

# The Sports Turf Manager as a Crisis Communicator

*Sports Turf Managers Association Editorial Staff*

Perhaps you will never be faced with responding to a crisis. But, if you ever have an athlete get injured during play, an employee who gets hurt on the job, a disgruntled employee, a weather related disaster, or an environmental incident, you just might find yourself in the spotlight and under scrutiny.

As a manager of people, you may have to deal with an employee's death or illness, a sudden change in top management, or employee issues of sexual harassment. Each one of these can constitute a crisis. You must be prepared for that decisive moment when your response can lead the crisis to better or to worse. An initial negative perception is nearly impossible to reverse.

## Crisis Communication Response Tips

- Respond within 24 hours.
- Don't point fingers.
- Always be available to the media.
- Be visible and on-site.
- Tell the absolute truth.
- Never say "no comment."

You are judged within the first 30 seconds of speaking if you and the information you are providing is trusted. Appearing empathetic and caring are the most importance characteristics you can exhibit to show "trustworthiness". Your audience will also assess your competence, your honesty and your commitment. Your goal as a communicator is to demonstrate these attributes.

It is important to recognize that the media is usually more interested in covering opposing viewpoints and that bad news and conflict are more newsworthy. Most reporters are working under a tight deadline, have limited scientific and technical knowledge and can be a bit cynical. When preparing to talk with the media, address the principal underlying concern of the audience/questioner/listener keeping your responses short and concise.

In many crisis situations it is important to bring in a third party and to tell the media who you have contacted.

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## 2013 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**STMA Annual Conference**  
January 15-19, 2013  
Daytona Beach, FL  
800.323.3875  
www.stma.org

**2013 Rutgers NJAES OCPE Courses**  
**Organic Turfgrass Management**  
January 29, 2013

**Reducing Pesticide Inputs & Exploring Organic Options for Sports Turf**  
February 12, 2013

**Baseball & Softball Skin Surface Selection & Management**  
February 20, 2013

**Two-Day Athletic Field Maintenance**  
February 21-22, 2013  
Rutgers Cook Campus  
New Brunswick, NJ  
732.932.9271  
www.cpe.rutgers.edu

## Welcome! New and Renewed SFMANJ Members

*Continued from page 3*

Onofrio Prinzivalli  
Mike Reissner  
Carmine Ricciardi  
Carl Rossi  
Francisco Rubi  
Mike Rusin  
Frank Russo  
Rich Russo  
Barry Scasserra  
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Adam Simmons  
Michael Sinesi  
Fred Smith  
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Terrance Tanner  
Victor Tarrazzi  
Norman Torkelson  
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Anthony Vitolo  
Chris Whyte

No Brunswick Twp. Parks  
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Clifton Recreation Dept.  
Newark Public Schools  
Westfield BOE  
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Rutherford Schools  
No Brunswick Twp. Parks  
Clifton Recreation Dept.  
Princeton Recreation Dept  
Robinsville BOE  
Glassboro Parks and Rec  
Collingswood Public Schools  
River Dell Regional School District  
Piscataway BOE  
Burlington Twp Rec.  
Princeton Recreation Dept  
Highland High School  
Hopewell Valley Regional School Dist.  
Ridge High School  
Hopewell Valley Regional School Dist.  
Davison Golf  
Lawrence BOE  
Mantua Aberdeen Regional School District  
Berkely Heights BOE

## Crisis Communication Interviews

- Take control early by educating the reporter and correcting misunderstandings.
- Clarify the questions.
- Prepare two to three main messages.
- Give facts: who, what, when, where, but don't give how and why.
- Express your concern. Safety is always the top priority.
- Avoid jargon and do not use humor.
- Frame your answers in the positive.
- Tell how fast you responded, how much has been done and what you will do about it in the future.
- Thank or give appreciation to any assistance.
- Avoid words with negative connotations such as lethal, risky, deaths, maimed, toxic.
- Do not repeat the "charges" or any negatives words, such as no, not, never.
- Be conscious of your body language. Do not place your hands in a "fig leaf" in front or in back of you, but keep your hands/palms open and above the waist. Avoid touching your face, clapping or clenching your hands and pointing your fingers.

## Remember these phrases.

You want to give a sense of more to come, which will help to establish your trustworthiness.

"What I can tell you is ..."  
 "So far, what we know is ..."  
 "So far, what we have done is ..."  
 "What we are planning to do next is ..."  
 "We will be able to tell you more when ..."  
 "I'll be glad to talk with you again after we conduct ..."

Source: Susan Santos, Ph.D., FOCUS GROUP, Medford, MA

## Crisis Example and Response

**Situation:** You have a major event that is being hosted in your stadium the next day. As a set of temporary bleachers is being installed, they collapse and your assistant has been critically injured. A reporter is at the stadium asking what happened and why, and if the event is taking place.

Your first response must show concern for the worker and his family. "Our first concern is for Joe Smith and his family. Joe's safety and the safety of all of our workers is always our top priority. What we do know is that a temporary set of bleachers being installed here at King Stadium collapsed about an hour ago. Joe has been taken to Mercy Hospital."

So far, we have cordoned off the area to protect the public. A team of OSHA inspectors are on their way. We'll cooperate in any way to find out what happened. We have also called in a safety engineer to help. We will be able to tell you more about

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## The Sports Turf Manager as a **Crisis Communicator**

the accident after OSHA and our safety engineer has evaluated the situation.

Your response to whether or not the event will be held the next day depends upon your management teams' decision. If you are going ahead with it, you need to respond with how you are insuring fan safety: "We are going ahead with the concert tomorrow; however to insure the safety of our rock fans, we will be limiting the seating to the built-in seats in the stadium grandstands and offering on-the-floor seating in the end zone." If you are not going ahead, "We will not be holding the concert tomorrow. Fan safety is paramount and until we know why the bleachers collapsed, we will not be holding any events."

We appreciate the help of the city's emergency response team. I'll be glad to talk with you again when we know more.

*Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA), Lawrence, KS*



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## Atlantic City Surf Stadium in 2012

piece of equipment made a rut that had to be repaired making sod installation a pain. Using straight sand as a growing medium came from the golf industry and is called a California method. The theory was you could save money without adding organic material or the cost of blending. I have seen method used on golf courses and athletic fields with most opinions siding with the notion that they wish they had used some organics.

After sod, we laid plywood over to the infield. We did a physical soil test for particles and determined that the infield mix was a very sandy material. The test came back with of course heavy sand, light clay and silt for existing infield mix. The city asked about different choices in infield mixes which we reviewed and selected a Marco clay product. The infield mix they choose was 15 to 20% percent clay. Not quite a major league scale but close. As an added amenity we installed 2 zones of irrigation dedicated to just the infield. This irrigates the infield completely in just minutes maximizing efficiently. Some customers have commented that having water on demand like that is better than adding heavy clay infield mixes. The exotic infield mixes with high clay contents have so much additional maintenance involved we have noticed that they prefer irrigation water to seal infields before games. We rototilled blending-in new infield mix, laser graded and topdressed with vitrified clay which is a sister product to the infield mix. It matched colors very well and finished very nice.

The warning track is 24' wide on the outfield side and 15' on the foul lines. It had not been maintained in years, so the first thing we did was strip the top 2 inches of material. We then recycled the material by screening on site. We handpicked large weeds and then screened with a skid steer bucket that was built for rock removal. The process was a great rain day project that we completed in stages. After cleaning we spread the material and picked weeds and trash as needed to groom. After the warning track was finished we built the bullpen mounds (2 on each side) and the pitcher's mound out of Marco mound clay products. The batter's boxes were also constructed with green bricks and the Marco mound clay.

All in all we only worked about 14 days on construction. As soon as we installed sod, the 30 day maintenance began. The contract had a 2-year option on maintenance in which the City contracted with Georgia Golf Construction. We just completed our first year of maintenance and have closed the stadium for the winter. I am writing this article just after the Hurricane Sandy and the second Nor'easter the following week. The stadium field did well. We had to pick shingles that got ripped off. Right before all the rain we aerified and topdressed which served us well. The field drained very well considering the amount of rain we received in a week.

*Sean Connell is President, Georgia Golf Construction, Woodbine, NJ; and SFMANJ Treasurer*