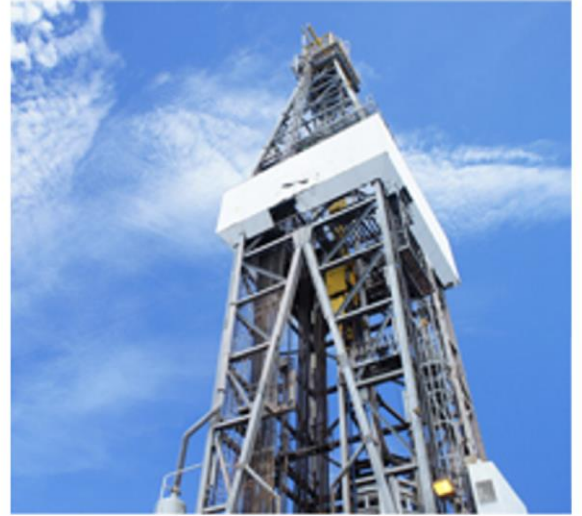




How Effective Media Relations Can Shift Negative Public Perception – A Conversation

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Railroad Commission of Texas
May 2025



About Me

- Close to 3 decades of public relations/media relations experience
- Corporate and agency background representing upstream, midstream, mining (lignite, uranium and aggregates) and infrastructure (concrete) industries
- Specialty in reputation management



About the Railroad Commission

- Established in 1891
- Led by 3 statewide elected commissioners



Mission

Our mission is to serve Texas by our stewardship of natural resources and the environment, our concern for personal and community safety, and our support of enhanced development and economic vitality for the benefit of Texans.



RRC Jurisdiction

- Oil and natural gas exploration and production
- Intrastate pipeline safety
 - Natural gas and hazardous liquid pipelines
 - Pipeline damage prevention
 - Critical infrastructure
 - Weatherization and designation
- Natural gas utilities
- Alternative fuels
- Coal and uranium surface surface mining operations





OBJECTIVES

- What is Media Relations?
- The Media Environment and the Journalist
- Best Practices
- Practice Your Knowledge

What is Media Relations?

Raise your hand if you . . .

- have experience with the media?
- enjoy interacting with the media?
- feel comfortable dealing with the media?



What is Media Relations?

- **Media relations, a component of public relations**, involves the strategic management of communication between an organization and the media, focusing on building mutually beneficial relationships with journalists and media outlets to achieve publicity and respond to queries
- **Public relations is a strategic communication process** that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics
 - *Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)*





What is Media Relations?

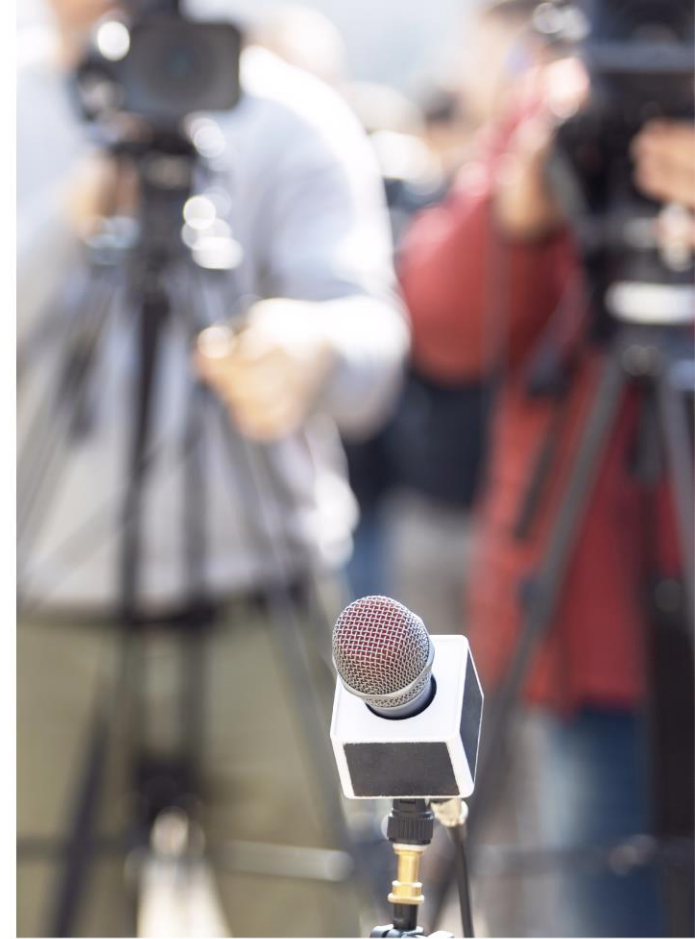
The Home Truths

- The media can't survive without PR/media relations
- PR/media relations can't survive without the media
- Honest and professional PR/media relations is about striking the correct balance





The Media Environment & the Journalist



Media Environment

- **The Media can:**
 - Spread truths/facts
 - Be an ally
 - Help shape public opinion
- **The Bad:**
 - Perpetuate inaccurate information that goes uncorrected
 - Destroy reputations and brands



Media Environment

Competitive

Reporters compete for breaking stories, exposure and recognition

Deadline pressures

Media outlets must make money, attract viewers/readers

Consolidation

There are fewer outlets, sometimes with more space to fill

Reporters cover more beats, or single beats for shorter periods

Reporters tend to be younger and less experienced



Media Environment

Digital Dominance



- Outlets are facing challenges maintaining audiences and adapting to the changing digital landscape
- Significant shift towards online platforms and social media - blogs, podcasts, streaming services - contributing to a complex landscape of information
- Rise of non-journalistic content
- Competing with social media “experts”

The Journalist



Reporters are neither our
friends nor our enemies.
They are not our audience.



They are conduits between
what we have to say and
what readers, viewers and
listeners want to know.



Let's get to know them!

The Journalist

- Always working against a deadline
- Aims to be objective on all stories
- Must answer to their boss – the editor
- Does not get to write or approve headlines
- Generally fair and human with a soft spot for underdogs
- They are not obligated to provide “equal time” or “equal space” to both sides of an issue when covering a story



Skeptical Tests Avoids acronyms
Motivations are breaking a unique story
Prefers simple language
The Journalist
Wants a story on cover, above the fold
Reports Questions Observes
Writes for and speaks to ninth graders (newspaper)





Best Practices



Know the Ground Rules



- ☒ Be responsive
- ☒ Be kind
- ☒ Be transparent and honest
- ☒ Know deadlines and try to respect them

- ☒ Provide status updates if you are unable to meet a deadline
- ☒ Never mislead or lie
- ☒ Present as much of the overall picture as you can
- ☒ There is no off-the-record

Know the Ground Rules



- If you don't know the answer, say so - and then find the answer quickly
- Know a good story
 - is it current, locally relevant, interesting, impactful?
- Provide compelling and newsworthy material
 - Don't forget to share background information and visuals (e.g.) photos
 - Have facts & research to back up your point

Be Proactive



- Cultivate long-term relationships with journalists
- Monitor
- Invest in media training
- Determine internal media protocols
- Develop consistent messaging, talking points and Q&A materials in advance
- Draft a media holding statement (Avoid "No Comment")
- Develop media kit/materials (press releases and fact sheets)

Be Proactive

- Informational/educational one-pagers written in layman's terms that can help educate stakeholders and audiences
- The desk-side briefing
- The interview and a well-trained spokesperson/subject matter expert
- Site tour



The Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC) has garnered international recognition for its extensive work and expertise in well plugging, including its contribution to technological advancements in techniques that ensure proper orphaned well closures. The RRC has plugged more than 46,000 wells through its State Managed Plugging Program (SMP). The RRC employs a staff of highly trained personnel, including engineers and geoscientists, that bring decades of combined experience regulating oil and gas industry operations. Every employee is committed to the agency's mission of protecting the environment and public safety in the state of Texas.

A Leader in Well Plugging

What is an Orphaned Well?

When a well ceases production, and no longer produces oil or gas, most operators fulfill their obligations and responsibly follow the required regulatory procedures to plug their wells with cement to prevent the well from leaking and polluting land or groundwater. However, if the operator is noncompliant or goes out of business, the well becomes orphaned.

An orphaned well is any oil or gas well that has been inactive for a minimum of 12 months and the operator's Organizational Report (P-5) has been delinquent for greater than 12 months. Once a well is deemed to have been orphaned, it falls under the monitoring jurisdiction of the RRC, evaluated for potential hazards to the environment and public safety and placed on a list to be plugged by Railroad Commission contractors. The orphaned wells that pose the greatest risk are prioritized to be plugged first.

When contractors plug orphaned wells, an RRC inspector is on location throughout the entire operation to ensure the well is plugged to its proper depth to protect water quality. Our inspectors are highly qualified professionals whose chief objective is to protect the environment and fresh water in the very communities in which they live. Depending on the condition of the well prior to plugging, the RRC may also conduct ongoing monitoring after the well has been plugged to ensure the well remains secure.

"We continue to be a national leader in addressing orphaned wells. Our extensive well plugging experience dates to 1984, and elements of our program, such as a prioritization system that ensures high-risk, high-priority wells are plugged, have been copied by other states. The design of RRC's plugging program and our dedicated staff help us quickly work to protect groundwater around the state." - Danny Sorrells, Deputy Executive Director, Railroad Commission of Texas

The diagram illustrates the layers of a well structure. From top to bottom, the layers are: CHRISTMAS TREE (the surface equipment), WELL CASING (the outer pipe), FRESH WATER AQUIFER (the water-bearing layer), CEMENT FILL (the material used to seal the well), CEMENT PLUG (the material used to seal the well), DRILLING MUD (the fluid used to lubricate the drill bit), and ROCK LAYERS (the natural geological formations).

Oil Production Tax was created in 1931.

Oil Production Tax

\$19.7 billion

04/25/2025

Before Tour

TOYAH - After a restless night of sleep, Elida Machuca texted her neighbor, searching for answers. **The air around her house in this West Texas town stunk of rotten eggs.** “Last night, about 1 a.m., it was so bad we couldn’t sleep,” She said. “We were feeling nauseous.”

Residents are dealing with the consequences of decades of lax regulation and enforcement of cleaning up wells after they no longer produce oil or water.



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

“Should we be worried?”: Another well blowout in West Texas has a town smelling of rotten eggs



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The air around her house in this West Texas town stunk of rotten eggs.

“Last night, about 1 a.m., it was so bad we couldn’t sleep,” she said. “We were feeling nauseous.”

“Should we be worried?”

Her neighbor, Brandie Baker, is Toyah's water and wastewater administrator. She told Machuca she believed — thought could not be certain — the smell that has overwhelmed this town of 61 was coming from an abandoned well that exploded.

Before Tour

“It's easy to lose faith in state agencies when they're just reactive and are not taking any proactive measures to prevent these [blowouts],” DiGiulio said. “And that's not happening in Texas, it's not happening elsewhere either.”



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

“Should we be worried?”: Another well blowout in West Texas has a town smelling of rotten eggs



Smye said the future challenge will be dealing with subsurface conditions and identifying areas under significant stress and pressure.

Dominic DiGiulio, a geoscientist who worked for 31 years at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said it's important to identify potential places where the pressure is highest. Finding the pressure points before they burst could prevent the next blowout, which is a proactive measure that DiGiulio said the commission could take now.

“It's easy to lose faith in state agencies when they're just reactive and are not taking any proactive measures to prevent these [blowouts],” DiGiulio said. “And that's not happening in Texas, it's not happening elsewhere either.”

After Tour

Just six minutes from 5,700 - person town's historic city center, where an old oil museum still nods to the boom days, the ground groans as oil workers pull steel tubing - each piece is longer than a bus - out of a well drilled in 1983 that stopped pumping profits last year. **Rain pours on this quiet Texas field, but the crew doesn't stop their steady pace.**

"The agency then evaluates how dangerous the orphan well is - to the environment and public safety - and places the well on a list to be plugged by contractors the agency hires."



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Texas has thousands of abandoned oil and gas wells. Who is responsible for cleaning them up?

Across Texas, abandoned wells are erupting with chemical-infused liquid and some have created massive lakes of contaminated water. Regulators say they need more money to address the problem.

BY ALEJANDRA MARTINEZ MAY 8, 2025 11 AM CENTRAL

SHARE REPUBLISH ↗



Oil workers pull tubing from an orphan well in a field in Luling on March 27, 2025. © Lorianne Willett/The Texas Tribune

LULING — Just six minutes from 5,700-person town's historic city center, where an old oil museum still nods to the boom days, the ground groans as oil workers pull steel tubing — each piece is longer than a bus — out of a well drilled in 1983 that stopped pumping profits last year. Rain pours on this quiet Texas field, but the crew doesn't stop their steady pace.

The job has become all too familiar. They're sealing one of thousands of unplugged orphaned oil and gas wells scattered across the state — abandoned holes left behind by companies that went bankrupt or just walked away. The last company to own this particular well was Geomeg Energy Operating Co., an Aransas Pass-based oil and gas company.

After Tour

How is a well plugged?

At the Luling field, red trucks and equipment surround a rusted pump jack, a mechanical device used to extract oil from an underground well to the surface. One of the trucks has two tanks that hold cement, another carries a cement mixer and a pressure pump.

The process starts with a site assessment: Crews glance at hand-held devices hanging from their neck to test for dangerous gases like hydrogen sulfide and determine the wind direction so they can position themselves upwind.....

The final step is land restoration. Once the well is sealed, crews clean up the site. The Luling well was plugged in two days and all five wells in the area were plugged in about a week.



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

This March project was a snapshot of what plugging a well looks like: part routine, part roulette. Sometimes workers find corroded cement casings, pressurized gas, or unexpected debris that can turn a cleanup into a days- or weeks-long job.

“Even the simplest well can take time,” said Nicholas Harrel, a state managed plugger with the Texas Railroad Commission.

From the air, the wells look like pinpricks across the Texas landscape. But on the ground, they can erupt like geysers, leak methane, and threaten water supplies with toxic chemicals like hydrogen sulfide, benzene and arsenic.

Abandoned oil wells are piling up across Texas, posing a growing environmental threat and saddling taxpayers with cleanup costs that have already reached tens of millions of dollars. In West Texas, at least eight orphaned wells have blown out since late 2024, spewing brine, a salty liquid laden with chemicals from drilling, and toxic gas. One leaked for more than two months before it could be capped. Another has created a 200-foot-wide sinkhole.



How is a well plugged?

At the Luling field, red trucks and equipment surround a rusted pump jack, a mechanical device used to extract oil from an underground well to the surface. One of the trucks has two tanks that hold cement, another carries a cement mixer and a pressure pump.

The process starts with a site assessment: Crews glance at hand-held devices hanging from their neck to test for dangerous gases like hydrogen sulfide and determine the wind direction so they can position themselves upwind. Once the site is secure, three workers wearing hard hats remove equipment inside the 2,000-foot-deep well - steel rods and tubing used to carry oil or gas to the surface.

Be Prepared to Be Reactive



- Be prepared to respond to negative coverage
- Consider a correction request objecting certain points
- Op-eds
- Request an editorial board meeting
- If continued coverage is untrue and/or blatantly unfair, consider writing a letter to the editor objecting certain points
- If the line continues to be crossed, evaluate the relationship and consider ending it



Practice Your Knowledge





OBJECTIVES

- Explore the integration of media relations strategies and tactics within a potential scenario impacting the reputation of an organization
- Analyze how effective media relations can positively influence or neutralize negative press
- Determine effective tactics for engagement and communication with the media



Fictional Background

- You work in the communications department of a regulatory agency
- The agency is about to make modifications to its state well plugging program, which will likely attract attention from stakeholders, including the media
- A common theme in coverage has been that the agency isn't doing a good job of protecting public health and the environment



Scenario #1

- You are several months out before the agency is about to make the announcement public.
- Leadership would like to become more proactive and trusts you, the media relations pro, to handle the situation as you see fit.



What to do?

- What steps should the agency's communication department take to encourage the best possible outcome?



Scenario #2

- Previous agency leadership was not a fan of transparency, nor did they encourage healthy media relations. A two-sentence announcement about the modifications to the well plugging program was made on the website.
- As a result, the media coverage was inaccurate and biased.



What to do?

- Discuss the pros and cons of doing nothing versus interacting directly with the media
- What should you look for in the coverage?
- Given the inaccurate coverage, how can you then “stop the bleed”?
- What should the spokesperson’s attitude be toward the media?



Conclusion

- **Be Strategic**
- Effective media relations involves much more than providing a comment/response to a media inquiry
- It is also an **opportunity** to promote your brand, educate the audience, share messages and tell your side of the story



Questions?



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