

THEY SAID WHAT???

By Scott Fraser

Creating a Crisis Communication Plan Part 2

You may recall in the November issue of “ie” Magazine, this column dealt with some of the steps you need to take to create a crisis communications plan. If you already have a crisis communications plan, congratulations! I hope these tips were a helpful review. If you did not yet have a plan, I hope that column was helpful in beginning the process. If you have not yet created a crisis communications plan, what are you waiting for???



This month's column builds on the last. It contains information that was presented at last September's 60th Anniversary IFEA Convention and Expo in Tucson, AZ. This will help you put your crisis communications plan into play when your crisis hits.

As a reminder, what differentiates a crisis from an unpleasant occurrence? In a crisis, you have the elements of surprise, some kind of threat and a short response time.

When a crisis hits, remember, time really is of the essence. With an almost instantaneous news cycle, if you are not able to provide information, chances are someone else will, and it may not be accurate and it may not be favorable.

The goal of any crisis is to deal with it (and make no mistake, you MUST deal with it) and transition, rather quickly we hope, from crisis into opportunity.

But in an effort to deal with a crisis quickly, do not sacrifice the need for accuracy. There are many examples of a news outlet rushing to be the first to get a story on the air without fully checking all the facts. This can lead to

some embarrassing reporting, and the need for later apologies. Do not fall into this trap. The need for accuracy always outweighs the need for speed.

First and foremost, get as much information as possible. Decide what you will say and how you will say it. Craft three key messages. This will help you organize your thoughts and decide what the most important information is to share with your audiences. Always give your messages in order of importance. In a time of crisis, it is important that your information is clearly reported and you want to help the media with this reporting as much as you can.

As you prepare your talking points, you want to ask some important questions. What are the holes in our messages? Who will be critical of us? Who will support us? What will they say? Your answers to these questions will help you prepare your communications to your various audiences.

Prepare your spokesperson. The spokesperson should be media trained and have experience dealing with reporters. If he/she is the one

who regularly communicates with the media, your messages will be more readily accepted. Make sure your spokesperson has as much information as possible, including a timeline of events. As a side note, it is best if you have some information prepared in advance. For instance, your organization history, bios on key leaders, who you serve and what you do, should already be on your website.

As your spokesperson begins to distribute the information, you probably want to prepare your administrative and security staff as well. There is a good chance they will be getting the next round of inquiries and quite possibly on-site visits from members of the media or interested publics. Make sure they have instructions for dealing with the situation including what to say or what not to say.

As the crisis unfolds, you need to stay flexible. Despite all of your best efforts in crafting your plan, depending on the situation and the reactions of the public and/or media, you may need to revise your plan, and do so quickly, to keep up with the events as they unfold.

Along with being prompt in your messaging, be direct. Now is not the time for flowery speeches about your event or organization. As that old time detective used to say on television, your audiences want “just the facts”.

And, this should go without saying, but always tell the truth. With all of the online and social media resources available today, even the smallest lie will be found out. Then all credibility will be lost. During a crisis it is imperative that your credibility be maintained at

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all times. If you are being questioned by the media and you don't know the answer to something it is OK to say "I don't know". Offer to get the information as soon as you can and then do so.

No matter how big or small the crisis may be, your audiences want two things. They want to know "How does this affect me?" And they want reassurance. Keep this in mind as you create your messages. Let the audiences know how they will be affected. And give them reassurance, if you can.

If you remember one thing in a crisis (with apologies to my middle school English teacher) don't do nothing. Doing nothing is always the wrong choice. It appears that you are hiding from the situation, or worse yet, that you are unprepared. If you say or do nothing, the void will be filled by your opponents or detractors or both. Their message will not be positive which will require more work on your part once you decide to get your message out.

Once the crisis has passed, take a deep breath. You made it through. But now is the time to take a good honest look at your crisis communications plan. Did it work well? Were there any problems? What improvements should you make for next time?

So there you have it. Two columns which I hope will help you in a time of crisis. May you never need to use any of this information, but may you be well prepared, just in case.

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