

Crisis Communications

Planning for the Unexpected Remains Crucial

By Melissa Hickman

A popular slogan in the world of news is, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Whether it’s a finger in a bowl of chili, 17 tons of dead fish in the White River or most recently, a group of miners trapped in an unsafe mine, crisis situations consistently garner prime time coverage and front page headlines.

What constitutes a crisis? In its simplest form, a crisis is any situation that has the potential to disrupt business or negatively impact the image of a company. Crisis situations may be classified into two categories: sudden or smoldering. A sudden crisis arises quickly and without warning. Catastrophic storms, fires and transportation accidents are all examples of sudden crises. A smoldering crisis generally arises over a period of time. White collar crime such as embezzlement or an alarming rate of deaths in a hospital are examples.

Since a crisis can never be predicted, some ground rules are important to have on hand before a disaster takes place. Foremost, an organization needs to have a crisis communications plan in place. When a crisis occurs, it is never “business as usual.” The crisis communications plan must include who the spokesperson is for all media inquiries and identify a “command central” from where media information will be released. Much of the communication confusion that occurred during the January Sago Mine disaster could have been averted if there had been a formal dissemination point and spokesperson for all media news.

Truth comes first

Secondly, a crisis communications plan must facilitate telling the truth and telling the truth in a timely manner. Never hide from the situation, but certainly don’t accept immediate blame until all of the facts are in. A statements such as, “We are on the alert, working closely with authorities and will share additional information as it is available,” is generally safe until the extent of the crisis is understood. Be sure to make regular media updates even if it is simply to report that the situation is still being researched.

Third, a company needs to tell its people first. Each organization needs to know who these key constituents are,

although it’s generally employees. Employees essentially act as ambassadors for a company, and it is important that they are informed.

Finally, resist the temptation to point fingers during a crisis. A few years ago, Ford and Firestone embroiled themselves in a very public battle of finger pointing that resulted only in raising the fears of each company’s customers and stockholders.



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Doing your homework

When a crisis occurs, the media will be using sound bites to communicate your responses. Therefore, preparation is imperative. Think through some possible crisis situations, including both sudden and smoldering disasters. Then role play how you would respond to each incident.

It’s a good idea to have some key messages regarding your company on hand and to be familiar with them. For example: “In keeping with our mission to provide high-quality, safety-conscious products to our customers, we are working closely with (regulators, safety experts, etc.) to address this situation.” This is an action-oriented response that also reflects your organization’s overriding principles. Practice important messages and think in terms of brief sound bites.

Crisis situations are never fun or effortless, but preparing for them in advance can eliminate some of the pain and panic, positioning your organization to get back to business as usual more quickly.

INFORMATION LINK

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