

Executive Director's Message



KIRK GRUNDAHL

"What You Should Do **IMMEDIATELY** When the Media Calls!" by Kirk Grundahl

Imagine yourself in this situation: A magazine, newspaper or television station reporter calls your company to interview you on a potentially negative situation, not about your company, but about the truss industry in general. What action should you take?

ACTION CHECKLIST

- DO NOT speak on the topic at that time. Tell the reporter you would like some time to prepare for the interview.
- Immediately call your Chapter president, other Chapter officers AND WTCA staff.
- Develop an action plan in concert with the Chapter president and WTCA staff.
- Determine who will be the spokesperson for the industry on this issue.
- Determine all the facts and then the key talking points—boil these down to three points at most.
- Determine who has the best working knowledge of the facts and talking points.
- Ensure that anyone who speaks on the issue should use the three talking points as the basis of any conversation. All members need to speak as if with one voice.
- Call the journalist or reporter to set up the interview date and time—preferably face to face at their location.
- Prepare for as many questions as you can. Gather important data.
- Answer all questions with a key talking point as the foundation, if possible. Consider a press release as an alternative.
- Stay focused on the issue and key talking points for the entire interview. Do not let your guard down or say anything in what seems like casual conversation. It might come back to haunt you later.
- Thank the interviewer when you are finished for the opportunity to provide your perspective.
- Compliment yourself and your colleagues on a job well done.

A REAL LIFE EMOTIONAL ISSUE & THE 10 O'CLOCK NEWS

Jack Dermer of American Truss Systems in Houston, Texas received a call on Monday afternoon, February 21, 2000, from Ms. Anna Werner of KHOU TV 11 on a very serious truss incident. She wanted to interview the truss industry for their "11 News Defenders INVESTIGATE" series that was going to be the lead story on the 10 o'clock news on February 23. While clearly Jack did not

have much time to react to this request, he was accommodating in order to avoid casting the truss industry in a very negative light.

Jack immediately called Sonny Loreda (the Truss Manufacturers of Texas Chapter President), Rip Rogers (a local Houston truss manufacturer and former TMAT board member), and WTCA staff. This immediately began a chain reaction of calls to determine what was going on and what needed to be done.

The end result was this:

- The group decided that I was the best spokesperson for this issue and needed to go to Houston for the interview.
- Kent Pagel, WTCA Legal Counsel, is also located in Houston and was available to attend with me and provide assistance.
- I called reporter Anna Werner to set up a time for the interview. At first it did not look like our schedule would fit into theirs, but after a few phone conversations they did accommodate us and set an interview on February 22 at 2:30 p.m.
- I was in Houston on the 22nd at 11:30 a.m. preparing for the interview and obtaining some visual aids to better describe the truss industry and the realities behind the success of our industry. This was all done with the help of the Texas Chapter and Kent Pagel.

To coincide with this, WTCA staff took the following actions:

- Immediately sent a note on the actions taken by the Texas Chapter leadership to all Chapter members to explain what was going on and to get their perspective and any additional thoughts or knowledge they may have on the issue.
- Reported on all the events after the interview was completed to ensure that information was available to all members.

The interview was one of the most challenging activities that I personally have ever undertaken. There is no doubt that Anna Werner's desire was to have an interview that was packed with emotion, controversy and sensationalism. The media's main goal is to generate viewers and ratings, along with the advertising sales dollars that go with it. I found this concept very interesting: Channel 11 has found that great profits can be made under the guise of defending the public and using much emotion to enhance viewer interest and therefore advertising sales. One must always remember that this intent does not foster objectivity and accurate use of ALL the facts.

Given this, the interview questions were all geared to elicit the emotional side of the issue at hand. While our industry has an abundance of excellent facts about the benefits of our products, they unfortunately do not have

KEY CONCEPTS

• *Educate everyone you can locally. Facts mean knowledge and knowledge means better decisions.*

• *Ask yourself, what should I be doing for our industry? Let's not trust others to do the right thing for us—let's take the initiative and do the right thing for ourselves instead.*

• *Make active, local involvement in putting a human face on the truss industry a part of your job description.*

any emotion attached to them. Therefore, the component industry is not a very appealing topic by itself unless a huge dose of emotion gets injected into a situation. There certainly are attributes of our industry that have the potential to inject the needed negative emotion. The key points that I learned from this process are as follows:

- You must know the subject matter far better than the journalist or reporter. They are very good at doing their homework, so if you do not know the topic inside and out, you cannot anticipate the answers to questions they are asking and formulate a response that takes the emotion out of the answer.
- Journalists and reporters will ask the same question over and over using different phrasing to see if they can strike a nerve or get a different response. Our answers must be consistent, accurate and stick to the fact-based industry message.
- At the end of the interview, Anna went into conversational mode and said that the camera operator was just taking some background shots. This was an attempt to get me to relax and share personal opinions or say something that was different than what I had said earlier in the interview. Fortunately, our facts are our facts and they will not change. But remember that this is the time that something innocent can be said that will be taken out of context and used to interject emotion back into the situation. The point is never to relax and let your guard down during an interview. This is the time they use to prey on any lapse in focus you might have during what can be a very stressful process.

As my first interview on an emotional topic by a very experienced investigative reporter, I learned a great deal about this process and will know what to do much better the next time this happens. Although, I must admit I hope we do not have to do much of this in the future.

We have a great industry with excellent facts behind our success. This experience reinforced the following points for me:

- We are a quiet, hard-working industry that has helped to create affordable buildings throughout America, with a product that meets significant builder needs.
- We need to get out and educate the media, our customers, specifiers, local legislators, etc. on our industry. To do this, we must:
 - Organize WTCA's Truss Technology Workshops and educate locally. This is very important preventative medicine for our industry. Left undone, our industry is at far greater risk than any of us can imagine.
 - Create press releases on new hires and civic buildings (e.g. new fire stations, new schools, new city offices, etc.) you are building. Take pictures, make it a story and show the local communities how much value you are adding to your community. They need to know.
 - Consider donating trusses or providing them at cost for civic building projects. Play up the fact that you are giving back to the community. The value of the goodwill and publicity you

If there is not a commitment to it being a key part of your job, it will never get done.

• It is easy to think that this job is someone else's to do. When a problem arises, we will then go looking for the person who failed to protect us or we make someone else the enemy. Our own lack of involvement may make us our own worst enemy.

• We need to be proactive, not reactive.

- receive for such a donation will be much greater than the cost of the trusses—guaranteed.
- Hold “get out the vote” plant tours for legislators and potential legislators during an election year cycle.

Our industry’s story needs to be told in our own voices, not by someone who will put his or her emotional spin on it. We must be energized to undertake this activity or it is clear that, as our industry gets bigger, we will be a target for criticism even when it is completely undeserved. Consider getting involved in education at a grassroots level—a little time spent now could offset an insurmountable problem later.

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