

**"OH, THAT
WOULD NEVER
HAPPEN"**



Why You Need a Crisis Communications Plan

By Scott Fraser

Did Freedom Industries ever think that a tiny little one inch leak could contaminate a West Virginia water supply? Did Governor Chris Christie ever believe he would have to address lane closures on the George Washington bridge? Did organizers of the Boston Marathon ever dream that two bombs would be detonated at their finish line?

OK, you get the picture. So why have you not completed your crisis communications plan? If you are like most companies and clients I counsel, you know the need for such a plan, it is on your "to-do" list (although never quite makes it to the top), and you will definitely get to it "some day." But guess what? A crisis will not wait until you are ready for it. It may be right around the corner. Or, if you are very fortunate, it may never occur. But do you really want to take that chance?

With today's multi-layered instant media communications, including social media, news travels at the speed of light. If you are not ready to deal with the unexpected, you will be slow to respond which will make you and your business look backwards and unprepared. The longer a company takes to respond to a crisis, the more some people will perceive this as "guilt" of some kind. Is this the image you want to portray when your individual, corporate, and/or event's reputation is on the line? Of course not!

So, although it may take some time, and a little bit of effort, now is the time to create, and complete your crisis communications plan – don't just start it. Don't just say, "I'll get to it, right after I finish the financial reports/sales projections/budget," or something else that seems equally as important at the time. Sit down with a few key leaders in your organization and get it done. If you need outside help, call in a professional who specializes in crisis communications. It may cost a little bit of money up front, but when you get that 3:00 a.m. phone call about "a situation," you will be very happy you took the time, made the effort, and expended some capital.

What should be in a crisis communications plan? It really is not that hard when you break it down. It should be a who, what, when, where type of listing. When a crisis occurs, the plan will tell you who needs to be notified, how soon they have to be contacted, and in what order people are notified. The plan will then tell you what needs to be done, with a general step-by-step strategy that will cover most any situation. The plan will tell you where you should meet and how you will go about putting the plan into operation. A list of your "audiences" should be available and you need to know how they will be notified.

You must always have a spokesperson identified and thoroughly trained in

dealing with the media. This person should be directly involved in crafting the key messages. He or she should be well versed in the three key message points along with some supporting information that you will be making public and/or using to answer media inquiries. Always put your most important point first. This person should be comfortable in front of a camera and microphone and also have the ability to speak in short (15 seconds or less) sound bites that can be easily used by the reporter.

It is generally not a good idea to have your CEO serve as the spokesperson. Why? Think Tony Hayward, the former CEO of BP. After several weeks of serving as the official company spokesperson during the oil rig explosion and huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, he will be forever remembered for uttering 5 fateful words "I'd like my life back." In what was probably an attempt to show his human side and maybe gain some support, he came off as callous, self-centered and unfeeling, especially in light of the fact that 11 workers on the rig were killed in the blast and 17 were injured. In addition hundreds of businesses lost millions of dollars and in some cases had to shut down, because of the spill.

A more practical reason not to have your CEO serve as the spokesperson is that if he or she can't answer a question or makes a mistake, they, and the company, look foolish. A reporter might logically ask "How can you not know the answer to that?" If a spokesperson can't answer a question, or inadvertently makes a mistake, there is always someone at a higher level who can provide the answer or correct the error. Make no mistake however, the CEO should be visible and available for important news conferences or media briefings. They just should not be the one handling every media inquiry.

Another key member of the team is someone to monitor social media and provide continual updates through your Twitter feed, Facebook page, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Google + accounts, etc. You should also have an outside crisis communications expert as part of the team to help counsel you and provide an important perspective from outside your organization. While your team will have a handful of members, one person should be designated as having final decision-making powers in case of conflicting opinions or ideas.

Why go through all this if you don't believe you will ever need it? It comes down to the Boy Scout motto: Be Prepared. If you have a plan and never use it, good for you! You may count yourself fortunate. If you have not yet created your plan, when a crisis occurs, you will spend valuable time trying to put this plan together "on the fly." When you do this, mistakes are made,

key points are overlooked, and confusion reigns. It will take valuable time for you or your company to get your act together. That terrible silence will be filled by your competitors or detractors and the news media, speculating on what might have happened, why it happened, and raising questions as to why you have not yet been heard from. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to pull yourself out of this kind of hole.

The critical reason for having a plan in place is to protect the company's reputation, and quite possibly its very existence, at a time when the company's future is truly on the line. How a crisis is managed and how communications are put forth are often much more important than *what* is said. Every action a company takes, every word that is spoken will count, either for you or against you. Poor crisis communications can actually make a situation worse. Individuals, companies or organizations that handle a crisis well usually emerge stronger and well respected.

Crisis communications, good or bad, can have far reaching effects on a company's bottom line, employee morale, internal and external opinions of management and a company's overall image. If a situation is not handled well, one can expect lawsuits, continued media inquiries, government and regulatory investigations, just to name a few.

Even if you don't have a good story to tell, being able to respond immediately, and acknowledging that a situation exists, shows that you at least are prepared to deal with an emergency. Telling the story from your point of view is extremely important, and always better than letting someone else tell the story for you.

Remember, doing nothing is always the wrong choice. During a crisis, some will advocate to do nothing, say nothing, acknowledge nothing, and hope that the situation will go away. It never does. Your silence will be filled by others and by information that may not be accurate. When you finally decide to go public with a statement, (and you will make that decision) no matter what you say, you will be seen as defensive and always trying to catch up to all of the other information that has already been swirling about in the public domain.

Another key point to remember is, once you have a plan, review it. Look at this plan often. Make sure that all of the email addresses and phone numbers are current. Check to see that all members of the team are still in place. If some have moved on to other responsibilities or have left the company, make sure their names have been deleted and that their replacements have been added to the list.

If I have done my job with this article, I have made you at least a little uncomfortable because you realize you have a lot to do either to create a plan or bring

your existing plan up to date. If you still are sitting back saying "I just don't need a crisis plan for my business," please think again. You have spent years and probably invested a fair amount of money building your brand and your reputation. Do you really want to risk all of this by not being ready for the unexpected?

Sometimes when I speak I will ask my audience to give me a type of business that they think may not need a crisis communications plan. In most cases, in just a few seconds, I am able to come up with a scenario for that business that shows a need for crisis communications.

Still not convinced? Here's one example. Why would a dry cleaner need to have a crisis communications plan? They take your clothes in, remove stains, make repairs, clean and press all kinds of garments, and generally return your clothes in much better condition than when you brought them in. Well, a number of years ago, there was a fire in a small strip mall in a local community. The fire started in a pizza restaurant. The restaurant was destroyed by fire and smoke and water caused heavy damage to the other businesses in the strip mall. One of these businesses was a dry cleaner.

Suddenly, through no fault of their own, hundreds, if not thousands, of garments in their shop had been destroyed. Did they have a plan for such a situation? How would they contact their customers? What would they say? Would they make restitution? Would insurance money have to be used? Whose insurance would pay – the cleaner's or the restaurant's? When would they re-open? Could any of the clothes be salvaged? These are all valid questions that customers probably started asking as soon as they heard the news about the fire.

Remember, a crisis doesn't have to be of your own making. You can be a victim too, but you must be ready and able to respond.

Bottom line, with a little bit of preparation, time and effort, you might just sleep a little better. Then, heaven forbid, if you do get that dreaded phone call, you will allow yourself a quick smile, knowing that your forethought and preparation is now going to pay off.

Good luck!

Scott Fraser is principal of Fraser Communications Group and an expert on crisis communications. He is an adjunct professor of Crisis Communications at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI and has taught classes, conducted seminars, and authored articles on this subject. He can be reached at sfraser@fraser-comm.com or (401) 647-3444.