

Bed Bugs and Other Bad News: An Opportunity for Media and Public Relations

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Introduction

Problems in libraries, such as inappropriate behavior, leaks, and pests occur from time to time. Deciding when, what, and to whom to communicate this information is an essential part of the recovery process and can make the difference between acceptance and fear. Making a decision to communicate about any situation in an academic library can be based on similar principles for managing bad news in a corporate environment.¹ For example, one common principle of media relations is to bring the story to the media rather than having the media come to you. Transparency and honesty are also cornerstones to turning a bad situation into one where the public is able to have compassion and begin to trust the organization.² The J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah (UofU), in consultation with its University Marketing and Communications team (UMC), made the decision to communicate to library staff, patrons, and the media about our experience with a bed bug infestation.

Bed Bugs, What You Never Thought You Wanted to Know

Bed bugs (*cimex lectularius*) are small oval insects that feed on human or animal blood. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Cen-

ter for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provide excellent descriptions of the appearance and life stages of bed bugs, along with descriptions of effective treatment methods. According to the EPA, bed bugs begin their life in egg form, which is about the size of a pinhead and is white in color, while adult bed bugs are about one fourth of an inch long with a rusty red colored body.³ Female bed bugs lay between “one to twelve eggs daily” and may “produce up to 500 eggs”⁴ within a lifetime which means one bed bug on a backpack can turn into many bed bugs within your library. Eggs are typically laid within tight corners and crevices making library furniture and high traffic seating ideal locations to breed. Within two weeks eggs hatch and hungry nymphs begin looking for their first taste of nourishing blood.⁵ Because the path to maturity involves “five nymph stages,” each made possible by a blood meal,⁶ library patrons spending hours studying, napping or conversing with colleagues provide ample opportunity for food. According to Ryan Davis, a researcher at Utah State University, mature bed bugs often make regular weekly feedings, but they can go weeks to months without feeding on a host.⁷ In a research library with gate counts of 1.8 million visitors a year there are more than enough opportunities for weekly feedings and more troubling there are 1.8

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million opportunities for a bed bug to be brought into the library.

Bed bugs are found all over the world. “By the late 1800s into the early 1900s, Americans were plagued by bed bugs.”⁸ In the mid-20th century with “the invention of new insecticides like DDT and chlordane, and improved living standards and cleanliness,”⁹ bed bugs were essentially eradicated. “Beginning in the 1990s, the frequency of bed reports and calls for treatment began to increase.”¹⁰ Today, there is an even more alarming resurgence in bed bug infestations in the United States.¹¹ In a joint statement from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency, the cause of this resurgence can be attributed to “an increased resistance of bed bugs to available pesticides, greater international and domestic travel, lack of knowledge regarding control of bed bugs due to their prolonged absence, and the continuing decline or elimination of effective vector/pest control programs at state and local public health agencies.”¹²

The small size and flat body of a bed bug makes it easy for them to hide in small spaces and easily travel on clothing and backpacks.¹³ As a result, public buildings have become an easy breeding ground for infestations. Infestations usually occur around or near the areas where people sleep or spend significant periods of time.¹⁴ The CDC advises looking for molted “exoskeletons, bloodstains, and fecal matter” on furniture or floors as an initial visual indication to bed bug presence.¹⁵ In addition, spaces with an infestation of bed bugs will have a sweet musty odor.¹⁶ Bed bugs’ ideal “feeding temperature is 80 degrees” but they will feed in “temperatures below 50 degrees.”¹⁷

According to the CDC, “Bed bugs should not be considered as a medical or public health hazard” and “are not known to spread disease.”¹⁸ However, as the saying goes, bed bugs do bite and they may bite any area of exposed skin given an opportunity. Bed bugs are very polite when biting their hosts in that they inject a small amount of anesthetic and an anticoagulant so that the bite is painless for most people.¹⁹ These bites typically result in small, flat, or raised bumps

on the skin and may itch like a mosquito bite. Most people do not have reactions beyond the itching, but the CDC reminds the public that scratched bites can become infected wounds.²⁰ Since most people do not like the idea of bugs in bed with them at night, there is frequently a good deal of insomnia and anxiety²¹ associated with a bed bug infestation, particularly when bed bugs are found in the home. While typically no treatment is required for bed bug bites, itching may be severe or an allergic reaction may occur, which “may require an antibiotic” or an over-the-counter “antiseptic medication.”²² While bite marks should clear up within a week, the “creep factor” in a public building can easily be sensationalized and cause damage to reputation, patron access, gate counts, and the budget.

Don’t Let Your Crisis “Bug” You

When comparing bed bugs to other crises that might occur on a college campus, a bed bug infestation seems minimal. In their article, “Crisis Communication by the Book,”²³ Duke and Masland, provide a variety of meanings for the term “crisis.” The one definition that applies most directly to this situation is offered by E.W. Brody, who defines a crisis as “a decisive turning point in a condition or state of affairs.”²⁴ The identification of bed bugs in the Marriott Library met the criteria of this definition of “crisis,” therefore communicating the facts of the situation became a primary concern. Duke and Masland suggest a “failure to communicate” is the most significant mistake to make during a crisis since “speculation and rumor” are sure to surface and the “media will be forced to fill the void with speculation.”²⁵

In his article, “Facing the Danger Zone in Crisis Communications,” Cos Mallozzi describes four phases to crisis communication, “1) crisis preparedness, 2) initial response, 3) maintain ongoing corrective actions and reactions during the course of the crisis, and 4) evaluation and follow-up.”²⁶ Our experience of addressing this bed bug infestation through working with the UofU Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) and the UMC followed these phases almost exactly with a successful outcome. While the detection

of bed bugs in libraries can be alarming, quick action to the proper campus authorities, treatment specialists, and a trained crisis/communications team can allow for faster mitigation of the problem with transparency and communication that leads to community support.

Prepared for a Crisis

A female student studying at the Library in a lounge chair found a bug crawling on her and left without reporting it. The following day she returned and explained her finding to Library Security and indicated that she believed it to be a bed bug. Security immediately cleared patrons of the area where she had been sitting and roped the set of chairs off. Our first reaction was based on the library's Emergency Response Manual that directs first responders to investigate, assess personal safety and the safety of those in the immediate area, while trying to limit disruption, and determine the next course of action. Drawing from our emergency drills, our internal communication plan brought together the Library Emergency Management Team.

Initial Response

After initial investigation, we consulted with the UofU Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) for additional perspective on our findings. EHS cautioned against labeling the insects as "bed bugs" until a professional pest control company could provide positive identification. Many insects resemble bed bugs however most are harmless and pose no threat to patrons or collections aside from general nuisance. Based on initial discovery Library Security, Library Facilities, Library Administration and UofU EHS hired a pest management company.

Pest management professionals confirmed that the library had an introduction of bed bugs. Based on this information the library expanded the closure area and began treating the area with pesticide. Still in the mode of discovery and initial response, the Library Emergency Team regrouped with the vendor to determine the scope of the introduction and a com-

prehensive treatment plan for the group of chairs that included heating them to kill any live bugs as well as eggs. With the issue confirmed the Library Emergency Team began to work with Library Administration to communicate to library staff.

A special staff meeting was called the following day to announce the discovery, confirmation and initial treatment of the bed bug introduction. The goals of the meeting were to present comprehensive information to the employees and provide a channel for questions and concerns. Armed with all we had learned during the initial phase, our Library Emergency Team began visual inspections of other groups of soft seating in the building. Another set of chairs was discovered to have bugs in an adjacent area. Fearing the problem was beyond an introduction, the Dean of the Marriott Library contacted the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and UMC. Together, and in an abundance of caution, we decided to close one of five levels so comprehensive searches and potential treatments could be conducted. At this time, we knew we had a problem that would quickly become a conversation topic across the campus and community. We determined together that UMC would provide consistent responses to all media inquiries. This would allow library staff to focus on patrons in the building and navigate around the partial closure that limited access to seating and collections. A second all staff meeting was called to discuss the plan, how it would be implemented and the factors involved in the decision making.

Maintaining and Expanding the Response

The plan for treating all soft seating on the closed floor of the library included broad application of pesticide as well as heating all chairs. During treatment on Level 3 bed bugs were discovered on another floor. Following decisions made by the University partners, all soft seating in public spaces was cleared and roped off. It was now evident the problem was an infestation and broader communication, along with expanded treatment was required in the face of what had become a crisis. A bed bug sniffing dog was brought in

to sweep the 514,000 square foot building. This process revealed that no bugs had spread to staff or collection areas. Based on the understanding that the problem was an infestation, Library Administration adjusted and enhanced the plan to close the library entirely over the weekend. On the Monday following the weekend, Library Administration opened Level 1 only, which holds the majority of classrooms in the building so that classes could be conducted. This allowed three days to properly react and mitigate the problem.

The expanded emergency response included activation of the phone tree. Within an hour more than 350 employees had been contacted and informed not to arrive at work until Tuesday. An author lecture and book signing scheduled for Sunday was relocated elsewhere on campus and signage and way finding assistance were put into place. A press release was issued to the media and posted on all doors of the library, explaining the discovery of additional bugs on all public floors and the treatment plan being used to eliminate the infestation. Over the course of three days 170 lounge chairs were heated to 140 degrees and diatomaceous earth was applied to baseboards and all furniture. Pesticides were not used in collection areas.

By Monday the press had picked up the release from UMC and the University spokesperson was prepared to deliver regular updates and answer questions. Having a singular voice from the University allowed updates and new information to be communicated clearly and regularly. Closing over the weekend allowed us to report the progress made and allowed the Library Emergency Team the opportunity to discuss all of the treatment work that was being completed so business could return to normal on Tuesday. The goal was to instill confidence in our patrons and demonstrate that we had appropriately identified and responded to this crisis.

Moving Forward with a Bug Free Library

As the library prepared for reopening the question was whether or not students would return and if they did come back to the library would they be afraid to sit in

the lounge chairs. When the building opened crowds of students filled the preferred study areas and all of the chairs quickly filled up. The next phase included taking steps to prevent this kind of problem from happening again. Bed bugs are pesky hitchhikers that are present in even the most upscale settings and can easily find their way to any public space. An important final step was crafting a proactive treatment plan with our vendor to ensure that we don't have this kind of problem again.

Getting rid of bed bugs is not an easy process, and often times require a pest control company to fully eliminate an infestation. Standard insect control tactics alone will not eliminate infestations. A variety of pesticide sprays, diatomaceous earth, and heat treatment applications can be used on all infested and neighboring locations where the pests may crawl or hide. Because bed bugs have a tolerance for generic pesticides, heat was the best method for eliminating bugs and their eggs in our furnishings. Recognition, education, and understanding of bed bugs are the best way to prevent infestations. Regular cleaning and vacuuming can be helpful in deterring infestations when combined with professional treatment plans. The Marriott Library has trained staff to conduct visual inspections of returned material, seating and surrounding spaces as the first line of defense.

While the media sensationalized the topic in a few reports across the country, the media also included the treatments and the precautions used by the library to protect the public. As the result of our proactive communication to the media, our library employees, and patrons, trust in the library was restored quickly as evidenced by our gate counts. Our proactive communication also eliminated a firestorm of criticism for not communicating and potential accusations that we were hiding a problem. While bedbugs are an unpleasant problem to report, we believe our efforts to communicate about the problem and its remediation were a better path that brought patrons back to the library quickly after the problem was resolved.

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