

THEY SAID WHAT???

By Scott Fraser

Creating a Crisis Communication Plan

First let me say what a pleasure and honor it was to be invited to present at this year's IFEA 60th Anniversary Convention and Expo at the JW Marriott in Tucson this past September. For those of you who were able to attend, you know the sessions were jam-packed with great information, the exhibits were informative, the after-session activities were fun, and the location was spectacular. Personally, I was fortunate to make many new friends who either attended one of my sessions or who I may have sat with at general sessions, awards ceremonies or one of the social events.



In any case, if you were not able to attend, here is an abbreviated version of my presentation on crisis communications. This will be presented in two parts. This issue's edition will be about the creation of your crisis communications plan. In the next installment of this column, I will discuss what to do when the crisis hits, and how best to put your plan into practice.

So, what is a crisis? Sure, you can think of any number of situations, but can you define it? The best definition says that a crisis is any situation that has a severe negative impact on an organization's reputation and/or bottom line. A crisis may place lives, reputation, and/or property at risk.

So, why don't you have a plan? No stumbling or stammering allowed! If you don't have a crisis plan in place, start the process, today! If you have not had a crisis involving your event or organization, consider yourself fortunate. And it is not a matter of "if" but "when" your crisis will happen. Since that is the case, why not follow the Boy Scout motto and "Be Prepared."

How do you begin? I'm glad you asked. First, you have to create a plan. You do that by gathering key personnel of your

organization. Depending on the size of your organization, you probably want to have five or six on your crisis team. Wait, you only have three people on staff? Well, obviously they will all be part of your crisis team, but you should also have some outside help. This can include local police and fire personnel and local public relations professionals. You must clearly define the roles of everyone on the team. Among the roles, one person must be designated as the spokesperson and one person must be designated as the final decision maker.

When creating a crisis communications plan, one of the first things to do is to define your audiences . . . all of them. Who will be affected by this crisis? The community? Your attendees? Your vendors? Your suppliers? The media? Local legislators? And most important of all, make sure you do not leave out your employees as a key audience.

Once you have decided who your audiences are, you have to decide the best way to communicate with each. Will you use email, text, mass media, phone calls, news conferences, your website, Facebook, Twitter, or some combination of these?

Then you must decide what you will say. Of course, this will be dictated by the nature of the crisis, but you can list some general guidelines in your plan. For instance, vendors and suppliers will need to know how this will affect their business. The public will need to know how this crisis will affect their plans to attend. The media will need to be updated as often as you can.

Social media will of course play an important part in dealing with any crisis. In your crisis communications plan, make sure you have simple instructions on how to post a message on any of the social media platforms in which you participate. Also, keep a current list of all user names and passwords necessary to access these social media outlets. That way, in case the person who handles social media in your organization is not available in a crisis, any member of the team will be able to post messages.

You also want to have the contact information of everyone on your crisis team listed in your plan. Make sure these are kept up to date and include all possible ways to reach people. When a crisis hits, you may not have a lot of time to react. If you have as much spelled out in your plan as possible, it will be that much easier to implement. Also, know where you will meet in times of crisis. Your regular office may not be available, so be sure to have an alternate location that is accessible to all.

OK, let's fast forward a bit and assume you have created your plan or already have one in place. Don't let it just sit in a folder (electronic or otherwise) or on a desk or shelf. Practice! Set aside some

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time every few months and practice how you will react when a crisis hits. This is the time to expect the unexpected. Remember, a crisis may not be of your own making. You may be the victim, but will still have to deal with your audiences.

And, as you are conducting these practice sessions, make sure all of the information in your plan (names, addresses, phone numbers, emails, passwords, etc.) is up to date.

While we are on the subject of your actual plan, once completed, create hard copies as well as electronic files. I know that sounds a bit "old school" but if the crisis includes loss of access to your computer or files, you will want to be able to access a hard copy and put your plan into action.

All right, this is probably enough information to get you started on the creation of your crisis communications plan. In the next installment, I will give you some tips on what to do when the crisis hits. In the meantime, if you have any questions, or need further advice, please let me know. Good luck!

Scott Fraser is a veteran communications professional with more than 30 years' experience. As principal of Fraser Communications Group, he provides public relations, media relations and crisis communications advice for his clients who range from small non-profits, to international corporations. He has been hired to protect the reputations of companies in crisis, and gain positive public exposure for clients ranging from an emerging high tech company to established organizations in industry and healthcare. Sought after as a public speaker, Fraser also is an adjunct professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI, teaching courses in Crisis Communications and Public Relations. You can reach Scott at: sfraser@frasercomm.com, (401) 647-3444 and follow him @frasercomm on Twitter.