

The Press Officer vs. the Spokesperson

Dustin Eno, Crisis Response Manager, Navigate Response

Not every company representative who speaks with a journalist and answers their questions is a spokesperson – indeed most aren't. When discussing the details of our crisis communications service, clients often ask if I will be their “spokesperson” during an incident. While I enjoy the spokesperson role, for strategic reasons the answer is usually “no”.

Theoretically, anyone can be a spokesperson for any company, but it's almost always better if that person is a company employee rather than someone from an outside agency. If the situation is serious enough to require a spokesperson, stakeholders (including the public) will want to hear directly from the company.

However, I do speak to journalists on behalf of clients all the time, but I do so as a “press officer” rather than as a “spokesperson”.

What's the difference?

I personally respond to about 50 incidents a year (Navigate Response as a whole deals with many more) and of these about five become major international stories generating thousands of articles and yet, if you Google my name “Dustin Eno” you'll find almost none of the cases that I've worked on – if I'd been a spokesperson you'd find them all.

A press officer should not be quoted by name or even as an individual. Instead, the report will read something like “the company confirmed that the sky was blue” or “a company representative told us that water is wet”.

Journalists are used to speaking to communications agencies to get information. Some journalists even prefer it as the process is clear – they're talking to a communications expert and so they can be sure that arrangements like “background – unattributable” or “on the record” are mutually understood.

Most media enquiries can be, and should be, managed by a press officer. However, sometimes a company spokesperson is necessary, such as when it's important to show sympathy for those impacted. Even if the spokesperson is speaking, there is still a central role for a press officer.

If one of my clients needs to provide an interview during a crisis, I will act as the press officer and take several steps:

1. Identify the best journalist(s) for the spokesperson to speak to. Usually s/he will not have time to give an interview to everyone who's calling.
2. Provide the journalist with the facts and details of the situation – interviews are rarely the best way to accurately communicate details.
3. Arrange the details of the interview including, time, location, format, subject matter, etc.
4. Prepare the spokesperson for the interview including drafting talking points, practicing, anticipated questions and coordinating details such as appearance and background.

On a busy case there will be many press officers working hard to deal with an endless flow of journalists and one spokesperson delivering just a few carefully selected interviews.

The press officer role and the spokesperson role are often confused – probably partly because most people never see a press officer and because some organizations combine the two roles into one.

Some years ago, when I was a Public Information Officer (PIO) for wildfire management in Canada, I was both the spokesperson and the press officer and to some extent the community liaison officer as well, but while I filled all three roles, they were in fact three distinct jobs.

Except in rare cases (such as for reasons of location or language) an external agency shouldn't act as a client's spokesperson, but during a crisis they should almost always act as the clients press office and do most of the talking.



About Dustin Eno

Dustin has over 12 years of communications experience including as the head of crisis communications for the largest wildfire management center in British Columbia, Canada. In this role he managed media and social media relations for destructive wildfires and property loss, routinely filling the Information Officer role in the incident command system. Dustin specializes in crisis reputation management and while at LSE developed computer models for tracking reputation in the online and print media.

As our Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Crisis Response Manager, Dustin manages the media response for numerous shipping incidents, coordinates the operations of our global network and is one of the company's lead media trainers. In addition to his crisis communication experience, Dustin has a background in public relations and has held several positions on the boards of directors for charitable organizations. Dustin is also an award-winning workshop presenter and public speaker.

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