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Crisis Communications: Have a Plan or Plan to Fail

Coping with chaos so your company's reputation remains in place

By Gary McCoy

The old proverb: "No one plans to fail but people can fail to plan" is never truer than when it comes to crisis communications. Companies that have no plan in place when a crisis erupts will find themselves scrambling to respond to the media who will inevitably descend upon them to get their reaction to the developing story. If you handle the crisis in a disciplined and orderly way, the damage to your company can be minimized or non-existent.

So what is a crisis communication moment? According to communications expert Sandra K. Clawson Freeo, "A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your company, usually brought on by adverse or negative media attention." It could be a fire at one of your plants, a product failure that injures a consumer, an organized protest/boycott of your company, or an unfavorable lawsuit filed against your company.

A crisis communications plan is a document that outlines how your company will respond when trouble arises. It is not an end-all document. Think of it more as an outline and a disciplined approach you will take when storm clouds descend upon your company's horizon. The goal of your plan is to come out of a crisis situation with as much of your company's image, credibility and reputation intact as possible.

"One thing to remember: that it is crucial in a crisis to tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth," says Clawson Freeo. "If you do this you have done all you can to minimize the situation."

How fast should you respond? According to Deidre Breckenridge and Thomas J. DeLoughry in their book [*The New PR Toolkit*](#), "Many communicators agree that there's only a 12-hour window to influence press coverage and public opinion when tragedy or crisis strikes."

No better example of how not to practice crisis management is the infamous Iraqi Information Minister Muhammed Saeed al-Sahaf or affectionately known as "Baghdad Bob." There are many classic Baghdad Bob quotes to choose from, but some of his classic lines included: "Our initial assessment is that they will all die," at the beginning of the war and, after U.S. forces seized Baghdad's airport: "We butchered the force present at the airport. We have retaken the airport! There are no Americans there!" Talk about someone out of touch with reality and the truth!

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Here are some suggested steps for your organization to follow that will help you put together a crisis management document.

Plan & Prepare

The most important decision to be made is who will form your crisis management team. It is absolutely essential to have your CEO involved; after all he or she will almost always be the voice of your company during a crisis. In addition, the head of your public relations team should be involved along with key vice presidents and managers. The team should be comprised of individuals who have a good sense of your company, its reputation, values, and the markets/publics you serve. But most of all, the crisis team needs to be comprised of "critical thinkers" who are able to think quickly and rationally. If you employ an outside public relations firm, a member of their staff should also be a part of the team.

The planning process will also involve many logistical items: where you will meet during a crisis, how you will reach each other during off-hours, and who will speak to the media once the crisis erupts. Putting together a place to meet during a crisis is important. You may want to develop two locations, if for some reason your corporate headquarters is destroyed or it is temporarily inaccessible. You'll want a location with good communication equipment such as phones, computers with a high-speed Internet connection, TVs and radios to monitor media coverage, and a room where you can comfortably host a news conference (if one needs to be held).

In addition to your crisis team, you may need additional staff on hand who can help answer phones, prepare materials, or other unexpected tasks that may come up.

Part of the planning process is developing contingency plans to cover possible crisis situations. Each plan may be slightly different, but one overriding plan should be in place that can be adapted to any situation. Write a plan that goes into as much detail as possible. I would suggest setting aside a planning day with every person on the team involved. With flip charts and markers in hand, spend time thinking through every possible crisis or disaster that could happen to your company and how you will communicate this information to the media.

Practice

Once you have established your plan, you must begin to prepare to implement it. You may want to "invent" a crisis for your team to respond to. If you have a PR firm, they could serve as members of the media and ask the hypothetical questions. In addition, they can serve as objective observers and provide constructive criticism to help you improve. Practice will ensure that you can quickly and smoothly respond when trouble arises.

Depending on the person you designate as your spokesperson (it should normally be your CEO); you'll want to rehearse on how to make a statement to the media and respond to reporters' questions. If your CEO has never had any media training, hiring an outside expert to take care of this will help him or her be a success when the camera lights and microphones are rolling.

Perform

The real moment of truth comes when the crisis has erupted. If you have done your planning, preparing and practicing well, this step should go very smoothly. Although it is impossible to sketch out every crisis that will arise, if you are ready you'll find it much easier to respond to the "curveballs" that are thrown in your direction.

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One Final Step

The aftermath of a crisis can last a few days or even a few months. Even if the crisis only lasts a few hours, if there is an ongoing investigation by an outside agency, the work of your team could go on longer. So be ready, should the assignment require rearranging schedules and job assignments.

After the storm has passed, remember to gather your team for a debriefing session. You'll want to consider your successes during the crisis, and the areas where you need to improve. Remember to review the original plan you wrote and revise it, based on what happened.

This is only a brief glimpse at crisis communications. [*The PR Crisis Bible*](#) by Robin Cohn is one of several good books on the subject and one I would suggest reading. The book makes a point that I want to emphasize in closing: "The general perception of crisis management is that it is a public relations problem. It's not: It's a CEO's problem. Regardless of how much talent a company has, it won't perform well in a crisis unless it's being directed by someone at the top who knows what to do." A CEO must be involved because even if they had nothing to do with the problem, it ends up on their lap. The buck always stops at the top.

Finally, Cohn argues that mastering a crisis is like going on a trip. "One packs before leaving, not after. It's also important to have directions."

Take heed to the message of this article: have a plan to succeed in crisis communications. Having no plan is a recipe for failure and that's a plan no company can afford.

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