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Building Confidence in a Crisis

Have a plan and use it!

By Jane Jordan

For many, putting together a crisis communication plan is a bit like visiting the dentist every six months – they know they should do it and that it will probably save a lot of pain in the future, but they figure they can get by without it.

No longer is this an adequate excuse as around the globe regulators are putting the spotlight on corporate culture with changes to codes, new laws and more stringent guidelines for risk management and business continuity.

In many countries regulators now have the power to prosecute companies and individual directors on the “basis of their corporate culture”. Included in that is the imperative to put in place clear and effective plans, policies and procedures for dealing with threats and issues.

While some of the new codes are yet to be tested, it is clear that solid business contingency plans are more important than ever. A crisis communication plan – which sets out clear guidelines for ensuring the right people are told the right things at the right time during any emergency or crisis – is a key part of an organisation’s risk and crisis management policies.

The problem is many people have difficulty in coming to grips with the concept of “managing” communication. How do you stop people from saying the wrong things? How do you contain the “Chinese whispers”? Can you control where, and who, the media gets its information from?

These are understandable concerns, given that communication is hardly an exact science at the best of times, let alone when the going gets tough. A good place to start, though, is at the most public level – train your media spokespeople in crisis communication. It’s one thing to be good media talent when things are going smoothly, but it’s another to be able to say exactly the right things when you’re under fire. Part of this art is



understanding exactly where the media is coming from at every stage of a crisis' escalation.

While your spokespeople are saying the right things out front - demonstrating that you care and are taking responsible action – you need to be confident their words are backed by a crisis communication plan built on strong basic principles. Regardless of how complex the issues, how diverse the stakeholders, or how broad the interest in what you do, if you build solid foundations, your best-laid plans are more likely to hold up.

1. **Set a clear goal.** If you are not absolutely clear about why you need to communicate during a crisis, and about the messages underpinning that communication, how can you expect others to fall into line? This goal – which will guide the development of messages – should be consistent with your organisation's mission statement, charter and/or values. That way, you are “practising what you preach”.
2. **Analyse your risks regularly.** It's not enough just to list your threats and leave it at that. All that does is leave you feeling daunted by the sheer size of the list. If you rate the threats and potential trigger-points – say, a top 10 – by considering each risk in terms of the likelihood of it eventuating versus the impact on your organisation if it does, you can channel your efforts and resources more efficiently.
3. **Assess your audiences.** Again, an unruly list is only going to make the job look that much harder. When it comes to deciding where your efforts are best spent, think about who among those stakeholders are best-placed to help or hinder you in a crisis. Who are most likely to work with you, or to work against you – and how much of an impact are they likely to have on perceptions?
4. **Get “buy-in” from all involved in the plan.** This means garnering support from all those who have a role to play in the crisis communication plan. A “memorandum of understanding” is often a

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good way to go – it might sound frighteningly official, but it is simply a case of key people agreeing to take on specific (and clearly identified) roles and responsibilities if and when a crisis arises.



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5. Test your assumptions. Some of the biggest stuff-ups come from assuming people know the basics (or what you consider to be the basics). Some of the most comprehensive plans have fallen apart before they have had a chance to play themselves out because the first step was based on an assumption – “Oh, we thought that person would know to call us the minute something happened” or “We thought everybody knew that number”. There is also likely to be a lot of information – and a lot of lessons learnt from experience – that is stored in individual heads and this should be documented as official procedures.

Related to assumptions is the concept of the “single point of failure”. Essentially, you can’t assume that a key person will always be available at the crucial time. Make sure you identify suitable back-ups, and ensure the guidelines in the plan are not based on assumed knowledge.

When you look at this concept of creating a “living” program, it becomes a step-by-step process that needs to be assimilated into the organisation’s culture. And a key to its effectiveness is understanding the importance of proper communication.

And, above all, a solid crisis communication plan is the cornerstone to a proper, holistic risk management program. It is now officially a demonstration of responsibility, accountability and best practice – the law says so.

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