



Preparation is key for crisis mode

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The crisis communication now in the news is a good lesson for all organizations to review their crisis communications plan. Oops, don't have one? Even the best of organizations can be blindsided by an unfortunate and unforeseen event.

As a 22-year veteran of creating and implementing customized public relations for clients' goals and objectives, I am always surprised to hear that many don't even think about a crisis communications plan, until, that is, they need one. A crisis communications plan needs to be in place before a crisis hits.

Today, a crisis can live forever online. Ask Tiger Woods. The 24-hour media cycle enhances the need for a precise, fast and effective response by all organizations, whether you are for profit or not. In moments of crisis or in the face of litigation, organizations need to work with the media not just to stay in control of the story with confidence, but to make sure reporters are armed with factual information. Obstructing their work means a less than a total view of the issue. Help them; don't make it impossible for them to do their work.

Minimally, organizations should have a media kit and an online pressroom. A media kit should contain basic information about your company such as company history, executives' bios, updated fact sheets of applicable company events within the community, recent newsworthy releases, TV and print-ready logos and information on whom to contact for more information. The aim of a media kit is to provide as much information as possible. An online pressroom does the same thing and can be a link from your website that reporters easily can visit to gather newsworthy information. Keep your websites and digital communications platforms ready for immediate, 24/7 use.

Anticipate events

Understand the difference between a crisis and an ongoing issue (confirm that all of your execu-

tives do, too). By anticipating and preparing for problems before they occur, companies can preserve their public reputations, maintain visibility and keep all audiences informed by communicating value in good times and bad. One universal best practice is to communicate early and often. Don't wait for the news to circulate through traditional and digital media outlets; rather, get out in front of the story immediately.

Stories will be written regardless. If you don't engage, you can't impact the story. People can be very forgiving when they know the facts, but when the details are hidden, human nature helps us create our own vision of the story.

While no level of preparation can predict a crisis, problems need to be dealt with quickly, honestly and with integrity, even if you are sharing bad news. Have your game plan ready and your team identified. Get your whole communications team on the same path so all questions are directed to one person or team of people (usually the PR personnel). Halt all e-mail or other communications surrounding the issue at hand so there is nothing to leak. Keep the message simple and modify it as needed to keep up with developments. Similarly, be prepared for the unexpected. There always will be more to respond to. There may be a flood of press calls. You need to tell everyone the same thing at one time so you can get back to work immediately.

Transparency works

Public relations isn't about propaganda; it's about telling the truth clearly, openly and so it can be viewed through a clean lens, transparently. Stakeholders will view the situation fairly when you provide a better understanding of your organization and how it works. It's only when facts are withheld that assumptions are made.

It always is best when a mistake has been made to admit it up front. Then begin doing whatever is possible to re-establish credibility and confidence with audiences. Don't forget, you have more audiences than you can list. This may be

difficult for senior management to see, especially if lawyers are involved. Attorneys can minimize or erase eventual legal costs the company may experience, but think of the harsh judgment experienced while a lawsuit is under way.

Always have a spokesperson identified from the beginning, someone knowledgeable about the information. For example, if an automation engineer is needed, have access to one who can speak effectively to questions that may be asked. Having the person practiced and ready is helpful.

Functioning with inconvenience

As can happen, a crisis is not always at the most convenient time and place. A complete management list is recommended as you never can tell who may be needed. Make sure cell phone numbers, secondary information and fact sheets have been prepared for eventual access. By doing some homework ahead of time, you'll find having a plan in place can save not just your money, time and reputation but long-term side affects. When anxiety from a crisis occurs, things can be forgotten when more preparation time is needed.

Reputations are on the line. Public perception is a key factor in the outcome. Stock values can be at risk. Each audience, all of them stakeholders, must be considered when crafting messages, as well as the most effective tools used to reach them.

News travels fast, and bad news travels even faster. So think about it ahead of time, be prepared and do not be left in a situation that can hurt you or your organization.



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