Study: Crisis Communication

Student Artwork Creates Public Safety Issue

The Incident

In December 2001 a “site specific” art project by SVA student Clinton Boisvert caused the police to close the Union Square subway station and launch a full-scale investigation. They believed his piece – composed of numerous black boxes with the word “Fear” on them – may have been a series of bombs. This was in the wake of 9/11, with the city still very much on edge. (The artist later claimed that this climate was exactly what his piece had intended to address.)

Crisis Issues

- Although the incident became a school-wide issue – with definite implications for the college’s reputation and its role in precipitating (if indirectly) this major disruption of public service – practical effects of this crisis were felt primarily by the Office of Communication. In other words, the crisis was contained within a single office.
- Press interest became intense, so the facts had to be established and a consistent message conveyed to the media quickly. [Sample coverage: [No. 1](#) . . . [No. 2](#)]

Sorting Through the Chaos: Dos and Don’ts

- Initially, the executive vice president and some fine arts faculty and administrators were involved in the issue. Later, the provost and Boisvert’s legal counsel became involved.
- This incident was not really treated as a crisis from the outset, possibly because it occurred off-campus and didn’t affect any of the college’s basic functions.
- Contrary to the fundamental procedures established in the Crisis Communication Plan, the various parties never met to share information, clarify roles, and formulate a communication strategy.
- Boisvert’s attorney began speaking to the press and the Office of Communication was forced to respond to press inquiries about his statements, rather than take the lead in communicating the college’s message.

Lessons Learned: Crisis Communications

- When anyone other than the Office of Communication spoke to the press, the message was muddled, less than favorable, and/or potentially damaging.
- When the Office of Communication spoke to the press, the message was clear and put the college in a relatively favorable light.

Lessons learned: General Crisis Response

- A crisis involving one office can be a crisis for the whole school.
- A crisis should be identified as such immediately, and all concerned parties should meet right away in order to coordinate the response.