



Crisis Communications —New Challenges in a New Era

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Most of us will never have to manage crisis communications for an airline whose passenger jet makes an emergency splashdown in the Hudson River. Most of us will never have to deal with catastrophic events involving loss of life or property. But in this recessionary era, many of us *will* have to offer communications counsel and respond to different types of crises involving major layoffs, significant earnings declines, customer lawsuits or charges of corruption. And many of us will face “everyday” crises like a power outage, computer system failure or flood. Any of these crises could make or break a company's reputation. It all depends upon how well we, as communicators, are prepared to respond to crises. And we need to respond faster than ever before.

Immediate response is essential

Today, we no longer have the luxury, once a crisis is under way, of taking time to develop and coordinate our initial statement. Technology has drastically shortened the time we have to respond. When any employee or customer with a cell phone or digital camera can be a reporter, it takes only a few moments for a crisis to be posted on the Internet or reported on the news.

The increased immediacy of communication channels means we must develop responses for crises while we can before they happen. A reputation that took years to build can crumble in a matter of seconds if our response is delayed or poorly thought out. Therefore, it is crucial to have a crisis communication plan ready in advance so your organization can respond quickly and effectively.

No surprises. No guessing.

A crisis should not come as a surprise. The only real unknown is “when.” The most basic research can help us identify the many types of crises that could

strike our organizations. That information is all we need to develop a list of potential scenarios that could befall our organizations. Armed with that, we're able to plan and be ready to respond immediately to any crisis.

A crisis communication plan takes the guesswork out of initial communications with key audiences by employing timely, meaningful statements about how your organization is managing the event. You determine in advance how your organization should respond, who is the best spokesperson and how you will communicate with those affected. By developing initial statements beforehand, you streamline the communication response process and help ensure that you and your leadership team are ready to deliver your message competently, clearly and consistently. An effective initial response demonstrates your organization is in control, and gives you time to evaluate the full scope of the event and plan your next steps.

Maintain stakeholder relationships

As communicators, we face new challenges every day, but one basic principle of crisis communication remains the same—the need to maintain relationships with stakeholders during the ups and downs of normal business cycles so when a crisis does arise, these relationships help protect the organization's reputation. If your audiences are accustomed to hearing from your organization on a regular basis, they will be more receptive to hearing your messages when a crisis strikes.

In a world where people demand increased accountability, it is invaluable to communicate directly to stakeholders about how your organization is managing a crisis. We must be prepared to communicate immediately and directly with employees, customers, shareholders, vendors and other key stakeholders, both through the media and directly, with meaningful information about what our organization is doing to manage the situation.

Use the latest technology

Take advantage of new technology. There are rapid response tools you can incorporate into your plan. They include blast voice mail, text messages and email. You can also prepare a separate, normally hidden section of your Web site you can turn on immediately. A social media presence also can be a valuable tool in a crisis. Proper planning and coordination makes it easy to quickly post the most current information during a crisis and can help you connect directly with your audiences, exceed stakeholders' expectations and strengthen your reputation.

Challenges and opportunities

Crises, by definition, threaten the very life of an organization. This is especially true in light of today's economic instability and a highly critical citizenry. In this environment, judgments will be harsher, criticisms meaner, repercussions devastating.

But crises also can be an opportunity to make your organization stand out in a positive way. This is the time, before you face an immediate crisis, to cement friendly relationships and repair shaky ones. You need to build more and deeper relationships to get you through these rough times if a crisis should occur. Augment your technology capabilities. Any perceived impropriety or delay in responding to a crisis could escalate, potentially putting you out of business. An accurate, timely response to a crisis will promote trust and confidence in your organization and brand, and reinforce your most valued relationships. All it takes is a little preparation.



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