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## **Communications Tips & Techniques Series**

### **Crisis Communications: Planning to Attack the Crisis Before it Attacks You**

Don't wait until your agency is in a crisis before you come up with a plan to deal with it. Crisis communications is sometimes called damage control. It's about protecting your agency's reputation and credibility when a major problem arises that could lead to public and media scrutiny. You can predict nearly 90 percent of the crises your agency could have. The other 10 percent include such sudden crises as natural disasters or product tampering. Since you can predict the majority of potential crises, you can plan for them.

### **Five Types of Crises**

**Facilities Crisis**—Damage such as that caused by an explosion, fire, leakage, or natural disaster.

**Community Crisis**—Adverse condition created by the organization or outside organizations hostile to the agency or its mission.

**Employee Crisis**—Includes loss of life, sabotage, or a reduction in force.

**Consumer Crisis**—Includes defective products, contracts that can't be met or an allegation against your agency.

**Image Crisis**—Includes unlawful or ill-perceived activities, such as sexual misconduct, drug use, or the indictment or arrest of a senior agency official. This is the most difficult crisis to counteract.

### **Pro-activity Versus Reactivity**

The best way to be pro-active about a crisis is to plan for it in advance and have a crisis management and communications plan in place and ready to go. It only takes one mishandled

crisis to cause your agency to lose the respect and trust that it has been building for decades. There are seven phases that an agency in crisis usually goes through:

- Denial
- Spin
- Recovery
- Wishful thinking
- Damage Control
- Anger and aggression
- Reconstruction

With a crisis communications plan in place before the crisis occurs, your agency can skip the first four phases and move immediately to damage control. That makes you a lot closer to recovery when you start. A crisis communications plan gives you time to formulate more comprehensive ideas and explanations. While you're in the midst of a crisis, stress reduces your field of vision, leaving you blind to alternatives that are obvious during a planning session done during a less stressful time.

### **How to Create a Crisis Communications Plan**

Sell the idea. The hardest job is to sell top managers their need for a plan. Brainstorm with them about the most likely crisis you could have. Ask them to assess how prepared you are to handle such a crisis.

Once you've sold the idea, work with management to start mobilizing and training a response team that will be responsible for coordinating communications with each of your various publics in the event of a crisis.

- Select the top manager who will head the in-house team to communicate with employees. Have workers from across your organization represented on the team.
- Select the top manager and team to deal with the media. Train several people to be media spokespersons.
- Select the manager and teams to communicate with customers, shareholders, and the key government and law enforcement agencies in your communities.
- Select the manager and team to keep your web site updated throughout the crisis.

Arrange a central site and phone number where all team members will check in when a crisis arises. Also select a secondary site and phone number.

Plan and tell employees how you will communicate quickly and effectively with each group. Make sure the teams know how to contact one another at all times by having current business and home telephone numbers, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses. Use an intra-net web site to distribute information to employees.

Establish separate points of contact for employees, media, customers, and others to call for information on the situation.

Determine who will make final decisions when you are releasing sensitive information.

Have each team review previous communications involving their publics. Look for strengths, weaknesses, and ways to improve relations. Begin working on those improvements.

Be sure the crisis teams know how to reach their key contacts at all times. Make sure they have day and night telephone numbers for both primary and secondary contacts, and keep those lists up-to-date.

Arrange for training and conduct simulations. All crisis team members need media and crisis training and regular refreshers. Keep everybody on their toes and constantly assess new potential problems.

In some situations, you may need to rely on wireless communications between teams and law enforcement officers. Do your homework and training; locate equipment.

### **What to Do When Crisis Occurs**

Communicate. Don't hide behind "no comment." If you do that, you immediately lose control. Even if all you can say is that you don't know, say so, say why and when you think you will know. Reporters look favorably on people who are trying to be helpful.

Never lie or speculate. Provide only factual, confirmed information.

Put people first. Help the people most affected by the crisis. In the case of accidents, remember to deal with victims' families before any other group. If they want you to, intercede on their behalf with the news media. Be sensitive to legal restrictions regarding information, such as the Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act. Know what kind of information is public and what must be withheld.

Communicate your concern about the victims.

Be available at all times to respond to your various publics. Know media deadlines and don't rely only on news conferences.

Don't be defensive. Be prepared for aggressive questioning. You might have to answer the same question several times.

Provide brief, precise answers to questions. Don't ramble. Use plain language. Short answers also help alleviate nervousness.

Take your time in explaining difficult issues to reporters.

Monitor media accounts and quickly correct errors by contacting the reporter or correspondents.

Don't attempt legal battles in the media. Express assurances that matters of litigation or potential litigation will be investigated thoroughly.

Prepare key points you want to make ahead of time. Make them short and to the point. Try to repeat them several times during the news conference or interview.

Stay with the crisis throughout its duration.

Follow up with the news media to keep them updated about what preventive actions were taken after the crisis ended.

Remember, the public's immediate assessment of an agency in crisis is based on these four factors of earning trust and credibility:

- Empathy and/or caring (usually assessed within the first 30 seconds)
- Competence, expertise, and readiness
- Honesty and openness
- Dedication and commitment

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