

HarveyLeach

How to
handle
crisis
communications

About the authors



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Preparation

“By the time you hear the thunder, it’s too late to build the ark”, someone once said.

It is astonishing how few companies or organisations have even the barest preparations in place to handle the media in the event of a crisis. Yet the media’s response can swiftly move events from crisis to catastrophe.

Most large organisations have a crisis plan, and many practise it regularly, but it invariably deals only with internal response and recovery. The plan hardly ever takes the media onslaught into consideration.

Preparation

For example, you must be prepared for the arrival of the media village that is likely to gather in the event of a crisis breaking – either outside your organisation’s headquarters or at the focal point of the crisis. That could be the scene of an accident, the source of a damaging allegation or a factory closing. The media encampment might comprise several satellite trucks from the main broadcasters, radio cars and legions of camera crews, reporters and photographers. Where will you marshal them – outside on the pavement, or inside your offices?

Then, as the questions begin, what will you tell them? How much can you tell them? Can your spokespeople hold the company line under intense questioning?

Preparation

When your organisation is suddenly engulfed by a crisis, don't stay silent. However grim things are looking, it's generally best to release a statement of some kind to the media – and do it fast. The longer you leave it, the more quickly the evidence will build up against you in the mind of the public.

The media will interview eyewitnesses, survivors, victims, those affected by the crisis and, most worryingly of all from your organisation's point of view, experts. They will have a lot to say about what has happened, some of it ill-informed or possibly guesswork.

Preparation

When, eventually, you decide to confront the media several hours later, you will have lost a considerable amount of ground which is then very difficult to recapture.

You need to decide in advance who will speak to the media. Who will undertake interviews for the various broadcasters and newspapers? Don't just rely on your most senior people. They might be on holiday, or ill. In any case, they will be closely concerned with managing the crisis itself. How many people do you have who can deal confidently and skillfully with the media and go before the cameras when a crisis breaks?

Preparation

Never forget social media. It is a forum where speculation, misinformation and allegation can breed fast. More and more, news or comment appearing on Twitter or Facebook drives the mainstream media. Having people available to monitor and control the social media is vital in handling a crisis.

So many problems, so many questions. Yet the answers are vital because they will determine whether this is seen as a crisis met with assurance and skill, or portrayed as an accident waiting to happen.

First actions

When a crisis breaks, the speed with which the media deploy can be awesome to behold.

If your organisation is suddenly at the centre of a major storm, within less than an hour you might discover that you have a media village camped outside your HQ or at the scene of the crisis. Furthermore, it won't take the 24-hour news stations long before they are beaming live pictures to a waiting nation.

One camera might be trained on the entrance to your building, with the TV presenter back in the studio telling millions of viewers that, "We are expecting a statement from the company responsible for the disaster very shortly."

First actions

Inside your building, however, everyone's running around like headless chickens because no one has thought about how to handle the media.

In such circumstances, silence is not golden.

The longer an organisation that's caught up in a crisis stays quiet, the more they look guilty. In the eyes of the public, they are running for cover.

The news media won't suspend covering the news story until the organisation in question gets its act together. They'll be interviewing eyewitnesses, survivors, experts, the bereaved – and all the time the bad news is getting worse.

First actions

Delay for too long and it becomes increasingly difficult to regain lost territory, media-wise.

The first action required, therefore, is for a company spokesperson to get out in front of the media as soon as possible after the story has broken.

This can be tough. Very often the spokesperson will need to confront the media with very little information to hand. The media might know more than the organisation involved.

Nevertheless, it's important that someone gets out and there and sends out a signal that the organisation is aware that a problem has occurred and is dealing with it in a calm and professional manner.

First actions

This won't undo any damage that's been done, but it will indicate to the public that the organisation is at least in control of events.

When a plane crashes, the airline in question can't un-crash the plane. By appearing before the media at an early stage, in a confident and authoritative way, they can at least leave the public with the impression that the airline is in on top of things. The crash might damage the airline's reputation, but not irrevocably so if their first media response is speedy and professional.

What to expect from traditional media

Make no mistake about it, journalists love a crisis. Not because they enjoy the suffering a crisis can cause, but because a crisis fulfils all the criteria for a news story.

It is new, perhaps unique. It has drama, the “gosh” factor. It is about people. For all those reasons, it does exactly what a journalist wants – it grabs the readers, listeners and viewers.

That is why the traditional media go big on a crisis. Or go overboard, in some people’s view. It offers the chance for sensational headlines, frenzied speculation and perhaps the public pillorying of a powerful figure or two.

What to expect from traditional media

The natural lifespan of a crisis is difficult to predict. Spin doctors, for example, trying to play down a crisis, will assure their masters that no story will survive beyond a few days. Usually they are right. Other stories, like the BP explosion and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, stay in the headlines for weeks, constantly prodded back into life by a further revelation or another bout of speculation.

In all this, the competitiveness of the traditional media must never be underestimated. Foolish, and possibly jobless, is the news editor who tires of a crisis too early. “This story still has legs” is a familiar cry in a newsroom, and leaving the public appetite for more information unsatisfied is a sure way to turn off your customers.

What to expect from traditional media

The customers, though, are perverse. They can often be heard in the queue at the newspaper shop, complaining about “excessive” coverage of a crisis. “All you hear about is bad news”, they say as they sit glued to the rolling news channels, watching another crisis unfold.

In the end, how deeply and for how long the traditional media continue to cover a crisis is dictated by the public appetite for bad news. And that shows no sign of abating. Schadenfreude, they call it.

What to expect from social media

Remember when you used to hear about a crisis first on the Six O'Clock News? Now many bosses probably long for their dirty laundry to get its first airing there, because it might just give them an hour or so to plan a response.

These days within minutes or even seconds of your catastrophic commercial cock-up, you'll find it's a little bird not a news anchor that's most likely to tell the gossip-hungry world all about it. Yes, the cute little blue Twitter bird can be a mighty bird of prey, quickly picking up the scent of possible carrion.

What to expect from social media

The speed of the dissemination is scary enough; but what's more worrying is, unlike reputable news channels, random tweets about your bad "news" are probably unsourced and unchecked. Do not expect accuracy, balance or context. Do expect to be an unwilling participant in a potentially very dangerous game called catch-up.

And faster than you can say "Holy Geek-fest", a sort of cross-contamination has set in with Facebook comments and blogs turning your issue into an amorphous and seemingly uncontrollable mass.

What to expect from social media

So how do you stop social media turning into very anti-social media, which threaten to ruin your business? In many ways the key principles of traditional crisis management still apply:

Be prepared. This means closely monitoring what is being said about your business, so you can nip potential issues in the bud. There are many tools that can help you track what and how much is being said about you “out there”. Preparation also means establishing relationships with key bloggers and Twitter users in advance.

Respond. Don't hide; instead deal constructively with criticism and correct inaccuracies. Social media is not merely a platform for marketers and the disgruntled public; it works best when it's a conversation.

What to expect from social media

Be vigilant at all times. Crises invariably break outside of “office hours”. Twitter and Facebook users don’t expect to clock off at 5.30pm on a Friday afternoon, so nor should you – your business should consider monitoring and responding round the clock.

Be quick, but not hasty. Every second counts, but don’t feel obliged to respond to the truly nutty rants of every troll, or you risk feeding the monster.

Be transparent. The temptation to obfuscate or perhaps delete criticism may be huge. But it’s far better to defuse an issue, to disarm with charm.

What to expect from social media

Be proactive. Beat them at their own game – use social media as one tool of many to get back on the front foot. For example, if you're issuing holding statements and press releases, make sure you're tweeting links to them, or have a Facebook page where people can go for more information.

Above all, stay calm. Tackling social media when it's dining out on a crisis might initially seem like trying to beat back a forest fire with a handkerchief.

Taking the company line

An agreed company line will always be a vital weapon in dealing with a crisis. But it must be agreed beforehand.

Trying to formulate a fundamental company message once a crisis has struck will be near-impossible. All attention will be on dealing with the crisis and answering the specific questions the media will ask. The central corporate line has to be settled and signed off beforehand.

What the company line is depends very much on the business and the crisis. However, general positive statements about your business will always serve you well. But beware of cliches. “Safety is our number one priority” has become worn out through constant use.

Taking the company line

Simple messages, however, such as “our first priority is to help those affected” or “we need to get to the cause of this as quickly as possible. That is why we have already got a team working....” may seem almost too obvious to state, but in the heat of the crisis they will serve you well.

Some of this material should already be included in corporate key messages. It is then immediately ready for use when a problem occurs.

Taking the company line

The media, their audience and your stakeholders are all looking for reassurance from you. They want to hear that the crisis is being handled speedily and professionally, that every type of help is being made available to those who need it and that the cause of the crisis will be determined as soon as possible – and any necessary changes made.

Top that off with an appropriate apology or expression of sympathy and you have the basis for an effective company response in any crisis.

Taking the company line

Be very clear, however, that these are not tricks to get you out of trouble. Crisis responses must come from the heart of the organization and be part of its philosophy. The media and the public will quickly sniff out hypocrisy, and the crisis will deepen.

The secret is to be ready. A breaking crisis is never the time to think about re-drafting the principles and aims of your organisation.

Dealing with the aftermath

When the crisis that's hit your organisation is over or has subsided, then is the time to take stock and audit how you have responded – or, rather, conduct an 'inquest' as journalists would put it. There are a few things you need to look at.

Did you have a crisis plan beforehand? If you didn't, make sure you get one in place fairly quickly – in case another crisis comes along. If you did have a crisis plan in place, how well did it withstand the onslaught of the media? If it proved fragile, revise the plan in the light of what you learned.

Dealing with the aftermath

As part of this, you should ask yourself whether your organisation responded quickly enough. OK, the crisis that engulfed you might have been unwelcome and you might have wished it would go away, but did you face up to the reality of being under the media spotlight and respond accordingly? This means not running away or going into hiding but being out there in front of the media as soon as possible after the crisis breaks. Did your organisation have an early footprint on the story or did you stand back and let others (most likely your critics) make the running as far as news coverage was concerned?

How well did your spokespeople perform? In front of the cameras did they come across as ambassadors for your organisation or as amateurs?

Dealing with the aftermath

Did they convey the impression of an organisation that was dealing with the crisis in a calm, professional manner or did their performance suggest the organisation is a shambles, with chaos reigning behind the scenes?

If they failed on this score, ditch them as spokespeople or get them up to speed before the next crisis breaks.

How well did you handle the social media? Did you have systems in place to respond when the story went viral?

Ensure that your social media monitoring strategies performed as required, and that you responded in a timely, open and proactive manner.

Dealing with the aftermath

Finally, what was your attitude towards the journalists covering the story? Were they ‘the enemy’ in your mind or just a bunch of guys doing their job? If it was the former, then animosity might have crept into the way you handled the media and this might have permeated news coverage – not a good idea. If this did happen, recast your company’s mindset towards the media before the next crisis hits you.

Request a tailored media training programme and quotation

If you are interested in the most effective media training for your spokespeople, [request a training programme and quotation](#) based on your requirements.