

## THE ART OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN JAPAN

Communicating during a crisis is a challenge everywhere. But in Japan it is even tougher. Because the media simply works differently here compared to in the U.S. or Europe, foreign firms often struggle in the market. Companies from industries as diverse as finance, automobile, lifts, food, pharmaceuticals and consumer goods have learnt the hard way – with British stroller-maker Maclaren one of the latest to suffer back in November.

So what is different in Japan? It all starts with the unique press club system. There are about 800 press clubs nationwide attached to all ministries, national and local government departments, as well as to industries.

It is here where up to 90% of reported news emerges. Members of press clubs include the large newspapers, the two news wires, NHK and the major TV stations. All other media – including magazines, internet and free press, freelancers and most international media – are usually barred access to the press club's press conferences. Even under the new DPJ government, changes have yet to be made.

A crisis can be triggered by a variety of scenarios: an accident, a product malfunction, whistle-blowing, a misleading news report or even rumours. Whether any of these events will lead to a media crisis – i.e., long-term negative media coverage damaging to corporate reputation – all depends on the company's behaviour during the first hours and days.

This is no different in Japan than anywhere else. What distinguishes Japan is the press club's close ties to the ministries and agencies that oversee industries – e.g., Transport Ministry for automobile, airline, lifts industries; Financial Services Agency and Tokyo Stock Exchange for finance industry; Health Ministry for pharmaceuticals industry. Since all briefings to the media are given at press clubs, by the companies and also by the ministry and public agency officials, the press clubs essentially monopolize reporting and greatly influence public perception.

Reporters at press clubs typically stem from the social departments within their media and lack industry-specific know-how. They are neither interested in, nor able to thoroughly analyse underlying industrial problems and offer suggestions for a solution. They monitor accidents and scandals with painstaking attention to detail and often focus on punishing the wrongdoers.

When a crisis arises, a company first should express remorse about the situation regardless of whether it must bear responsibility. This form of an apology is essential in Japan. Any firm involved in a scandal has to convince the relevant press club reporters that it is taking the case seriously and taking all necessary measures to prevent reoccurrence.

During this process, the firm deals exclusively with social press club reporters. Even colleagues from the business section of the same newspaper, say *Asahi* or *Yomiuri*, will not touch this topic until the company has been "cleared" by the social reporters. This



**Dr. Jochen Legewie**  
President of CNC Japan,  
the only European communications  
consultancy in Japan.

---

A crisis can be triggered by a variety of scenarios: an accident, a product malfunction, whistle-blowing, a misleading news report or even rumours.

---

explains why technical explanations – often given by Western firms in such situations – fail to impress journalists and get reported.

Act fast, show honesty, be transparent, provide info – all of this is true around the world. The difference in Japan is that you have to do it with a very distinct part of the media, i.e., the press club, and cannot count on help from your usual media contacts in the business and trade press. Headquarters back in Europe tend to demand "to get our message out with the right media", but this does not work here easily.

Until the recent establishment of the Consumer Agency, makers of consumer products did not have a single overarching ministry. But with this development, companies must take heed and prepare to deal with the press club of the Consumer Agency in all complaint cases or problems with their products.

The lesson is clear: no company will overcome critical media reporting in Japan without clearing the biggest hurdle, the media in charge at the relevant press club, be it at the Consumer Agency, the Transport Ministry or any other public institution.