

Background and Context

On 19 January 2007, a severe storm hit the ship *Msc Napoli* in the English Channel. The damaged ship, with 3,000 containers, was being towed to Portland Harbour when weather conditions deteriorated. The Department for Transport took the decision to beach the *Napoli* in Lyme Bay, Dorset to avoid losing the ship, its cargo and avert a major pollution incident along a world heritage coast.

The beaching of the *Msc Napoli* and subsequent coverage of the 'free for all' salvage operation in the face of official demands to stop, was a major news story in January 2007. GNN's South West office was called in to co-ordinate the 24/7 media-handling operation.

How the Topic was Handled

On Saturday 20 January, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's chief press officer called in GNN South West and Wales to assist with handling the press enquiries that had begun to flood in. A press officer was sent to Sidmouth to assist in the setting up of a media briefing centre. By Sunday, it was clear that this was an international story and the MCA requested further GNN support, including Regional Director Peter Whitbread, to advise on communications and media strategy

Objectives

- Develop and implement a media strategy to handle the short and long-term demands of a rapidly growing international media pool.
- Co-ordinate the communications activity of all the partner organisations, providing an overview of how the incident was being handled on and offshore, in particular, through media handling at press conferences and media access to key staff.
- Ensure that key messages were communicated, rapidly correcting inaccurate stories and providing a constant supply of up-to-date information.

Initially four key story lines had to be addressed:

- The anxiety surrounding potential long term environmental impact to a World Heritage Site by oil spill from the ship.
- The reasons why the ship was beached here.
- The human story of the "scavengers" of the shipwrecked goods on Branscombe beach.
- Questions of law and order and confusion on the status of "wreck versus salvage" over time.

As the story developed, it became clear that the 'scavengers' story was a key theme and that they, not the wreck itself, were a major cause of potential damage to the Heritage coastline. Using the media to dissuade people from coming to the beached container sites and discarding rubbish and unwanted cargo around the coast became a key MCA/partner communication objective.

Strategy and Plan

Working with the emergency services and local authorities, GNN co-ordinated, developed and supervised a media handling strategy for the salvage and recovery operation.

Roles were allocated as appropriate, with GNN taking overall responsibility for media handling and co-ordinating press conferences at the Media Briefing Centre in Sidmouth.

It was vital to keep the MCA, emergency services, local authorities, National Trust and major conservation bodies together in the dissemination of information on the *Msc Napoli*. Teleconferences allowed all parties to keep up-to-date and convey consistent messages. Devon County Council's PR team, in consultation with the Strategic Co-ordination Group, produced a regular media bulletin covering all aspects of the incident. This became the sole status report, enabling all organisations to work from a single, agreed script.

The Media Monitoring Unit's regional service in Bristol produced regular updates of media coverage to enable the communications team to track the story and respond accordingly.

Along with MCA press office staff, GNN took control of the media situation at Branscombe beach, handling Receiver of Wreck and Principal Coastguard interview requests, briefing key spokespeople and managing requests to film the *Napoli* recovery independently. This was a 24/7 operation including handling both live TV and radio interviews and phone interviews direct from the beach into television and radio programmes throughout the world. Over 150 interviews were given from Branscombe beach alone, from live British, American and Japanese satellite stations to down the line live radio and TV interviews from BBC World Service to Australia, Canada and South Africa.

Measurement and Evaluation

By constantly monitoring the media, the MCA and emergency services were able to convey key messages and respond quickly to developments. One of these was to make continuous pleas to stop people from all over the country coming to the beach. The combined media handling operation ensured that there was a regular supply of information and spokespeople to meet media demand.

Evaluation is still ongoing with over 2,500 clippings, miles of video and cassette tape and thousands of Internet page impressions.

Timescale

Immediate and throughout the first two weeks of the *Msc Napoli* being beached, January – February 2007.

Budget

On-call service throughout – total cost to the client (Maritime and Coastguard Agency) was £8,000.

Award

Government News Network (GNN), in conjunction with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), were awarded first place in the Issues and Crisis Management category at the PR Week Awards 2007 ceremony on 24 October 2007 to recognise their work on the *Napoli* incident.

Lessons Identified

The *Napoli* incident demonstrated the benefits of getting a rapid-response media team in place, creating a cohesive, consistent team from representatives of all the organisations involved. Faced with 24/7 media demands, back-up teams are also essential. One of the key challenges was to allow the media good access, but to ensure that it did not hinder the rescue operation. This was achieved.

Although every incident is different, the strong relationships that have been established between local organisations, GNN and the media helped to ensure a consistent and well-planned approach. These have been built through regular meetings and rehearsals of major incident scenarios over many years.

A full review of the *Napoli* incident will take place shortly between the MCA and the other key responders to highlight key points and lessons learned. These will be shared with partner organisations to ensure that future incidents can be managed effectively.