



## **Crisis Reaction:** *Techniques for Producing Effective Christian Programming During A National Crisis* By Phil Cooke

All day, September 11<sup>th</sup> as the terrorist attacks took place at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I had the opportunity to encourage Christian television and radio stations across the country to break into their regularly scheduled programming and go LIVE with programs related to the national crisis. It started with a single memo containing crisis programming suggestions to my media clients, but grew into something much larger, as numerous Christian stations and networks began circulating it and using it as a guideline for their producers.

Within an hour from the first airline crash, I sent the memo to about 30 of our Christian clients and associates nationwide. In the past, Christian TV and radio stations have been slow to deal with immediate crisis issues like this. I've often been frustrated that while a national tragedy unfolds on secular networks, Christian stations tend to do "business as usual" and ignore these issues. But one that day, it completely changed. We saw literally hundreds of Christian television and radio stations respond with answers, encouragement, and most of all, hope.

But can a local church program have an impact in these situations? Especially since most aren't live, and must wait a few days to a week to broadcast their next program?

*Absolutely.*

On the 11,<sup>th</sup> I heard from numerous clients and friends who were preparing a special Sunday program to specifically deal with the crisis. Some taped it during their

Wednesday night service, others taped it during a special service they conducted on Tuesday, and still others did a special studio taping.

The memo I sent to Christian stations, program producers, and churches was the following:

From a programming perspective, I would urge you to go on the air immediately if possible with content related to today's events in New York and Washington. Today and tonight, millions of people are at their television sets looking for answers. This is not the time to run "Christian TV as usual" - we need to provide answers to people filled with questions.

- 1) I would suggest you go on the air tonight at the latest with a special program of prayer, interviews, and discussions about what is happening.
- 2) If possible, try to connect with people well-versed in these types of events - prophecy experts, terrorism experts, college professors respected in current events and world affairs, pastors with a global perspective, or expertise on the Middle East. If you can't get them into the studio, connect with them via phone.
- 3) We are not necessarily news experts and cannot compete with CNN, ABC, Fox, and others in news. However, we can provide spiritual insight to millions who are searching. The major networks can only repeat the facts surrounding the incidents of today so many times. Sooner or later, people will be looking for something deeper - some type of explanation, understanding, and perspective. This is an opportunity for you as a Christian broadcaster to provide that insight.
- 4) Stay away from "pat" answers. Chances are, more non-Christians will be watching you over the next few days than ever before. So stay away from "Christian lingo" they won't understand, and try to provide real answers to the real questions they are facing.

5) Do not be afraid to break into your regularly scheduled programming. This is the time to act, and make a real difference for the gospel.

The next day, after nearly 100 e-mails, I followed up that memo with another note:

CRISIS PROGRAMMING MEMO #2:

I'm very impressed and encouraged by the numbers of stations and networks who broadcast live yesterday with up-to-the-minute reports, encouragement, spiritual help, and other information for your viewers. I think you'll find that more non-Christians are watching, so this is a great time to minister to them, as well as increase your exposure in your particular market.

As a follow up to yesterday's memo - here are some new suggestions, now that the immediate crisis is over:

1) Begin a plan for thoughtful long term programming. Yesterday had lots of questions - "Who did it?" "Why?" "How did it happen?" Now, the facts are beginning to emerge, so be careful and don't contribute to mis-information or inaccurate reporting. Start thinking about programs related to "What do we do next?" "How can we Pray for our Country now?" "How do Christians respond in times of Crisis?" "What does the Bible say about national issues?" etc...

2) What is your LOCAL area doing in the wake of the crisis? Rod Payne in Wichita Falls spent yesterday doing video reports at the local blood bank. He also did a phone interview with a local viewer's nephew who had been on the 17th floor of the World Trade Center. There are many local stories such as price gouging, airports closed, and other issues. Not to mention all the local church services, and spiritual events surrounding the crisis. Be a local Christian voice for your audience.

3) Television programs - use your "bug". The "bug" is your logo inserted in the corner of the screen. Since more people than ever are changing channels looking for coverage, a "bug" instantly reminds them of who you are, and helps them find you in the future. Always remind your viewers of your station and how to contact you for more information.

4) The LA Times reports today that the secular networks have made the unprecedented decision to share all video feeds. I don't know if this extends to local stations, but check with your legal representation to find out if you could have access to this footage as well. Remember - we don't have to look like CNN, but a few shots here and there help visualize the crisis and explain certain issues more effectively.

5) Check the NRB Website Press Release page for satellite coordinates and schedules from the major Christian networks like Lesea, TLN, CBN, and others. Local stations can use these resources when you can't afford to do your own coverage.

6) Karl Stoll from the NRB is also sending out resources from other media ministries, such as potential guest interviews, experts in certain areas, etc... Make use of these resources. If you can't fly someone in, perhaps you can do a phone interview. Offer to promote their latest book or their ministry, and they'll often do whatever you need. Make it a "win-win" situation for both of you.

7) Call or e-mail Christian stations or networks you admire for advice in situations like this. From programming suggestions to production advice, we're all in this together, so let's share information and ideas.

8) Finally - remember, this event will not be over in a day or so. The spiritual and psychological effects of a tragedy like this will linger for weeks and months

to come. As horrible as it was, Oklahoma City was small compared to this, so focus on providing information and answers for the long haul. This is a remarkable chance to present spiritual answers to your audience at a time when they welcome anything you have to offer.

You have their attention - now let's give them something to change their lives...

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What started as a simple idea, in a matter of hours blossomed into a remarkable event for millions of television viewers and radio listeners who had the opportunity to hear a Christian perspective on the horrible events. Within a week, church programs followed with their own original programs focused on the crisis.

If we're going to impact this culture for the gospel, we have to speak in a language and style they understand. That happened on hundreds of Christian radio and television stations across the country that week, and the results should be incredible.

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