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Crisis Management

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Editor's Letter

PR's Leadership Role in Crisis Management Begins Now

Dear Reader,

Crises are a part of doing business. Handled well, they demonstrate to your publics that yours is an organization that puts people before profits, truth before denial and spin.

When a crisis is handled poorly, it can escalate to a point of no return.

The key to handling crises is to be ready ahead of time for the storm that is always on the horizon. Proper planning can take the panic out of the initial response to a crisis and can set the tone for the post-crisis communications, out-reach and repair efforts.

Crisis planning means taking a long, hard look at your company, its products and services and the people who represent the company to the world. It means assessing weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

It also means strategizing and creating an action plan; one that identifies teams, internal assets, lines of communication and communications protocols.

You may do a great job of communicating to your core constituencies, but when a crisis hits, your audience is mostly composed of complete strangers and you must deliver your messaging with that fact in mind.

This edition of the PR News Crisis Management Guidebook brings together the latest research, case studies and expertise from the field of crisis management. The authors have been in the trenches and bring to the table a wealth of experiences. The content in this guidebook will provide you with guidance on issues ranging from research tips to social media tactics to having an effective crisis plan. As crisis management is not a science, per se, you'll find many different views on best practices, but you are certain to find interesting and game-changing takeaways from all of the contributors.

We hope you enjoy this Guidebook and will update us at PR News on your communications successes.

Sincerely,

The PR News Editorial Team

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Following are the companies featured in this guidebook.

"If you don't measure your company's preparedness and resiliency, how do you know if you are able to manage a crisis?"

— Suzanne Rhulen Loughlin,
Co-founder and EVP, Firestorm Solutions, LLC

Play The Role of The Tough Reporter in Your Crisis War Room

By Joe Hodas

Executives don't want to think about crises before they're in one, and they certainly don't see the point of spending money and time on a crisis that hasn't yet occurred. Too often, they think that if a crisis does arise, they can wing it. As a professional winger, I can safely say that nothing can prepare you for cameras, lights and questions as you try and explain loss of life, loss of shareholder value or other crisis scenarios with limited information, muffled by a veil of chaos and fear. Nothing.

Create a simple plan. If you find yourself with hours, or even minutes, before a crisis occurs, there is still time to train. Better yet, you can actually kill two birds with one stone because you will also have to craft messaging for your various responses and communications. There's no better way to test your messaging than to run it through a real-time, iterative process grounded in media training. If it doesn't sound good the first time it rolls off the lips of your CEO, odds are likely that it's not the right message.

Below are eight steps/considerations for media training in a storm that should help you prepare for, though maybe not conquer, whatever crisis you face:

1. **Find a dedicated war room immediately.** If it has presentation capabilities, that's great. But mostly it just has to be a room large enough to hold a crowd and convenient enough for all to access.
2. **Identify your team.** Keep it managable. In a crisis, when time is of the essence, less is

> If you find yourself with hours, or even minutes, before a crisis occurs, there is still time to train.

more. Otherwise you'll never get to consensus on the messaging and you won't get to run through any of it for practice. I recommend some combination of at least the following representation:

- Legal counsel: Just to be safe.
- CEO/president: If at all possible, and depending upon the nature of the crisis, this should also be your spokesperson.
- Subject matter expert: This will vary depending on the crisis.
- PR counsel: That's you.
- Note taker/researcher: If you are going to act as the PR counsel, it's beneficial to have someone there to capture words, expressions, facts etc., so you can focus on driving the discussion.
- CFO: Why the CFO? CFOs tend to have a very analytical mind and they often know the risks associated with certain messaging and have a good sense for any insurance or third-party vendors that should be involved.

3. **Development of messaging.** Ideally, you have spent about two hours developing two columns:

- Facts: These are the elements you know to be true about the situation.

Don't Panic: Use This Checklist for Containing a Crisis Situation

For organizations mired in a crisis, having a plan, swift stakeholder communications and active reputation management are crucial to help mitigate controversy. David Kalson, CEO of Ricochet PR and 20-year crisis-management veteran, recommends an organization use this checklist to work through a bad situation:

- ❑ **Draft a team.** Assemble a crisis response team with the CEO as the ultimate decision maker and choose your spokesperson(s). Ensure that operations and communications are closely coordinated by including both operational managers as well as communications managers on the team. Also include legal experts and subject-matter experts, e.g., if the crisis is an IT security breach, the head of IT must be on the team.
- ❑ **Categorize the seriousness.** How many people are victims, real or perceived? Is the media covering it? Which media? Some are more influential, hence consequential than others. Can the crisis be contained at a local facility or does it impugn the entire corporation, nationally or globally?
- ❑ **"Tell it first and tell it fast" to audiences affected by the crisis.** Make your organization the authoritative informational resource on the crisis, or else someone else will take that role from you. Tactics could include an apology to victims, Web site content, op-eds, remuneration to victims, ads, regulatory filings, legal actions, etc.
- ❑ **Focus Internally.** Make your employees a primary audience so they are equipped to carry your crisis-related messages to customers and into the community while they maintain their productivity and morale.
- ❑ **Break out the influencers.** Whenever possible, use respected third-party experts to tell your story during a crisis.
- ❑ **Be media savvy.** Use media/presentation training during a crisis and rehearse before going before the media or groups.
- ❑ **Rule No. 1. Empathize (be human) to victims, real or perceived.** They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

— PR News Editors

- Messages: These are the words that you'll use to communicate the facts. What you really want to get to, for the purpose of media training at least, is a series of three to five (three is ideal) broad messages that cover only the most essential points of the situation. Each of those can be supported by three messages/facts. If you go any deeper than that, it's easy for your spokesperson to get confused, share too much or the wrong information. One of the downsides to media training during a crisis is that as you go through the messaging process, it's easy to forget what was merely part of the "discussion" versus an actual key message.

4. **Now that you have your messaging, it's time to try it out in front of an audience.** If you have the time and technical capabilities, it's best to capture the training on video. This way, you can play back the critique via video, rather than interrupting it in real time. Also, the video will help you see exactly how your spokesperson might come across on camera, which can be much different than seeing him or her in person.
5. **Opening Statement.** Start your training with your spokesperson making an "opening statement" to set the stage/tone for questions.
6. **This is the fun part; you get to be the nasty reporter.** Really grill your spokesperson and switch up the style. Try to use as many tricks of the trade as you can, such as:

- Silence: So often, when a reporter lets the silence sit for a few seconds, the interview subject will try to fill the silence with words—sometimes words that should never have left his or her mouth.

- Interruptions: Don't let your spokesperson finish his or her sentence. See how many times you can do that before they get flustered.
- False or misleading info: Feel free to throw out a question or some information your spokesperson has never heard or considered. See if he or she can bring it back to the key messages.
- Confrontation: Ask your spokesperson something that borders on personal/emotional and see if he/she can come across as sympathetic, but not necessarily as the bad guy.

7. **Analyze, analyze, analyze.** Which messages worked, which didn't? Which facts did your spokesperson get wrong? Did he/she lean too much to one side of the camera? Was the spokesperson able to convey sincerity and integrity? Did he/she fall for any reporter tricks?
8. **Finalize the messaging document and make sure everyone who needs it has a copy.** And go ahead and use that messaging to begin drafting that first release/statement to post to your Web site, Facebook, Twitter, the company blog and the wires.

In all, this exercise requires at least three hours. The media training itself, however, shouldn't go on for more than two hours. You don't want your spokesperson to get run down before the crisis even hits. Also, make sure everyone in the room agrees to a specific time frame to declaring a situation a crisis or not. If it's decided that the situation is not a crisis, then you've still come up with a wonderful way to get your spokesperson invested in media training. PRN

Joe Hodas is the EVP of channels for Vladimir Jones, and is a partner in the agency. He has more than 17 years of experience in consumer branding.