

**External responses to the Glasgow Stockline fire:
an analysis by Stirling Reid Limited**

Summary

This note, prepared for Stirling Reid clients, examines external responses to the fire at the Stockline chemical factory in Glasgow on 11 May. It looks at the extent of press coverage of this incident, and the way in which different ‘angles’ developed. It also looks at statements made by agencies and other participants, and tracks how these were received by the media. It is intended to help clients to assess and manage any future incidents.

Useful pointers from this incident include:

- (a) This was a local story, but received world-wide coverage, largely because it was dramatic. Few ‘issues’ were covered: media focus was on the rescue attempt.
- (b) A very large number of press releases and statements were made by a wide range of bodies. Their motivations varied; clichés began to emerge.
- (c) The response became a secondary story – who had said what about the incident?
- (d) You have to fight to get your voice heard.
- (e) It is essential to brief news agencies and local TV and radio, as well as local press: most other stories feed on their reports.
- (f) It is essential for corporate media responders to see clearly through the amazing amount of coverage the media generate, and to set clear objectives for their own response.

This report is based on a sample of media stories available on the internet. It only includes coverage in English. The full texts of some stories were not available, and our judgements are sometimes based on summaries or first paragraphs.

The incident

At about noon on 11 May 2004 an explosion took place in the Stockline plastics factory in Glasgow. At the time of writing it seems that the explosion killed 9 people, and injured many others. The building collapsed, and emergency services and rescue workers attempted for some days to free trapped people.

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How widely was the event covered?

Coverage of the incident was considerable. For instance, a Google news search for 'Glasgow explosion' on 14 May listed 1320 news items between 11 and 14 May. There was internet-accessible coverage on a wide range of media including the Bulgarian News Network, the Australian ABC Online, Channel News Asia (Singapore), the Toronto Star, a very large number of US regional news media, as well as UK national media (FT, Guardian), radio and TV (BBC, Sky) and agencies: PA, Reuters, AP, etc.

Google searches in foreign languages ("for Glasgow Stockline") found a spread of coverage: 69 in French, one in Danish, 4 in German, 6 in Italian, 8 in Norwegian, 31 in Spanish, etc

It was quite clear that coverage was immediate and world-wide. After the initial blast, the drama and suspense of the rescue effort continued to guarantee coverage. Initial coverage focused on the incident, the rescue attempt, and, particularly in Scottish local media, personal interviews with survivors and relatives. A site visit by the Scottish First Minister created another round of stories, as did the announcement of an inquiry.

Images and video of the site, and media interviews, could be downloaded from several websites. Several services (eg CNN) also offered email alerts on the story: they would send out new reports by email as they came out.

Comments:

- (a) once again (see our previous report on the sinking of the 'Rocknes') an interesting story rapidly goes global.
- (b) Media technology now means that you can have the same amount of information just as quickly, whether you are in the same city or on the other side of the world.

On what angles did external interest focus?

Initial coverage of the incident related almost entirely to the facts of the explosion and the progress of the rescue attempt, with speculation about how many people might still be alive, etc. Local media also had interviews with relatives and friends and ‘human interest’ stories.

By 14 May other issues began to surface:

(a) Why the incident had occurred

This is the obvious major issue. There were reports that the factory had recently been inspected by the HSE. On 16 May Scotland on Sunday carried a long analysis of previous complaints by workers, a statement from the local MP, and a list of various HSE visits to the factory. It also described in some detail how it believed the explosion brought down the factory building and gave a potted history of the site and the company. On 17 May there was a story alleging that the oven involved in the explosion had been made from ‘lorry parts’. The announcement on 19 May of an investigation was also covered.

(b) Alleged links between Stockline or ICL and the supply of ‘torture equipment’ to police forces.

According to media reporting, a former boss of ICL Tech was fined in 1997 for selling “electric stun guns” to two undercover reporters who posed as Libyan businessmen looking to place an order for 5000 batons and stun-guns, when he or the company did not hold a licence to produce them. This story was repeated several times but no attempt was made to suggest that it was relevant to the latest incident: it appears that Stockline may produce equipment for riot control (such as batons, body armour, helmets, etc.) but there was no suggestion that this includes anything more sinister.

Comment

- (a) The classic pattern of external response is borne out: initial focus is on the facts of the incident, then on the human interest drama (the rescue) as it unfolds. After this comes the question ‘why?’ (or ‘Who is to blame?’). Other issues such as the stun gun allegations appeared, but in this case did not take root.
- (b) In a sense this was a story without the usual corporate angle: Stockline Plastics is a small company and its key management were victims rather than being cast as villains.
- (c) Any past history, even if not relevant, is in the on-line databases, and will be raked up and repeated.

How many people and agencies got involved in the story?

This incident was an excellent example of how individuals and bodies are drawn into the public arena: sometimes by a genuine desire to be helpful, sometimes to promote their own services, sometimes perhaps because they feel they are expected to comment, and sometimes as a result of questions from the media. The reaction to the event becomes part of the story itself. This has no doubt always been the case, but modern technology – and modern expectations – make it more and more prominent.

Police:

Strathclyde Police took the lead in making formal statements. According to their website, they issued 24 statements: 8 on 11 May, 6 on 12 May, 5 on 13 May, and 5 on 14 May. The Police statements mostly dealt with the names and identities of the casualties, gave out a Helpline number (discontinued on 14 May), and reported on traffic arrangements and disruption. Sensibly, the Police appear to have consolidated casualty information rather than exposing individual hospitals to the media.

Fire Services

As of 19 May, the latest press release on the Strathclyde Fire Service website was dated January 2004, and concerns a new Consultancy Document. However, the London, Manchester and Grampian fire service websites each had press release on their own sites within a few hours (each reporting that they had been called in to help, and describing their own Fire Service's capabilities and training.)

Others

HSE issued two statements, on 11 and 19 May:

- (a) On 11 May, that they had a team on site. We were surprised that this statement also repeated statements made by the company (expressing condolences) and the Police (number of casualties), and quoted workers caught in the explosion, presumably based on reported media interviews. This seems to break the golden rule of only making formal statements in areas where you have direct knowledge or responsibility.
- (b) On 19 May, setting out details of a joint investigation.

From political figures, we found formal statements by: the Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell ("I would want to give everyone in Scotland a very clear reassurance that our emergency services have shown here in Glasgow what a fantastic job they do... Our first thoughts today are with the families, friends and work colleagues of those who have died"), Prime Minister Tony Blair ("expressed the House's condolences to the families and friends", echoed by the Conservative and Liberal leaders), local MP Ann McKechnie ("Ann commenting on yesterday's explosion at Stockline Plastics in Grovepark Street expressed her horror at the scene of devastation"), Glasgow Maryhill MSP Patricia Ferguson, ("There are people unaccounted for, and our thoughts are with them and their

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families at this worrying time."), The Lord Advocate ("My thoughts and sympathies remain with all those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy"), the Scottish Secretary ("This is a shocking incident. I extend my sympathies to the injured and to the families of those who have died.") and Buckingham Palace (The Queen "... wants to convey her deepest sympathy to the bereaved and injured, and her prayers are with the missing and their families and everyone engaged in the rescue operation.") Councillor Liz Cameron, the Lord Provost of Glasgow: ("We mustn't give up hope and I know that the leader of the Council and myself and the members are greatly encouraged by the superb work of the fire team, of the police and of those who have come from all over to give their days and their help to this city. My debt of gratitude to them is boundless.")

Professor Sir John Arbuthnott, chairman of NHS Greater Glasgow, (staff had shown "real professionalism under extreme pressure"), NHS Greater Glasgow's Emergency Planner Alan Dorn ("Emergency planning is about teamwork and the NHS was just one part of a very successful team effort involving our partners in the emergency services, the local authority and neighbouring Health Boards.")

The Scottish TUC said "the STUC considers it a duty, both to the workers in this factory and throughout Scotland, to work to ensure that health and safety procedures and enforcement minimise risks at all times."

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) said: "No significant environmental hazard has been identified but SEPA was informed that asbestos was burning on-site. SEPA officers have been in attendance at the incident site and provided advice."

Stockline Plastics do not appear to have made a statement until 12 May. This is no doubt because many of their senior management were killed or injured in the incident. Their website was down during the week of 11 May, but a limited site was available on 19 May, carrying one press statement. The company is apparently part of a privately owned, Scottish based group with outlets in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Newcastle specialising in the distribution of plastics and the manufacture/fabrication of parts and components for a wide range of industrial and commercial uses. It is not connected with any of the 'majors'. The Stockline/ ICL statement was carried quite widely: it said:

"The companies express our condolences to the families of those among our staff whose lives were taken in the tragic event at our manufacturing plant yesterday. Our thoughts are also with those who have suffered serious injuries, and to their loved ones as they await their recovery. All of us are deeply shocked by the incident, and relieved that so many people escaped serious injury."

It went on to express gratitude and admiration for the emergency service response and to promise cooperation with the enquiry. It ended: "It would be inappropriate to comment further until the rescue operation is completed and the site is declared safe so that investigations can proceed."

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In a later letter to staff (which reached the media), the Chairman of ICL plastics said: "You will know that certain adverse media comment is speculative and comes from unreliable sources. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this time."

Comment:

- (a) Note the large number and high frequency of Police statements. This is the sort of feed the key media expect, and usually get from someone.
- (b) But note how several other statements are effectively an advertisement for the work of the group making them.
- (c) Whilst no doubt spoken from the heart, the phrase "our thoughts are with..." is in danger of becoming a cliché.
- (d) Reactions to the event can become a secondary story in themselves.

Who gave interviews?

The Strathclyde Fire Service

The Fire Service position was very different when it came to giving interviews. Here, the Strathclyde Fire Service Chief Fire Officer was much more prominent: he was quoted in almost every story.

A local paper, the Herald, analysed this on 18 May "As the painstaking work of clearing up begins, it is worth considering the disaster's leading man: Strathclyde's firemaster Brian Sweeney. The image of a confident, articulate, compassionate officer with an honest, couthy face, a down-to-earth accent and a truly impressive fire-helmet, filled our TV screens.... Here was the man to put it all right; the champion of the disaster; the fireman from central casting.....He was, after all, performing one very important aspect of his job, which was to draw the fire of the media, to satisfy their hunger, to fill up extended bulletins, to distract them from pestering families of the bereaved and injured. It has to be said he did his job terribly well.....Perhaps inevitably, in the climate surrounding a long-running industrial dispute, in which he is one of the main management negotiators, Mr Sweeney is not as much of a hero in the eyes of his firefighters as he is to media and public.From many of the grassroots firefighters' point of view, Brian Sweeney's role in the factory disaster was blown out of proportion. The bigger question is why the public needs to create heroes in this way. Part of the answer must be that there is now a huge, 24-hour multi-channelled story-making machine sitting on the doorstep of every disaster, looking for characters and drama in a world which feeds on emotion and simplistic interpretations.."

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Others

The Fire Brigades' Union's executive council member for Scotland, John McDonald, said the union had raised similar concerns in the past. "Within residential areas the planning authorities and Health and Safety Executive need to give due consideration to the risks to the general public as well as staff within the premises," he said.

Transco, the International Rescue Corporation and the Red Cross also gave statements to the media. So did Scottish Plastics and Rubber Association president Colin Hindle ("...our thoughts and feelings are with the families of the people killed and still missing."), the Scottish Plastics and Rubber Association secretary ("a blow to the industry and to the image of the industry") and individual companies in the area, as well as large numbers of locals. (Certain websites now allow access to information based on the electoral roll and telephone directories: so a journalist can look up the names and telephone numbers of everyone living in the streets near to an incident, and telephone them all until one makes a quotable comment.)

Comments:

- (a) Quotes fill up space and give a slightly new angle to the media stories. They are also easy for journalists to obtain – most people will make one if pressed, and some people are keen to volunteer them. Many organisations have an interest which they wish to place on record, and use the incident to do so.
- (b) Against this background, you have to fight for attention.

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Who originated the media stories?

It was clear that local media had large teams on the ground (The Glasgow Daily Record claimed their reporting Team included 13 writers and 8 photographers.) The major agencies also seem to have had teams on the ground, as did the TV news companies.

Not surprisingly, most of the world-wide coverage was secondhand. The same stories and quotes come up again and again: sometimes attributed directly to news agency sources, sometimes probably copied down from TV newscasts. Sometimes they are mixed, eg story by AP, photos by Reuters. Even some UK nationals, although giving bylines to their own reporters, appear to have relied almost entirely on second hand sources.

Comment: it is essential to make sure you brief agencies, and local TV and radio, as well as local written media, since almost all other coverage will feed on them.

Who reads all these stories, and does it matter?

Much depends on the incident. In this case, it is difficult to see how much it mattered that this particular story was carried in Australia, Bulgaria, Canada (etc.) Although tragic, it was largely a local story. Most readers presumably saw it in the terms described by the Herald columnist, as a drama with human interest.

The challenge for corporate response teams is to cut through the amazing prolixity of today's news media, and to establish clear strategies:

- Which external responses actually matter to us?
- What do we need to place on record?
- How can we best make our voice heard where it needs to be heard?
- To what extent is a secondary incident now taking place in the media arena- and will our secondary response (or lack of it) become part of this secondary incident?

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