

## View From the Back of the Room

Press Conference Audio No. 1

by Gary Palamara

### **Breaking Events Turned a Staid Tech Gig Into a Hurried, Nationally Covered Event.**

It was a cold February morning in 1986. I arrived at the small corporate TV studio in New Brunswick, New Jersey for what was to be an easy day of work. The weather and the latest happenings constituted most of the early morning chatter as the crew unpacked our equipment and began to set up for a small videotaping later that morning.

Although everything at this point was relaxed and calm, we all felt there was something strange going on. You couldn't quite put a finger on it. Then somebody noticed that it was a little quieter than normal around the building. Just before 10 a.m., things began to change.

At first, word filtered down that our videotaping might be a delayed. Several minutes later, the company told us that the job was cancelled; but for some reason they didn't want us to leave. Something was definitely going on, but we had no way of knowing what it might be.

Around 11 a.m. the guy who ran the studio came in. As he came over to me, I could tell by his face that something was wrong.

"How soon can you set up a press conference in the auditorium?" he asked.

"Well, when do you need it?"

"They wanted to do it at noon, but I got them to push it back to 2 p.m."

"It'll be close, but I can do that ... how big a conference is this going to be?"

"Big."

### **Here comes the Zoo**

There was no point in asking the topic, because it didn't matter anyway.

The actual structure of a press conference is about the same whether it's for the president of the United States or your average rap artist. Besides, I didn't have time to think about that. What I needed was more audio gear, and I needed it right away.

I called the shop and dictated a complete list of equipment that I needed and asked them to bring it to my location, ASAP. I stayed on site and helped prepare the auditorium as best as I could.

### **Johnson & Johnson Calls Tylenol Case Isolated Incident**

By MICHAEL WALDHOLZ  
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.—Johnson & Johnson, moving quickly to protect its prized product, Tylenol, said that it was convinced the recent poisoning death involving the painkiller was an isolated incident and that it will keep the product on the market.

makes that assumption a strong likelihood.

The bottle, he said, was part of a batch of 200,000 packages shipped to retailers last August, 95% of which have been already sold to consumers. Johnson & Johnson believes other people would have reported problems months ago if the batch had been tainted either at the manufacturing plant or at distribution sites. Moreover, cyanide would have destroyed the gelatin capsules within 10 days of being placed inside of them.

Mr. Burke said that while he was concerned about loss of Tylenol business, he said, "Our primary concern is for the public," which relies on the product for health reasons.

Chicago Deaths 3 Years Ago

An hour or so later, when my equipment arrived, several news trucks were already set up on the front lawn of the building; more were arriving by the minute. Back in the auditorium, a couple of technicians had already staked out their camera positions near the back of the room. One guy asked me, "Where can we plug in the audio?" It was still about an hour and a half before the conference was to start, but he seemed annoyed when I told him I hadn't yet set up my gear.

Right from the start, this event seemed to have all the ear markings of becoming a media zoo. By the time I began to lay out the equipment, it was almost 12:45. I still didn't know or care about the purpose of the press conference. All I knew was that I had a pile of cases sitting on the floor, everything had yet to be connected and checked out and minutes were passing by too quickly.

Soon the room was full of people. Besides the electronic press, photographers and print reporters took almost every available seat. Everyone was jockeying for positions and staking out their turf around the room.

Once the equipment was up and running, I told everyone who had already plugged into the press muls to test and then re-test the audio feeds. All was ready to go, with about 20 minutes to spare.

But as I viewed the room from behind my audio board, reporters and news crews were still coming in the door. One by one, they'd plug into my equipment and I would test their feed to make sure everything was clean. I left the podium mics open so the crews would always have a live signal coming from the hall.

At first, I thought that I would probably have to give out about 25 audio feeds to the press. By the time the conference actually started, closer to 50 electronic media had plugged into my equipment. In truth, some of those last connections had to be improvised, once the press mult box was completely full.

### **At the Mic**

The press conference finally began, about 45 minutes late. Right before it started, you could feel the tension rising in the room. The reporters were tired of waiting around, they all had questions, they wanted answers and they had deadlines to meet. Antsy reporters with time on their hands make for a volatile situation. You could tell there was blood in the water and the sharks were beginning to circle.

Jim Burke entered the room unannounced, and for the first time the reporters quieted down. Burke was corporate head of the Johnson & Johnson Company, parent company of McNeil Pharmaceuticals. He walked down the side aisle, opposite from where I had my audio setup, then on to the stage and approached the microphone. My microphone.

This is the moment when the audio engineer in charge wonders. "Did I set up everything correctly? Are all the levels right ... is it all going to work?" The last thing you want to have

happen is for the press conference to start and have someone say, "My audio is distorted, "I'm not getting a feed" or "We're not hearing you in the back of the room!"

As Burke neared the stage, I remember thinking that I still didn't know what he was going to say. All morning things were happening too quickly and I didn't have time to ask. When he reached the podium, Mr. Burke took a moment to collect his thoughts, looked up and began to speak.

There had been another Tylenol poisoning, another death. It recalled the events of four years earlier when six people in the Chicago area had died. Back then, cyanide-filled capsules of Tylenol had been found on grocery store shelves. That appeared to be the case again.

Burke went on to say that McNeil was suspending all sales of the over-the-counter medication and the FBI and police officials in New York State were looking into the crime. He ended his prepared remarks and opened the floor for questions.

### **Snap**

Suddenly there was a loud roar from every corner of the room. Like a coiled spring that had snapped, the reporters shouted their questions, with the loudest, most persistent ones getting to go first. The microphones that I had set up around the room so that reporters could "politely" ask their questions were ignored. It was a media free-for-all, and the loudest won.

After about 45 minutes, the formal press conference ended and the reporters descended on Burke as he tried to make his way out of the room by the same side aisle from which he had entered. From what I could hear, most of the in-person questioning was similar to the questions asked during the conference.

Even before the event ended, some reporters began doing stand-ups again from the back of the room. Those stand-up reports and other live feeds continued through the afternoon and long into the evening. J&J left the facility open and invited the press to stay as long as they needed.

The Tylenol crisis was the lead story for news broadcasts across the country and perhaps around the world. I could hear my audio echoing from the news crew monitor feeds around the room.

With everything that was going on, rather than tear down the audio setup, J&J asked me to leave the gear in place and ready to go at a moment's notice. Long into the night, Johnson & Johnson turned its small corporate TV studio into a damage control center. The company bought satellite time and fed edited clips of the press conference over and over again to the nation, and the world.

Less than a week after the initial event, a second press conference announced the total recall of all Tylenol products nationwide. Then, several weeks later, the company re-introduced the Tylenol brand with new tamper-resistant packaging. Naturally it called a third press conference to get the word out.

Although several people were arrested and later convicted of trying to cash in on the mass hysteria that surrounded the Tylenol crisis, 20 years after the event, no one had been charged with the any of the murders. To this day, speculation abounds as to the actual motive for the crime.

Now few people pause to think about tamper-proof packaging, but it was the Tylenol murders and several copycat crimes in the early 1980s that forced manufacturers to adopt these measures.

In the years that followed the '86 case, the managing of information by Johnson & Johnson during the Tylenol murders would be touted as a nearly perfect example of how to handle a crisis situation with integrity and corporate responsibility. Even now, the Tylenol case is used as the gold standard by which other corporations are measured.

So, what had first started out as an easy morning of routine corporate work, actually ended up as one of the biggest stories of the Decade? But as with most major news stories, few people give a thought to the many technicians who work behind the scenes and who make media events like that happen.

In the 20 years and several thousand press conferences that have followed the Tylenol crisis, I've come to learn a few things about engineering a successful media even. Be prepared for the unexpected and have backups for all system critical components. In the end, no matter what happens, everything has to work. When it does, everyone wins.

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