

BOX 13.3

Demonstration Image Briefing

Background

I am playing the role of Michael Gartner, president of NBC News, and I am under pressure to explain and justify the handling of a story on General Motors's trucks by my division's *Dateline NBC* program. The program was broadcast on November 17, 1992, and dealt with the controversy surrounding the design of General Motors's C/K pickup trucks. Six million of these trucks were produced between 1973 and 1987 and have demonstrated a tendency to catch fire in high-speed side collisions because of their "sidesaddle" gas tanks—tanks that are mounted on the outside, rather than the inside, of the truck's frame rails. Between 300 and 600 people have died in these crashes, prompting more than 100 product liability lawsuits.

(Continued)

In a recent press conference (mid-February 1993), GM accused NBC of irresponsible journalism and presented evidence to refute almost every major point made in the *Dateline* story—especially a 57-second sequence showing a GM truck bursting into flames after a side collision. GM revealed that it hired detectives who learned that the crash sequence was rigged. GM charged that *Dateline* had said incorrectly that the truck's gas tank had ruptured when it hadn't and, more serious, had used explosive miniature rockets to make sure the truck would burst into flames—two important facts NBC's viewers were not told.

I am holding this press conference in mid-February 1993 for members of the media who will disseminate information to the general public.

Crisis Briefing

Specific Purpose: To explain the errors NBC News made and to work to restore the image of the news division.

Strategic Summary: Minimization and apology followed by attacking the accuser.

Introduction

- I. To a journalist, nothing is more important than credibility. If the audience doesn't believe in the facts of our reports, we have no reason to exist.
- II. People rely on the media to report both the actions of our government and unsafe business practices. Because of problems in a *Dateline NBC* story in November, we have damaged our credibility, and this concerns us here at NBC News.

(Trans.: Let me open by providing some background information on the events in question.)

Narrative

Many of you already know the story. In November 1992, while trying to alert people to an important danger to public safety on our highways, the staff at *Dateline NBC* made a mistake. *Dateline's* November 17 show featured 14 minutes of balanced debate capped by our mistake—57 seconds of crash footage that showed how the gas tanks of certain GM trucks could catch fire in side-on collisions.

Despite my previous comments defending the segment, the crash footage, conducted by the Indiana-based Institute for Injury Reduction, now appears to have been a mistake. Ultimately, I am troubled by two primary problems. First, our story reported that the gas tank had ruptured when it had not, and, second, we did not fully disclose the nature of the crash test to *Dateline NBC* viewers.

(Trans.: Let me explain these two errors through reference to claims that GM has made against us.)

Refutation

- I. First, according to GM, our segment claimed that the gas tank ruptured when no such damage occurred, and that the fire was caused by an ill-fitting gas cap that was not original equipment. These claims are partially true.
 - A. It is true that we made an error in falsely reporting the gas tank rupture, and for this we are chagrined and embarrassed.
 - B. In addition, GM is correct in its claim that the gas cap was not original equipment (Henry, 1993).
 1. However, it was an after-market replacement cap similar to those found on many vehicles on the road today.
 2. The fire was not, as GM claimed, caused by an ill-fitting gas cap.
 - a. Instead, the force of the collision blew the cap off the filler tube, and gas was ejected from the crushed tank.

b. It was the ejected gas that caught fire and caused the explosion

(Trans.: In addition to criticizing our report on the gas tank rupture, GM has made another claim against NBC.)

II. GM also claims that *Dateline NBC* purposely used incendiary devices to ignite the 1977 Chevy pickup used in the crash test; again, this claim is partly true

A. Although incendiary devices were wired to the truck, these would cause a fire only if fuel was spilled from the tank (Henry, 1993).

B. In addition, our investigations reveal that the cause of the fire in the test crash was a spark from a broken headlamp, not the incendiary devices (Henry, 1993).

1. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of reporters to explain all the relevant details behind video demonstrations like this.

2. We did not tell the public about the presence of the incendiary devices, as we should have.

(Trans.: Having explained the background of the events in regard to GM's claims, I would now like to make three additional points.)

Arguments

I. First, although we acknowledge serious errors in creating this story, we began the investigation with good intentions.

A. Our nation's founders intended the media to serve as a check on the actions of government, and in this century, this watchdog function has been extended to big business.

B. The safety of GM trucks is exactly the kind of issue that a popular news program such as *Dateline NBC* should address (Henry, 1993).

C. Any product whose design injures or kills a significant number of people is worthy of investigation.

1. Estimates suggest that 600 people have died in side-impact crashes in GM trucks, and many lawsuits have been filed against GM (Multinational Monitor, 1994).

2. As a result, these trucks deserve the scrutiny of news programs like ours, and such scrutiny is necessary to protect public safety.

3. I firmly believe that in this matter, our intentions were honorable and in keeping with journalistic traditions.

(Trans.: Our good intentions aside, we did commit significant errors that I have discussed above, and we would like to apologize for these.)

II. As I stated above, we made two major errors in judgment, and for these we wish to apologize.

A. First, we were in error reporting that the tank ruptured when it did not, and we were in error when we failed to report the presence of the after-market gas cap.

1. There is no excuse for these omissions in a network news organization.

2. We wish to offer our sincere apology to our viewers.

B. Second, we were also negligent in failing to report the full details of the crash test, including the presence of the incendiary devices on the gas tank.

1. NBC News presents 225,000 minutes of news each year.

a. We don't wish to be defined by the errors in this 57-second crash test (Henry, 1993).

b. We ask the public's forgiveness for these errors.

2. To prevent such errors in the future, we have created the following policy:

a. In the future, no unscientific demonstrations will be used in hard news stories.

(Continued)

BOX 13.3 Continued

- b. In the future, no simulations of real events will be produced (Byron, 1993).
- c. In the future, we will report all relevant details about how scientific demonstrations are produced and edited.
- d. We believe that strict adherence to these guidelines will prevent the errors we made for the GM segment and hope this will help restore the public's faith in NBC News.

(Trans.: Finally, although we apologize for our errors, we regret the use of these errors to divert attention from an important public safety issue.)

III. It is unfortunate that our errors have allowed GM to divert attention from the central issue, that there may be a fundamental flaw in the safety of C/K pickup trucks (Diamond, 1993).

A. Automotive research clearly demonstrates the safest location for fuel storage tanks.

1. According to Richard Alexander, of the San Jose-based Alexander Law Firm, auto industry researchers have known for years that placing the tank between the frame rails, rather than outside the rails, and forward of the rear axle is the safest location (Alexander, 1998).
2. That fuel tanks should never be put in the crush zone—for example, outside the frame rails—was well understood when the 1973 GM pickups were in their design stage (Alexander, 1998).
3. According to Department of Transportation Secretary Federico Peña, "The record clearly shows that there is an increased risk associated with GM C/K series pickups and leads me to conclude at this point that the risk is unreasonable. This case involves not only serious injuries, but a significant number of fatalities, in crashes that were otherwise survivable" (Multinational Monitor, 1994, p. 7).

B. Some people claim that the flaw in the C/K truck designs has led to unacceptable injuries and deaths.

1. Clarence Ditlow, director of the Center for Auto Safety, estimates that more than 600 persons have been burned to death in GM pickup fire crashes, and thousands more have been injured (Multinational Monitor, 1994).
2. This past week in Atlanta, a jury awarded a \$105.2 million judgment against GM for a Georgia teen who died when his truck was struck from the side, the fuel tanks ruptured, and the vehicle exploded in flames (Henry, 1993).
3. "Joe McCray, a San Francisco-based trial lawyer who has handled 19 GM pickup truck injury and death cases, estimates that about 300 such cases have been brought against GM" (Multinational Monitor, 1994, p. 8).

Finally, evidence exists that GM has known about the dangers of the C/K pickups since the late 1970s.

1. According to Secretary Peña, "Of critical importance in this matter is the evidence that GM was aware, possibly as early as the mid-1970s, but certainly by the 1980s, that this design made these trucks more vulnerable and that fatalities from side-impact fires were occurring. . . . However, GM chose not to alter the design for 15 years" (Multinational Monitor, 1994).
2. It is possible that GM has violated provisions of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act.
 - a. The act states that, if a company becomes aware that its vehicles are dangerous, it must notify the government and consumers, and repair the defect.
 - b. If GM was aware of the problems with its "sidesaddle" tanks since 1978, it has also been in violation of the law.
 - c. Did we make errors in our November 17 story? Without question.
 - d. But GM has arguably made errors with its C/K pickup trucks as well.

(Trans.: Having made my arguments and apologies, let me conclude this briefing.)

Conclusion

- I. Today I have explained the circumstances behind our errors and again wish to acknowledge these errors and apologize for them.
 - A. For a news organization, credibility is vital.
 - B. We hope that by admitting our errors and creating a policy to prevent future incidents, we can move toward restoring our credibility with viewers.
- II. However, we don't want our errors to obscure other issues.
 - A. You can't put a price on safety.
 - B. We at NBC News will continue to pursue product safety stories in the belief that this is one of the most important services a news organization can provide.

References

- Alexander, R., "Gas tank fires," *Consumer Law Page*, June 19, 1998, <http://consumerlawpage.com/article/gm-exploding-tank.shtml>.
- Byron, C., "Crash and burn," *New York* 26 (February 22, 1993): 19-20.
- Diamond, E., "Auto-destruct," *New York* 26 (March 15, 1993): 18-19.
- Henry, W. A., III, "Where NBC went wrong," *Time* 141 (February 22, 1993): 59.
- Multinational Monitor, "10 worst corporations of 1994," 1994, www.ratical.com/corporations/mm10worst94.html.