

Communicating in a crisis

It has been said that it takes a lifetime to build a reputation and only seconds to destroy it.

The same is true for a business, no matter if you have one or 1,000 employees.

Businesses can face a service interruption, serious lawsuit, a product liability action, EEOC complaint, devastating fire, a tornado or other natural disaster. Unfortunately, recent events have taught us that it is no longer inconceivable for a business to face total catastrophe—the sudden deaths of key employees, the disappearance of a key supplier or the destruction of irreplaceable documents.

Expressing concern, providing accurate information and staying in touch with victims, employees, customers, bankers and suppliers can be accomplished through various channels—phone, e-mail, Internet and, often, via television, radio and newspaper.

Here are 10 steps to take before a crisis occurs:

1. Anticipate potential crisis scenarios within your company and prepare key message responses. Think of the 10 worst things that you might face and craft core answers.
2. Have a media-trained, designated spokesperson. A crisis is no time to hand the ball to an amateur or anyone unprepared to further the goal of maintaining your firm's credibility.
3. Prepare to reach key personnel with current office, home, cell and e-mail information. You must be able to reach everyone, anywhere, anytime.
4. Prepare basic background materials on your company and its key employees. The middle of a crisis is not the time to prepare a press kit. Give consideration to maintaining a "dark" web site that can be turned on in an instant.
5. Develop a media distribution list with current names, phone, fax, e-mail and cell phone information. You will communicate with some of your audiences through the media. If the media doesn't get the information from you, they'll get it elsewhere.
6. Identify your target audiences (i.e., employees and their families, vendors, customers, stockholders, labor leaders, local government officials, etc.). In the midst of a crisis, you don't want to neglect one of your core constituencies.
7. Develop a written crisis response plan. If it's not in writing, it's not a plan.
8. Develop relationships with the media and other third parties. If you're in the middle of a crisis, it's too late.
9. Conduct a mock drill. Consider a "tabletop drill" in which crisis scenarios are walked through with key people.
10. Revisit your plan on a regular basis.

10 steps to take when a crisis occurs:

1. Assemble the crisis team and refer to your prepared plan.
2. Analyze the situation promptly, but don't over-analyze. A quickly unfolding crisis leaves no time for broad-based consensus.
3. Prioritize your target audiences.
4. Develop and/or refine your key messages. Agree to an interview so you can get your message out.
5. Communicate a consistent, simple and clear message. Anything less hurts your company and your credibility.
6. Set up a place for the media to gather. Meeting with the press off-site can help you control the message and the situation.
7. Provide a steady stream of communication to the media and other target audiences.
8. Assign someone to monitor the mass media and Web so you can quickly respond to inaccurate information.
9. Make the media your partner, not your enemy. If you stonewall, they'll dig. They're going to write about the situation anyway, so respect the job they have to do.
10. Conduct a follow-up evaluation of your efforts after the crisis abates.



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