



Communicating in Crisis Situations

~ Peter Turkington & Colin Reade, Strategic Communications Solutions

Are you prepared to respond to a crisis?

What would you do if your company's president suffered a fatal heart attack days before the company issued an IPO on the stock exchange? What if the president is incapacitated for an extended period?

How would you communicate with your key stakeholders in the event of extreme weather conditions (i.e. multiple hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, etc.)?

Is your company prepared to weather the storm of an Avian Flu Pandemic? Have you considered how it might impact your business? And, do you know how to get information to those that need it during a health emergency.

These aren't just 'pie in the sky' scenarios. In recent years we have had to deal with two out of the three situations listed above, Hurricane Katrina and SARS. And that's not the end of it. Reports suggest an active hurricane season this year and the WHO continues to monitor the possibilities of human to human transmission of the H5N1 virus. Authorities claim that it's not a question of if it will happen, but when will it happen.

We live in an environment of intense media scrutiny. Improvements in technology such as the Internet, the Blackberry email device and text messaging mean that there is a 24 hour news environment. Organizations become easy targets for uncontrolled communication in an unregulated cyberspace.

This means that corporate actions will be monitored closely on a daily basis. Imagine the scrutiny when a crisis hits.

As the court of public opinion will decide whether or not your organization is guilty and not a court of law, your response to this scrutiny will determine how your stakeholders view the company.

It is no longer sufficient to send out a team of lawyers to deny the charges or utter a simple 'no comment.'

The question needs to be asked, are you prepared to handle an incident? Does your company have an action plan? Who will respond to the press when they call (there's one certainty in a crisis situation, the media will call)? Are your responses perceived as caring and genuine?

There must be complete transparency. Corporate leaders should understand that setting the record straight is the best course of action. An admission that there is a problem or situation must be made and the corrective action being taken must be outlined. Remember, if your reputation is destroyed by negative publicity, a court victory at a later date may not be enough to restore it.

While transparency and clear messaging will help organizations communicate during a disaster, emergency or crisis, it takes intense planning to make sure that they are prepared and delivered properly. Being unprepared can cause a spokesperson to fall into the lethal trap of speculation. In the midst of a crisis media have an insatiable appetite for information and they will not



hesitate to ask the “what if” and the “in your opinion” questions. Improper handling of these types of questions could spell disaster for any corporation.

Public relations practitioners cannot predict a specific disaster or crisis. They do know, however, that the unexpected can, and will, occur. According to Christine Pearson and Judith Clair, authors of *Reframing Crisis Management*, a crisis situation is a low probability high impact event that threatens the viability of any organization.

To help organizations survive, practitioners can anticipate various scenarios and prepare crisis communication plans that meet the needs of top management during an emergency.

Organizations that choose not to develop crisis communication plans often make mistakes in handling crises:

- Hesitation, which leads people to believe that the organization is incompetent.
- Obfuscation, which gives the impression that the organization is telling lies.
- Retaliation, which only serves to intensify the situation rather than diffuse it.
- Not telling the whole truth, which complicates matters when discovered.
- Not dealing with the situation at hand – the head buried in the sand approach.
- Confrontation, which only serves to keep the issue alive.
- Litigation, which guarantees prolonging the life and increasing the visibility of the situation.

These mistakes can be avoided by following the six simple steps outlined below:

- Take the time to identify things that can go wrong and become highly visible.
- Assess the organization’s vulnerabilities.
- Prioritize the urgency of the vulnerabilities identified (i.e. which are most likely).
- Anticipate questions that could arise with each scenario and draft responses/resolutions.
- Focus on the areas of what to do and what to say during the initial hours of a crisis.
- Your strategy’s purpose should be to contain and counteract. It should be proactive and not reactive.

Once an organization has worked through these steps, they will have the outline of a crisis manual. Copies of this manual should be made and distributed to the company’s executives. The key members of the crisis team should ensure they have copies at home as well. Crises don’t contain themselves to regular business hours.

It is important that employees are familiar with the crisis plan once it has been approved. Preparation is key. While you might be dealing with a situation out of your control, your messaging and response will be well within your grasp. The ability of your organization to get the correct message out could mean the difference between weathering the storm and bankruptcy.

Peter Turkington and Colin Reade are the principals of Strategic Communications Solutions (SCS).

In today’s increasingly competitive business climate, SCS provides timely, accurate and measurable communication objectives, strategies and tactics that meet your organizational needs.

Peter, Colin and their team offer organizations over 50 years of expert knowledge in the public relations field. As a result, SCS combines current knowledge of the industry and its trends with a wealth of seasoned expertise.