

## **Effectively planning before and communicating during and after a crisis is the mark of a truly successful company**

773 words

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How an organization communicates its story to the public during a crisis is as important today as how prepared the organization is to respond to the crisis.

The tone and words of the message can either give the public confidence that the situation is under control, or soon will be under control, or they can create fear and panic.

What a company or any government agency says must be carefully thought out. In a crisis mode, you can't be sending contradictory messages.

For example, when the anthrax crisis struck, the public received conflicting messages from the U.S. Postal Service, National Institutes of Health, and Center for Disease Control, and U.S. Department of Justice, among others.

Teamwork is especially important when more than one organization is involved, A company responsible for a crisis needs to coordinate its communications effort with local emergency response and other federal, state and local government agencies. The team also must decide who will be the lead spokesperson.

However first, the organization needs to be prepared.

A recent survey of 200 U.S. CEOs by PR Week and Burson-Marsteller showed that 81% believed their existing crisis management plans were inadequate to handle the myriad of issues arising from the September 11 tragedy.

Especially disappointing was the fact that only 63% of those corporate leaders surveyed reported having re-addressed their plans since the attacks.

When there is a chemical leak, explosion or other crisis, the public and all stakeholders must be told as soon as the incident occurs and in a way that will not create anxiety.

The crisis communications plan must be an integral part of any crisis management plan and involve your public relations professionals.

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In addition to the obvious crises that can be anticipated based on an organization's product, business or service, management should have five generic plans in place for the following:

1. Terrorism
2. Violence in the workplace
3. Sexual harassment and discrimination
4. Environmental pollution
5. Acts of "Mother Nature"

The business software issued handled by Dunlap Sales and Services in Hopkinsville is an excellent example of how a company can effectively handle a crisis and communicate effectively with the media in the process. The recent tornado in Hopkins County and western Kentucky showed just how effective pre-planning for a crisis can be.

Ultimately, how an organization handles itself during a crisis is determined by the ability of its management.

Although many organizations have a "crisis" or "emergency" plan on paper, few organizations ever actually practice them. Unfortunately, when the fire, the flood or the work place violence hits – it is too late then to lament not having properly reviewed and practiced the plan.

The "bottom-line" questions an organization must ask itself are simply: "How much is my company's good name and reputation ultimately worth?" and "Am I prepared in the event of a crisis to protect my reputation?"

### **Preparation and assessment**

There are five distinct phases in the development of a crisis and issues management plan:

Phase I. Preparation – all management that will be engaged in the handling of the crisis should be involved in this phase

Phase II. Plan Development Steps

Step 1 - Visibility Analysis – What can you forecast that could go wrong?

Step 2 - Key issue identification – What issues can impact your organization?

Step 3 - Scenario Development – What are the 'worse case' scenarios?

Step 4 - Message Development – What are our key messages when they do happen?

Step 5 - Creating contact lists – Who needs to know we are in a crisis?

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Step 6 - Review and counsel – Best left to independent – “no horse in the race’ professionals leading your team through the exercise and providing objective counsel.

Phase III.     Assembling the Plan  
                  Tabbed information  
                  Tab 1 - Crucial contact lists  
                  Tab 2 - Scenarios (Flowcharts)  
                  Tab 3 - Standby statements  
                  Tab 4 - Q&As and Briefings  
                  Tab 5 - Critical tips to successful Implementation

Phase IV.     Implementation  
                  Plan installation  
                  Briefings  
                  Coaching  
                  Simulations  
                  Review and counsel  
                  Training  
                  Training tools  
                  Strategy, techniques tips and insights, dealing with media  
                  Testing  
                  Updating annually

Crisis and issues planning is another part of the public relations business that can and will make a difference in your “bottom-line” before, during and after a crisis hits.

Astute and successful forward-looking companies already have their plans prepared, have practiced them, and are prepared as best they can be and in the final analysis will survive.

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