

# *Crisis Communication*



## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

When a crisis situation arises, the way an organization handles it is what determines the severity of the long-term effects. No company or organization is immune to crises and it is therefore more important to prepare for the situation, rather than imagine that it will never happen.

A crisis can appear in many different forms. The key to handling such situations is careful preparation, development and execution of a *crisis communication plan*. With such a plan it can be assured that your organization will get a fair hearing with the media because of your ability to react quickly to situations that may arise.

### **THREE STEPS OF CRISIS PREVENTION**

**Anticipate** the crisis.

**Prioritize** the types of crises.

**Consider** worst-case scenarios.

(Source: Harland Warner, APR, Fellow PRSA)

When dealing with a crisis it is important to remember these key elements:

#### **Tell the truth.**

Honesty leaves no burden on your shoulders. Trying to cover up a problem can only lead to the media's search to find the truth. Dishonesty can create damage to your organization's good reputation with your community. Relaying through the media that the problem is evident and being corrected is the best way to maintain an organization's good standing throughout times of crisis.

#### **Identify an organization spokesperson.**

Identify a contact person for your organization who knows how to communicate with the media, and is also a credible source. Whether the news is good or bad, it is always important that your spokesperson is accessible to the media. Provide reporters with your spokesperson's office, home and cellular numbers so he or she can be reached easily for comments.

#### **Brief all spokespeople.**

It is often unavoidable that there will be more than one person speaking with the media in times of crisis. It is important, therefore, that everyone be armed with the same facts.

#### **Build positive relationships.**

The key to fair treatment and understanding is the maintenance of positive, ongoing relationships with media contacts. If you are presented as a reliable source, the media will contact you before trying to obtain information on their own. It is important to build their confidence in your knowledge of the organization.

### **Develop a crisis communication plan.**

Take the time to plan ahead. It is important to have a communication plan before a crisis occurs. There are several keys to developing a plan. A few include: deciding who will manage press contacts, getting media training for all spokespeople, and creating a set of written guidelines that can be followed in case your primary spokesperson is unavailable.

Measure the effectiveness of your crisis management. You should evaluate your efforts and assess any damage your organization may have suffered. There is also a period of recovery, during which you will spend time and effort rebuilding your reputation and credibility.

### **STEPS FOR CREATING THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

1. Identify potential crisis scenarios.
2. Identify people likely to be the principal participants in the communication plan.
3. Decide what media to use in a crisis. From memos and faxes to e-mails and blogs, choose the media that are the best method for getting information out about your organization's situation.
4. Create a system for checking message statements made by internal and external spokespeople. Usually, the internal message is developed first, and from that, the external one is created.
5. Plan to act as a reporter first. After the crisis occurs, gather as much information as you can about the situation.
6. Anticipate questions from the news media.
7. Have your own photographers and interviewers ready to go out and gather the story.
8. Know that your first job will be to get a statement on the severity of the disaster or crisis from someone in authority. You'll need to have the statement both typed and audio taped.
9. Develop a fact sheet of known information. Review these facts with your organization's attorney to assess the legal ramifications of releasing the information.
10. Create expert crisis-communication teams from staff and outside counsel. These teams should be identified in the plan, and they should be equipped to deal with the crisis so that the organization can go about its regular activities as normally as possible.
11. Plan the contents of a crisis media kit. The special parts relating to a specific event can then be added quickly.

## **CRISIS COMMUNICATION FROM A-Z**

- A**lways prepare for a variety of crisis situations.
- B**e realistic about the outcome expected.
- C**ommunicate with empathy, compassion and care.
- D**evelop a communications plan for your team and train them.
- E**nlist the help of others—internally and externally.
- F**orm an inclusive communications team.
- G**et the crisis behind you as quickly as possible.
- H**elp the media as much as you can.
- I**ncorporate Internet strategies into your plan.
- J**ust do the right thing.
- K**ep your cool. Stay in control.
- L**ook before you leap and anticipate trouble.
- M**aintain an appropriate sense of humor throughout the crisis.
- N**ever go ‘off the record.’
- O**pen the door to two-way communications.
- P**repare three key messages before your briefing and stick to them.
- Q**uestion all potential crisis strategies and ask “what if?”
- R**espect the media and respond to media inquiries quickly and professionally.
- S**top talking when you are finished.
- T**hink before you speak. Rehearse your statements.
- U**nderestimate the power of the media at your own risk.
- V**erify all information — no matter how reliable the source.
- W**ork hard to coordinate, cooperate and solve issues as they arise.
- X**erox papers so you don’t lose critical information.
- Y**our reputation depends on how you handle the media.
- Z**ero tolerance of media distortion, inaccuracy and bad press.