

How to Prepare Your Crisis Communications Plan

By Edward Segal

Your worst business nightmare has just come true: a crisis that threatens your professional reputation, your relations with clients or customers, the bottom line of your corporation, or the image of your organization.

What can you do now to help prevent your nightmare from becoming a reality?

Be prepared.

The best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place:

- List everything that could possibly go wrong in your organization.
- Take every step possible to guard against it from occurring.
- Make sure that you have a workable plan in place that can be quickly and effectively implemented to handle any problem situation.

Several well-known corporations have found out the hard way the consequences of being unprepared; ranging from Sears for the way it handled charges of auto repair fraud to Exxon for its clumsy response to the Valdez oil-spill disaster.

How you handle a problem can have a direct impact on what the public thinks about you and your company or organization. According to a survey by National Family Opinion, 95 percent of people feel more offended by a corporation that lies about a crisis than the crisis itself.

Here are some guidelines you can use to prepare and implement a communications plan to help you deal with the media and the public during a crisis.

Since no crisis communications plan can ever cover all possible situations, this generic plan is intended to serve as an outline for the basic procedures and policies that

should be followed when handling an emergency. *These recommendations should be customized to meet the needs, concerns and situation of your own organization.*

Strategies

The strategies behind these recommendations are based on the fact that appearances and perceptions about how a crisis is handled can be more important than reality, and that during a crisis you should:

- Control the crisis instead of letting a crisis control you;
- Immediately provide accurate and up-to-date information—and your point of view—to the media, the public, and appropriate government officials and health or law enforcement agencies. Use all appropriate technologies and methods of distribution, including Web sites, blogs, Podcasts, YouTube, conference calls, instant messaging, texting, e-mail, VNRs, news releases, etc. Issue updates as necessary.
- Make sure you are available to and accessible by the media 24/7.

Your plan should include the following components:

Crisis Team

Procedures

- Establish guidelines for what constitutes or will trigger a crisis.
- Establish a reporting process to transfer responsibility for the handling of a crisis to a designated team leader.
- Establish guidelines to determine when a team leader should activate a crisis team.

Team Leader

- The team leader should be an individual who is intimately familiar with the organization and can be reached 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. In case of illness, travel, or vacation, a backup team leader should also be appointed.
- The team leader should have the authority to deal with the highest ranking officials in the organization.

Team Members

- Members of the team should include a representative from each major component of the organization.
- In addition, a list should be prepared of the names, phone numbers and fax numbers of specialists who would know how to handle the specific details of a particular kind of crisis or emergency.
- All members of the crisis team should be required to carry pagers, and to appoint backups in case of illness, vacation, or travel.
- When activated, the team should have access to all relative information about the situation, including the who, what, when, where, why and how of the crisis.
- Before it is needed for an actual crisis, the team should meet to come up with the worst-case scenarios, and determine what, from a theoretical standpoint, the options or most appropriate response should be.
- While actual decisions will be based on real situations, a list of potential alternatives that could be discussed and considered during an emergency will help save valuable time.

- These scenarios and responses should be written down and kept as a ready reference for when the team meets.
- Decide who else should be notified about a particular crisis, such as political or elected leaders.
- Determine ahead of time where the team will work, access to communications, secretarial support, etc.

Spokesperson

A spokesperson should be designated who, during a crisis, will:

- Communicate and advance the organization's viewpoint;
- Release only that information which is needed in order to inform the media and the public. For example, initial announcement of a crisis should be limited to giving out basic details about the location, type of incident, when it happened, why it happened (if known), and who is involved or affected, and what is being done about it;
- Give updates as appropriate to the media;
- Respond to all press calls;
- Have access to top officials of the organization 24 hours a day. All members of the leadership of the organization must have access to the spokesperson 24/7 and, in case of illness or vacation, a backup spokesperson should be designated; and
- Provide appropriate organizations in the community with his or her name, telephone number, e-mail and pager number in case they need to reach him or her about a crisis situation that officials of the organization have not yet heard about.

General Guidelines

Do

- Notify your marketing and communications staff, PR firm, advertising agency, and law firm immediately
- Prepare a chronology or fact sheet about the crisis. Distribute it as a handout for use by the crisis team, the media, and as an historical account of the crisis.
- Gather and centralize all information in one location.
- Have access to facilities, staff and resources to prepare, print and distribute information when needed.
- Refer to written statements that have been approved for release to the press when answering or giving out information.
- Get the crisis out in public as soon as possible.
- Put the matter behind you as soon as possible.
- Be honest and candid without violating any confidences.
- Go to the scene of the crisis immediately.
- Find ways to cut red tape.
- Release only verified information.
- Demonstrate the organization's concern and show that it is in charge of or on top of the situation.
- Explain and inform the employees or members of the organization about what happened.
- Provide information from the viewpoint of the public interest, rather than from the organization's interest.

- Tell employees or members of the organization what they should say to the press, e.g., “I’m sorry, but you will have to talk to (insert name) about that.”
- Notify officials of the organization prior to the release of information.
- Take appropriate steps to communicate information directly to the public, e.g., letters, signage, advertising, etc.
- Keep a list of all calls received during the crisis.
- Thank staff and others in writing immediately after the crisis for a job well done.

Do Not

- Speculate on the cause of the emergency.
- Speculate on the resumption of normal operations.
- Speculate on the outside effects of the emergency.
- Speculate on the dollar value of the losses (if any).
- Place blame.
- Leave the press unattended at the scene of the emergency.
- Be defensive.
- Minimize the problem.
- Let the story dribble out.
- Release information about people if it will violate their privacy or legal rights.
- Say "no comment." Instead, explain why you cannot comment.

Implementation

- Distribute copies of the finished crisis communications plan, including phone numbers and e-mails of people to be contacted in case of an emergency, to those likely to need them.

- Meet with and circulate an abbreviated version of the plan to others in the community who would most likely be called in case of a crisis.

Test, Test, Test

After your crisis communications guidelines and policies are in place:

- Stage a mock crisis to identify weed out any bugs and revise or modify these guidelines as needed.
- Stage an annual mock crisis to evaluate the state of readiness of the organization to an emergency, evaluate procedures, and make changes as necessary.

About Edward Segal

Edward Segal's background is a unique blend of public relations, journalism, government affairs and association management. He is the author of *Getting Your 15 Minutes of Fame, and More* and has trained executives at top companies on crisis communications and more. Visit www.edwardsegal.com to learn more.