

A 9-Point reputation management crisis planning guide

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Planning for a response to a crisis need not be the crystal-ball activity it at first appears.

No one can be expected to know in detail how to respond to a hypothetical crisis of unknown dimension. Yet, retaining an experienced crisis communications professional can prove well worth the investment – just like buying insurance.

You cannot reasonably ask your PR counsel to develop plans for a building emergency, bankruptcy, major environmental disaster or plant closure, for example, simply because they're conceivable.

Together, though, your company's executives and an experienced crisis communications pro can develop the methodology now with which to apply sound PR principles, should disaster occur.

You can do it most inexpensively by blending the necessary steps into the existing activities in a PR plan. This, of course, means you should have a plan. Curiously, many developers and builders do not.



Here, then, are nine points to consider before developing your crisis preparedness plan:

1. Ask for a capabilities presentation from your PR counsel

If you haven't already done so, or if it's been some time since, ask your PR resource to outline its full range of capabilities. But buyer beware, not everyone has crisis experience.

Resources and experience you may require during a crisis may not be part of your current mix of PR activities, but that doesn't mean your PR firm is incapable of providing them. If not, how quickly could they get rolling in a crisis?

2. Analyze – to minimize – approval cycles

Routing a routine news release or other written PR material to too many people is a waste of everyone's time, and can cause serious problems during a crisis.

First, it will put noses out of joint to bypass some of them when issuing releases during an emergency.

Second, it does precisely the opposite of what it purports to do: By asking many people to review a draft, it becomes too tempting for each one to get careless about spotting errors. They each assume others have done or will do that.

3. Identify potential crisis situations

It's not as difficult as it seems. A brainstorming session among corporate executives and PR counsel might suggest a host of worst-case scenarios.

When you're developing your crisis preparedness plan, you can measure its potential effectiveness against these grim possibilities to pinpoint soft spots.

4. Prepare top management to be spokespeople

When disaster strikes, neither news media nor the public will tolerate a low-level corporate mouthpiece while top-level executives are unavailable for comment. Senior staff may need media training (or a refresher course) in advance, so they can handle the tough interviews even when there's no time for rehearsals and speechwriters.

5. Notify PR counsel of all news media contacts and speaking engagements

It makes for better media relations if your PR counsel (and marketing-PR staff) has a complete list of news media individuals familiar with your organization.

In a crisis, upcoming speaking engagements might also become ready-made opportunities to set the record straight when your audience suddenly wants to hear from you something very different from your original prepared text.

6. Use non-crisis events as planning exercises

Planning for a news conference heralding a new product line may proceed at a leisurely pace; but use it to identify the turnaround bottlenecks in case you have to arrange another, less festive one overnight.

It's not how quickly each step gets handled that matters, but how quickly each one could have been completed. Your analysis could suggest changes in your own organization and the way you relate to your PR firm.

One key problem to look for is how quickly people can be reached in an emergency, and what can be done if they can't.

7. Encourage broad-based contact by your PR counsel

Don't leave everything up to your marketing manager, funnelling all communications through them. Your PR representative should develop working relationships with a range of individuals in your company, so the introductions won't have to come in mid-crisis.

Who's the most credible in-house authority to respond to a particular issue? Which people are best suited for media interviews? How quickly can your PR people get direct answers to technical questions?

This broad-based approach doesn't imply a loss of personal control over approval of what your PR firm does. It simply helps shorten response times when you're too busy to run around looking for answers to their questions.

8. Review the fundamentals periodically

Your PR counsellor should be able to draft an up-to-the-minute company profile on short notice.

Biographies and pictures of key people and summaries of product lines are other examples of information that shouldn't have to be assembled in a panic. Have the information prepared in advance. Review it as part of each annual PR plan review.

9. Increase PR emphasis on strategic planning

It's easier in the short run to leave PR details to your PR consultant, to execute on a day-to-day basis.

It's more effective in the long run, however, to use your PR counsel's expertise to better equip your company for rapid response to crisis. Involve PR in your "where are we going?" sessions. Develop clear, consistent positions on social and economic issues.

Above all, be sure your PR counsel and staff fully understand your corporate objectives.



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