



Navigate Response Extended Abstract

Interspill 2025

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Strategies for Effective Communication & Stakeholder Engagement in Oil Spills

When a vessel spills oil into turquoise waters, it attracts media attention and public concern. Nowadays, even smaller spills can make the headlines thanks to technological advancements and social media, which allows for easy access and distribution of information. In 2024 the world has been made acutely aware of the risks shipping poses to the environment. We began the year with a capsized barge leaking 35,000 barrels of fuel oil along Tobago's coast, threatening tourism, the fishing sector and surrounding islands; and as we speak, an abandoned tanker ablaze in the Red Sea, carrying more than one million barrels of crude oil, is at risk of spilling, which would result in a pollution four times the size of the Exxon Valdez thus becoming the biggest environmental disaster of our time.

It is impossible for the industry to hide from the truth that any spill, big or small, or even the risk of pollution could be the biggest corporate crisis you have faced during your career. The increasing global instability, combined with lowered barriers to information sharing and heightened awareness of environmental protection, force companies to manage oil spill disasters publicly, in the media spotlight, and due to the industry's past indiscretions they often face significant scrutiny in the process. So how can a shipping company protect their carefully built brand and reputation when it's impossible to respond to an oil spill in secrecy? The answer lies with effective crisis communications.

Our talk will explore how shipping companies can utilise crisis communications to combat oils spill related reputation threats, by examining recent real-life examples such as the cases mentioned above, as well as the MV Wakashio spill in Mauritius highlighting issues with delayed communications and mismatched tone, Repsol's communications response to a 12,000-barrel spill in Peru, which was unsuccessful in preventing a \$4.5 billion lawsuit and travel restrictions on executives, and the Terra Nova spill in the Philippines, caused by rough seas and heavy monsoon rains brought on by Typhoon Gaemi. Our presentation will provide concrete advice on how to:

- Effectively reach and coordinate with stakeholders,
- Address audience needs and concerns in a fast-moving situation,
- Fight misinformation and false narratives with facts and evidence,
- Leverage the media as allies and navigate social media,
- Overcome cultural and political differences, and
- Turn any incident into an opportunity to build and reinforce trust with stakeholders.

Getting the communications response wrong doesn't just mean misinformation, public backlash and loss of trust, harm to stakeholder relationships, perceptions of inadequate transparency, long-term brand and reputation damage, and hindered future business opportunities. It can also lead to increased insurance premiums and potential denial of claims, escalated litigation and settlement costs, possible criminal charges, plummeting share prices, lost investor confidence, and further destabilising the company's financial standing. We will equip listeners with the tools to get their communications response right to showcase our industry's skills, professionalism and dedication to protecting the environment in which we operate.

