

No Matter the Crisis, a Communications Plan Is Critical

BY ANNE SCEIA KLEIN

The facts are seared into the minds of university presidents, administrators, professors and staff members. Most students and their families, especially the parents, can even recall the weather, the setting or the time of year: A frosty, early-spring morning in the Shenandoah Valley; A sweltering mid-summer afternoon in central Texas; A crisp Valentine's Day afternoon in suburban Illinois.

Some with strong memories or a personal stake in the incident can even give you the names of the shooters and their body counts: Seung-Hui Cho, 32. Charles Whitman, 16. Steven Kazmierczak, 5.

Everyone knows the campuses: Virginia Tech. University of Texas. Northern Illinois.

A campus shooting is an extreme example of the need for a crisis communications plan, but that's why such a plan is of utmost importance. You never know if or when a crisis will occur, or how horrific the situation will be.

Recent news reports from a pair of campuses amplify the need. At the University of Virginia, a male lacrosse player with an apparent history of violence allegedly beat to death his former girlfriend, a member of the woman's lacrosse team.

At the University of Alabama-Huntsville, a female professor who just had been denied tenure shot and killed three colleagues and wounded three others.



Not every crisis will make national news. But a campus flood, a dorm room burglary spree or a university official charged with embezzlement requires you to inform your audiences immediately about what has happened and what you plan to do about it. Twitter, Facebook, blogs and 24-hour news cycles make even a moment's delay a potentially fatal misstep.

That's where a university crisis communications plan comes in

A few years ago, a colleague of mine was speaking to a group of more than 150 corporate executives and asked for a show of hands of how many of them had crisis communications plans. No arms moved. Whether it's a corporation or a university, that response is still common. The usual reasons are no time or no money. Or there is denial that a crisis could actually happen. Meanwhile, university administrators and corporate executives are calling public relations professionals after the fact.

Some events are legitimately more serious

than others. However, in many instances just one unhappy blogger or tweeter has escalated what might have been an insignificant incident into a social media tsunami. Do you recall the movie producer who was asked to leave an airplane because he was considered too fat to occupy just one seat? The social media eruption was massive. After the fact, there is often no longer the luxury of spending hours gathering information and preparing statements for students, staff, families and the media.

A recent university crisis communication plan in which I was involved contained a list of 68 different scenarios. Each one of them has a unique description, a ready-to-go comment for the press, a designated team leader with backups, names of key executive and technical contacts (also with backups) and affected audiences that must be reached, by whom and through what channel.

That list of 68 scenarios runs the gamut from alumni discontent to bomb threat to vandalism to whistle blower. The exact list may differ for each institution, but many issues and events can be anticipated and planned for.

Five steps to get started

How might you get started on a crisis communications plan? Here's are five helpful steps:

1. Decide to develop a proactive plan for working with all key audiences. Those audiences include your staff, also the media, including key social media commentators. List steps that can be taken to build trust even before a critical event occurs.
2. List every conceivable kind of crisis. As mentioned above, you may result in 68 different scenarios, or more, or fewer. Determine who within your organization will be the official spokespersons and how they will respond to the media and other key audiences should any of these incidents occur.
3. Develop key messages and talking points for each potential incident. When responding to the media, deliver your key message up front before discussing anything else.
4. Be aware that technology makes it possible for reporters to be on the scene almost instantly, and they will be looking for immediate answers. Along with the university's legal team, develop a pre-approved list of the statements and information you can provide to the media, bypassing the need to clear every word while the crisis is

actually underway.

5. During disaster or crisis training drills, be sure key audiences and media are included. Drills provide the perfect opportunity for designated spokespersons to practice and sharpen their response skills.

Drills are essential. Once you have a plan, you must try it out to see if it works and change what doesn't. You should also periodically update the plan, adding scenarios, updating contact names and revising the pre-approved media statements.

Academic Impressions is an event planning firm serving universities. I was disappointed, but not surprised, by the results of a survey they conducted in early 2010 which disclosed that a quarter of the responding universities had never tested their crisis communications plans. Meanwhile, among those universities who had tested their plans, just a third found the plan to be effective. Another third of the participants said they had low or no confidence that their institution would be able to execute the plan in the event of an emergency.

One crisis communications plan that was well prepared and tested for effectiveness went into action on Valentine's Day afternoon in 2008 at Northern Illinois University.

Melanie Magara is the university's assistant vice president for public affairs. Magara said in a recent issue of *The Public Relations Strategist* magazine that planning and practice were the most important factors that allowed her to disseminate key messages to all of the university's audiences. "There wasn't time to have a meeting," she said. "We had practiced and we were authorized to get the word out quickly."

The genesis of the Northern Illinois communications plan was the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. University president John Peters told Magara that day, after watching the two towers collapse, "This is a huge wake-up call for all institutions. We absolutely have to have our plans in place and have practiced them and be prepared for any kind of emergency."

How prophetic those words would turn out to be. **TC**



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