

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

A crisis can happen to any organization -- large or small, public or private. When it does, you must take immediate, corrective action to remedy the problem. You must also communicate your actions immediately and sometimes repeatedly to all appropriate audiences. Failure to communicate or to communicate effectively creates the perception that the crisis is continuing out of control, or that you are hiding something or are indifferent to public concern.

There have been many instances where an organization did an excellent job of containing or correcting the emergency, but failed to communicate those positive actions. The usual result was that the crisis was prolonged or the organization failed to recover at all. Successful crisis management involves communication as well as emergency response activities.

What is a crisis?

A crisis is an event requiring rapid decisions involving the media that, if handled incorrectly, can damage an organization's credibility and reputation.

There are two types of crises:

- Instantaneous (e.g., fire, explosion, etc.)
- Smoldering (e.g., a pattern of harassment, discrimination, etc.)

Crises need not be the seemingly unpredictable and uncontrollable events that their victims too often perceive, or allow them to become.

Your two goals in any crisis situation are to establish yourself as a credible source of information and to put a caring and compassionate face on the name of your company.

Five stages of a crisis

1. Identification:

- The critical stage in which you determine whether an event has turned into an emergency, and is likely to escalate into a crisis. Avoid denial!
- Gather information, ask these questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- Separate facts from speculation.

2. Containment:

- The stage in which you try to contain information about your crisis (e.g., local vs. national or international story, one-day story vs. week-long story, back page vs. front page, etc.).
- Timely, honest, forthright response to the media can help you achieve containment.
- Refusing or delaying communication to the media implies you are hiding something and will only serve to prolong or expand the media coverage of your crisis.

3. Communication:

- Communicate as quickly as possible and as frequently as is appropriate.
- Delaying communication will send reporters may go elsewhere to get their information after which it may be difficult or impossible for you to correct reports of inaccurate information.

- Communicate both externally (e.g., media) and internally (e.g., employees and other stakeholders).
 - Be consistent in your communications. Don't say one thing to employees and another thing to the media.
4. Format for your Press Briefing
 - Introduce yourself -- name and organization
 - Set the ground rules -- explain how you will conduct the briefing
 - Make your statement -- reading it is ok
 - Be sure to express empathy and caring
 - Allow time for Q&A only if you decide if you will take questions
 - End/Exit the interview
 5. Correction
 - The media are motivated by what went wrong, who's to blame, and what has changed to prevent further incidents
 - The media will want to know, "Do you recognize this as a problem? What are you going to do to prevent it from happening again?"
 - Explain what you are doing to investigate the problem. If possible, explain what corrective measures you are taking to prevent the problem from recurring.
 6. Recovery:
 - Recovery starts at the beginning of your crisis -- when you properly identify your event as a crisis.
 - Your goal is to have as short a recovery period as possible.
 - You must convince people that you care and want to do what is right.
 - If you "break even" after an incident and keep your credibility and reputation intact, you have succeeded.
 - Being accessible to the media in order to communicate your messages to the public will facilitate recovery.
 - Remember, your goal is to communicate with the public; the media are merely a conduit.

Crisis Communications Center

A crisis communications center serves as a central news center in times of an emergency. It provides you with a suitable location in which to brief the news media.

- Select and equip your facility well in advance of an emergency.
- Choose a room large enough to accommodate multiple reporters.
- The room can continue to serve the original purpose for which it was designed (e.g., conference room), but it should be adapted now to serve in a future emergency.
- Be sure the room contains ample electrical and telephone outlets for laptop computers.
- Provide extra phones and fax machines.
- Dedicate a corner of the room to accommodate coffee, soft drinks, snacks.
- When selecting a room, look for good entrance and exit capability. The person who communicates with the media should not walk through the media either to speak to them or to leave. Try to have a door to your back when briefing the news media.
- If there is no suitable room for the crisis communications center at your location, or if the crisis has rendered your room unusable, then select an alternate crisis management site (e.g., hotel conference room).

- Your event might occur far from your planned crisis communications center. For example, you might end up talking to the media in the middle of a field somewhere. That's ok. Tell the media that is where you will continue to communicate.
- The goal is to provide a central location for all company communications during a crisis. By helping the media do their jobs better, you help your organization. Together you become a team helping the public understand what can easily be an easily misunderstood situation.

After an Emergency

Anticipate media follow-up

Expect and prepare for follow-up media inquiries several days or weeks after the emergency. Also, news reports in one medium can trigger interest by other media a day or two after the emergency.

Monitor news coverage

Monitor the print and broadcast news coverage of the emergency. Depending on the severity of the emergency and length of media interest, monitoring may be required for more than a day or two. (You may want to obtain videotapes of the TV news coverage from a video monitoring service if you have not been taping the broadcasts yourself.) Are the news reports accurate? Is there a need to get inaccurate reports corrected? Do editorials or letters to the editor indicate community concern?

Obtain positive PR

One of the most important opportunities to obtain positive public relations comes after the emergency is over. As appropriate, release to the news media, as soon as possible, company decisions about special employee or community relief, plant reconstruction, etc. Express gratitude to the community, police and fire departments, emergency crews, medical personnel and employees for their help.