

## When Things Go Wrong:

### A Crisis Communications Plan Points You in the Right Direction

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Is your company prepared should an accident or natural disaster threaten your employees or your building? What if a serious incident shuts down your computers and your business operations came to an abrupt halt? How will you respond if litigation, financial issues or a scandal tarnish the reputation of senior executives?

A crisis can occur in any type of business, at any time. The possibilities are endless: your company's delivery truck runs into a parked car and seriously injures the occupants; a hacker breaks into your computer system and gains access to confidential client records; a rainstorm floods your warehouse, damaging 15 percent of your inventory.

The fallout from a crisis can be complicated and damaging to a business. With a user-friendly, up-to-date crisis communications plan in place, a business owner has the means to keep employees and the public informed and maintain as much control as possible when disaster hits.

Unfortunately, many businesses don't plan ahead, and as a result find they are ill-prepared when faced with a crisis. Often the need for crisis-communication planning is dismissed, rationalizing that it's just for big companies or those in dangerous industries. Yet, just as a company's financial plan is integral to its success, so is a plan that can guide a company through a disaster.

The first step toward creating a crisis communications plan is to define the types of crises that may occur. While each crisis has its own special action items, the key to handling crisis communications is to look ahead and plan.

Begin by writing a memo to key managers defining how the company will immediately respond. Some topics to cover include: an overview of possible circumstances; how to summon help; how employees and if applicable, the community, are protected from harm; how to warn employees to avoid hazardous areas; instructions for evacuating employees without inciting panic; steps needed to minimize the impact of the crisis; and necessary back-up systems.

The plan also needs to examine how to inform and update employees and the public. Prompt crisis communication – via news media, email, text messages, and/or phone calls can reduce the harm caused by the incident. Determine who should be authorized to talk with the press. Establish procedures to provide designated spokespeople with timely and accurate information about the situation. Be prepared to notify reporters by having a list of media contacts prepared. This is not the time to be chasing down a reporter's cell-phone number.

The media can be invaluable as a provider of public information. To maintain a company's reputation and be able to respond to difficult questions that may arise, a good crisis communications plan needs to consider the following procedures for dealing with the media:

### **Manage media access**

While you don't want reporters and TV crews getting in the way or going into hazardous areas, you also don't want to restrict access making it difficult for them to report the story.

The answer? Notify the media that you have a check-in location where they must register. Have a designated representative available to provide an updated briefing about the situation. Oversee media, by offering an escort to safe areas.

### **Assign Press Spokespeople**

Allowing unauthorized or uninformed people to talk with the press is asking for trouble. An unfortunate example occurred some years ago when there was a fire in an East Bay office building. A woman on the third floor panicked and got on the elevator. Sadly, it stalled between floors trapping her and she died of smoke inhalation.

A building maintenance employee told a TV reporter – on camera -- that he had warned his boss about problems with that elevator.

An investigation determined that the elevator did not malfunction. Rather, the electric power had been knocked out by the fire, which caused the elevator to stall. It was also clearly marked that the stairs and not the elevator should be used in case of a fire.

Nonetheless, the worker's remark made a bad situation even worse, putting the building owner in a position of legal jeopardy.

An informed – and media-trained – spokesperson would have provided the facts and avoided the unnecessary negative fallout from the incident.

It's essential that all managers and employees (particularly new hires) understand that only designated spokespeople are authorized to speak with the press.

### **Verify Information**

Be pro-active in providing up-to-date and accurate information to the media. Keep them informed, even if the news is bad, but be sure to double-check information for accuracy. Haste, confusion, and the possibility of danger all contribute to the likelihood that inaccurate information will be circulated. Electronic media in particular are under intense pressure to be first with the story. If incorrect information is reported, do everything possible to correct it. The dissemination of inaccurate information can cause additional confusion to an already chaotic situation.

The impacts of inaccuracies can be devastating. A case in point is the January 2006 Sago mine disaster in West Virginia. Non-stop news coverage focused on efforts to rescue 13 miners trapped by an explosion. The world watched as church bells rang and people cheered when it was announced that 12 of the miners had been rescued. Unfortunately, the news was not true. In fact, 12 miners had died and only one survived, dashing the joy of the miners' families.

Who was at fault? That's hard to say, given the confusion of the situation. But the message is clear that verifying information is key to demonstrating to the public that you are in control and can be trusted.

Finally, whether you develop a crisis communications plan with your staff or hire a crisis communications expert to develop an effective plan, it's critical that you have a plan in place, ready to go.

Then hope you never need to use it.

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