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Paper No. 9
As a Partner of the Media

Some Suggestions for the Public Relations Employees in Making Progress

And Maintaining Daily Mutual Understanding with Media

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am very honoured to have an opportunity to talk about my experience of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Taking precautions against a disaster for the future, I think is our goal here today.

Before beginning to talk, I want to express my deepest sympathy to victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the Turkish Earthquake, the Taiwan Earthquake and all other natural disasters.

In the Early Morning, a Tragedy was Happening

As you saw in the documentary videotape of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, a moment ago, on January 17, 1995, in the early morning, suddenly, I heard a loud rumbling coming close to my neighbourhood, and soon after, I was thrown out of my bed by a great tremor. At that moment, in the city of Kobe (I live in approximately 20 miles west of my home: the city of Mino-o) in the adjacent area of the Hanshin (Osaka-Kobe) region, a tragedy was happening; bringing down many houses, buildings and elevated highways and railways. Thousands of people were killed and injured under the rubble.

Sad to say, the final death count reached over six thousand, including my dear friend.

Eventually, the tragedy of the Great Hanshin Earthquake will pass into oblivion.

But we should not forget the many people in the disaster zone who had lost family, relatives or friends, and the thousands of children who had lost parents, who had been psychologically scarred, as well as physically. In the wake of the calamity, many people’s
lives have been changed forever. Every morning since the day of the earthquake, I awaken at 5:46 in the morning. I will never forget the earthquake, and I will do my best through my limited ability, to make an effort to help as long as I live.

**Analysing, Researching and Discussing for the Final Object**

The Great Hanshin Earthquake was the second severest earthquake disaster in the 20th century Japan — the biggest one was the Great Kanto earthquake on September 1, 1923, 72 years ago. The Great Hanshin earthquake was a typical city disaster, in effect it hit an advanced and densely—populated area, it not only affected Japan but also the world. Because it left behind various new issues which should be dealt with as soon as possible. After the earthquake, many scholars and critics concerned with social science, disaster measures and many other fields, have been eagerly analysing, researching and discussing for the final object “How and What we should do to reduce damage in a natural disaster”. When the earthquake happened, I was Hankyu Railways public relations manager. Today, based on my hands-on experience, I’d like to talk about relaying damage and repair schedule information to the media from public utilities.

The media can achieve more information wide and fresh reports in a live broadcast, which will be support for rescue operations, relief efforts and also psychological mitigation for victims.

**A Few Distinctive Differences in Japanese Public Utilities**

Before going on to my main theme, I have to explain a few distinctive differences in Japan. First of all, ‘Life-Line’ is a phrase that is used in Japan: it’s meaning includes all public utilities: transportation, telephone, electric power, gas, and water. So throughout the following talk, I’d like to use ‘Life-Line’ as reference to all public utilities.

Another noticeable difference between Japan and other countries is, most ‘Life-Line’ companies are privately owned. For instance, West Japan Railways Co., Hankyu Railways Co., Kansai Electric Co., and Osaka Gas Co. There are eight railway companies in the Hanshin region, and the most convenient means of transportation for getting to and from work for the citizens is by train. These railway companies are competing with each
other on passenger fare, speed and facilities. The paying passengers per day has reached about three million. Consequently most 'Life-Line' workers are not public employees. So in Japan they are not required to provide public relief. Therefore they are not trained intensely on emergency situations and will have to navigate through the hazards on their professional instinct.

Four Lessons, We Learned for the Public Relations in the Initial Stage

Getting back to my theme, I'd like to talk about four valuable points and some improvements, we learned from the Great Hanshin Earthquake, for the public relations staff in an initial stage of a natural disaster. Our staff at the time consisted of eight public relations officers. On the day of the quake, I arrived at the office first and I was alone for a few hours.

The first point is; 'Life-Line' public relations staff must get to their office as soon as possible after a disaster.

The staff must get to their office as soon as possible when a disaster happens, anytime and anywhere you are. On the day of the earthquake, I got to my head office 40 minutes after it happened; usually it takes me at least one hour. Then at 6:35 a.m., in other words, only 49 minutes after the quake happened; I informed all broadcasting stations in the Hanshin region, "Hankyu railways public relations office is open, and you can call and contact me now" by facsimile. That was the start of my long and hard fight against the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Incidentally, if your office was destroyed and couldn't be of any use, you must get to a substitute office. Fortunately my office hadn't suffered a great deal of damage, but the earthquake destroyed many offices. Therefore I suggest to you, both public utilities and the media, You should set aside a substitute office for the event your main office is destroyed.

The second point is; the public relations staff who arrives at their office must gather damage information without delay, abiding by emergency manual instructions.

Although I tried to gather information of Hankyu railways damage, it was impossible to
reach anyone at any of the stations on the Kobe Line (that connects Osaka and Kobe). At that point, I knew only that an unexpected powerful earthquake had happened, and Hankyu railways trains possibly weren’t running, because as I looked down on Osaka UMEDA terminal from my office, all trains were stopped on the track. I faced a serious problem. Then I made up my mind to call the centralised train control (CTC) room, which is strictly concealed from the public, and equipped with special lines besides public telephones, on-line seismometers and wireless telegraphy links to all trains. In that way, I was able to get the initial information of some unbelievable damage; the powerful earthquake had hit in the Hanshin region and the centre of the earthquake was in the city of Kobe, three trains on the Kobe Line had overturned, and many stations had suffered damage. At that time, by our emergency manual instructions, I was not allowed to call directly to the centralised train control room, but I broke that code and called.

A few days later, the president of Hankyu Corporation, to whom my actions were reported, praised me for my judgement and approved the action as completely suited to the occasion. And he rewrote the emergency manual, to give us approval to call the centralised train control room in a situation when there is no alternative measure.

I think, the emergency manual is, so to speak, the fundamentals, but we must approach the problem in our own way, and use suitable actions for the situation. Therefore, I advocate that you should add a phrase into your emergency manual as the last instruction; “At an unforeseen situation, determine priorities in the situation and act, having confidence in your ability”

The third point is; the public relations staff must relay damage information to the media promptly and correctly.

Not only the victims but also everyone who knows a violent disaster happened, is in habit of turning on the television or portable radio, and they do try to find out “How much damage is suffered? How many people are injured?” and “Are our relatives Okay?”... For a few hours after the earthquake, most broadcasting stations had no means to collect the news in the Hanshin region. One reason is it happened in the early morning before most reporters were at work. Some reporters living in Kobe tried to
report the horrible sight to their broadcasting station by telephone, and or tried to get to their office, but all efforts proved futile. Telephone lines were jammed, trains were not running, and roads were collapsed everywhere between Kobe and Osaka. Therefore consequently, any public relations staff who had arrived at their office, like me, was practically the only means of getting information to the media.

**Lastly, the public relations staff must relay the newest damage information and repairing plan one after another, every time it changes.**

I relayed the newest damage information to the media, over 20 times in the first day, and I had to keep on relaying the repair plan information about two hundred times over 146 days - to June 12, when the Kobe Line had completely resumed to normal service.

In particular, the first 3 days, -72hours after the earthquake happened, was the most vital time for life saving rescue operations for victims who were buried alive and seriously wounded. Any repair news of the ‘Life-Line’ was indispensable to rescue operations: for performing operations on wounded victims in hospitals, for living in places of refuge, for sending outside rescue parties and equipment supplies.

**An Intention of “KANSAI Life-Line and Mass-Communication Conference”**

Throughout my dealing with the reporters, I felt there was a lack of mutual understanding. If I explained a repair plan at a press conference, most reporters: reporters with unfamiliar faces and reporters I knew well - had trouble understanding.

They had practically no knowledge on ‘Life-Line’ subjects: station names, locations, and railway running system, regulations and laws. Nevertheless, they requested me to give the report “Easily, briefly, quickly and much more” Which is unreasonable and if not impossible. I was very often at a loss for an answer. After the social situation settled down at last, I reflected if I had worked on communications earlier, and had explained about different conditions and circumstances of ‘Life-Line’ business in a normal situation, I could have had much more successful communications at that time of crisis.

In 1997, two years after the earthquake, we organised “KANSAI Life-Line and Mass-Communication Conference” in Osaka sponsored by the Hosó-Bunka Foundation. It
consists of the 'Life-Line' public relations staff and some scholars, along with reporters in Kansai which consists of Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto. From the time the conference was established, I have served as Secretary-General. Once in every three or four months, we come together, and have a discussion on various subjects such as; "What is the best announcement at a disaster" or "What is the best way to relay information".

Sometimes, we have a lecture on a pre-disaster reduction, or take a field trip to a public utility company or a broadcasting station for mutual understanding and increasing our knowledge. We have reached a point where we feel mutual understanding is indispensable for broadcasting. Following our example, conferences of the same intention have been organised in the cities of Sendai, Shizuoka, Ehime and Kagoshima, which are also sponsored by the Hoso-Bunka Foundation.

Last month, on September 28, representatives of the conferences came together in Osaka, and had agreed to have more interactive relationship in the future.

We are hoping that similar conferences will be organised in the other chief cities of Japan.
Don’t Forget the Human Relations Aspect

I have a feeling; most of the participants in this Regional Conference are parties concerned with the media. So this Conference may proceed mainly by the media’s viewpoint, and on the theme; “How should, and what can, we report?”

For that purpose, improving of the manufacture of machinery for broadcasting coverage: equipment for a home generation of electricity, a helicopter, satellite telephones and internet service and maybe drafting announcements and commentaries for an emergency situation.

That’s great, and in addition to that I ask of you, please take into account the covering of information from the public relations staff during your discussions.

The cost is free, and it will have a great effect on your coverage of a disaster.

Many measures to protect people in the event of a disaster will be performed, and many emergency supplies will be stored in most countries and cities throughout the world. Also, the technology of measures for dealing with disasters is making rapid progress.

But only two months ago, the Turkish tragedy happened. You know and I know, regrettably, the force of nature is beyond human understanding and preparations.

When a violent disaster happens, the media is one of the vital support means for rescue operations and relief of disaster victims.

However, the media can’t carry out the supreme role and duty without doing it hand in hand with many devoted partners, and the public relations staff is one of the valuable partners. I hope that this Conference will achieve brilliant success. Thank you very much.

(October 13, 1999)