

EIGHT TIPS FOR WHEN A CRISIS HITS

Crisis (noun, plural):

- *a time of intense difficulty or danger.*
- *a time when a difficult or important decision must be made.*
- *an unstable period, especially one of extreme trouble or danger in politics, economics, business etc.*

1. BE PREPARED

Before a crisis occurs, you should already have a crisis communications plan in place. Make sure it's updated and that all key players have a copy with them, and that it's accessible – no hiding it in the back of a filing cabinet.

Regularly run an analysis on the potential controlled and uncontrolled crises in your business. Decide how they will happen and what actions will need to be taken, by whom. If you worry something may happen, make sure there's a plan in place for when it does.

Hold on-going media trainings for all your likely spokespeople – media training shouldn't be done in a rush once something happens. Have a file with up-to-date key messages, holding statements, photos, B-roll, and basic information about the company.

Remember, your crisis plan will *never* be final!

2. GET ALL THE INFORMATION (QUICKLY)

When a crisis occurs, speed is of the essence. Quickly try to find out what the problem is, what went wrong, who's involved, and what might happen next. From this you can draw up your communications objectives:

- What is the ideal outcome?
- What needs to be communicated? To who?
- Who will lead the communications?
- How, where, and when will you communicate?



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3. SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE

While there is some comfort in numbers, when it comes to a crisis, it's important that there is just one company spokesperson. Remember, they may not be your normal media representative. You should choose someone who is relevant to, and will resonate with, your audience. They should be:

- Senior and experienced enough to hold the respect of the company;
- Well prepared but willing to be coached;
- Positive, even when under attack;
- Loyal to the company;
- Unafraid to say "I don't know, but I can find out"; and
- On hand for the duration of the crisis.

4. TELL IT ALL, TELL IT EARLY, TELL IT YOURSELF

The mantra of all crisis communications is to "tell it all, tell it early, tell it yourself." It's key that you and your company are in control of the story and get the real facts out there. If you don't tell your story, your critics will do it for you, and they're likely to get it wrong.

When talking to the media, there are several things to bear in mind:

- Acknowledge the problem, express concern or apologise.
- Bear in mind any legal restrictions you may be under. If you can't comment on something, don't just say "no comment", but try to explain why you can't comment - "I'm sorry, but for legal reasons, I can't discuss this at the moment. What I can tell you is that..."
- Don't try to justify actions or the problem. Show willing to work with other parties.
- Identify what you're doing to rectify the problem and when you expect a solution (but don't make promises you can't keep).
- Discuss the impact on people first, then the environment or buildings. If there is a financial impact, this comes last.
- Be human - it's ok to show emotion.

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5. DON'T FORGET YOUR EMPLOYEES

Where possible, internal communications should be done before your external communications. Your employees (whether you have one or 10,000) are your unofficial spokespeople. They must be kept informed on what's going on, and what's being done to solve the problem.

Employee questions should be anticipated and answered regularly. Even if you think the questions are irrelevant, the fact that they're being asked suggests that they're of importance.

Open, timely, and truthful conversations with your employees will lead to greater support, understanding, and trust.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA IS THERE (EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT)

In a world where social media is dictating news stories instead of just reporting them, you need to be prepared to use channels you may not be a natural in. The important thing to remember is that social media should only be used to disseminate useful and relevant information. These are not channels for discussion. Use complementary media channels for more in-depth analysis and debate.

7. CONSIDER EXTERNAL HELP

Even the most prepared and proficient company needs help sometimes. If you see a gap in knowledge or experience of crisis communications, consider getting in specialist external consultants to help you. They'll be able to give you an objective outside perspective and will be able to call on their experiences to come up with novel and successful strategies.

8. LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

When the dust has finally settled, it's time to reflect, refine, and review. Things will have gone wrong as you dealt with the crisis. Be critical in your analysis of mistakes and make sure steps are put in place so that they don't happen next time.

If you don't know where to start when it comes to crisis communications, why not get in touch?

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