

Crisis Communications ... Staying in Control of Your Message

Nature abhors a vacuum. You can be certain that, in a period of crisis, communication channels left unattended will be filled by someone else. Chances are, it won't be in your interest.

Communicating in a crisis is both important and delicate. Knowing what or what not to say, how to say it, when to say it, who should say it, and to whom, where and how often is crucial to the success of managing a crisis.

While there are countless examples of failure, success stories rarely gain significant exposure. For those that do, hard-earned brand value not only lives on but can be strengthened.

Whether it's your shareholders, employees, customers, neighbors, elected officials, the media, all of the above or others, in a crisis they turn to leadership for answers. Are you ready?

Develop a Plan

Those charged with managing the reputation of the brand should have a plan. Crisis communications plan development is one of the most important practice areas for public relations professionals. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

➤ **Practice:** Simulate a crisis and practice how your company would handle the situation through press briefings, releases, media inquiries etc. In a high-stress situation, it's

easy to panic and narrow your field of vision, eliminating the ability to find reasonable responses. Practice makes perfect.

➤ **Use your Web site:** A company Web site is one of the easiest ways to manage your message. Members of the media are seeking immediate answers. Granting them access to information online keeps them satisfied and you in control of your message. An online media room, including press releases, video and issued statements is essential during a crisis.



➤ **Be Transparent:** Trying to deliver a message that tells half-truths is a recipe for disaster. Your audience will appreciate honesty and integrity more than a squeaky clean image. In today's Web 2.0 world, there are few, if any, secrets.

➤ **Stick to Your Message:** When participating in interviews, don't stray from your message. If you aren't asked questions that relate to your message, find ways to bridge back to it. Even when you are not the interviewer, it is always possible to stay in charge of the interview.

These are all easy ways to ensure that one official message is transmitted to all interested audiences. More important than anything, be sure to have a plan in place *before* a crisis occurs. The "it won't happen to me" or "I'll deal with it later" attitude will fail a company as soon as an urgent situation arises.

In a crisis situation, calm and consistent communication is crucial. If your company does not have public relations staff in-house, we strongly recommend hiring a public relations firm to help create, implement and evaluate a crisis communications campaign.

You may even find that in preparing for the worst, you discover ways to capitalize on your best qualities.

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