

## **Crisis Communication Made Simple – or at Least Manageable**

*By: Katie Tolin*

Benjamin Franklin once said “Take care of your reputation. It is your most valuable asset.” That saying is even more imperative today than when he said it. As a result, it is essential that you control how your business is viewed in the court of public opinion.

Today, the 24 hour news cycle contributes to the swift judgment media gives a company in the time of crisis. There is very little debate and people and businesses are appointed either the *bad guy* or the *good guy*.

The decisions made by companies during the time of a crisis are not easy ones. Keep in mind that the short term pain felt by your firm may be less than the long-term loss of the brand. In every crisis there is a victim, a villain and a vindicator. As a victim, you want to move to the vindicator role as quickly as possible. A good plan can help achieve that goal.

If the media comes knocking at your door, make sure you are prepared to protect your reputation. The following is a five step process to help firms prepare for a crisis.

1. Audit – Determine what is the worse that can happen (i.e., physical, financial, client-related).
2. Plan – With a tight group of people, plan for how you will “fix” the issues identified in the audit.
3. Develop – Develop a formal plan.
4. Train – Make sure your people know how to deal with a crisis. As training, consider having a faux crisis fold out on the weekend or while you are away, since it is quite possible this is when a real crisis will occur.
5. Refine – What worked and didn’t work in the scenario? Make sure you refine your plan to include what you discovered during the training.

The worse mistake someone can make during crisis communication is to take no action. Yes, it is important that you communicate with the press, but it is even more important that you take action. And, while people will forgive an accident, they will not forgive a cover-up. Never cover-up what happened.

Thinking like an outsider should also be part of your communication plan as well as the development of good message points. Address potential questions straight on and be sure to communicate message points to your employees, too. Your employees are your ambassadors and you should keep them informed so they do not have to read about what’s going on in the papers. However, you should also realize that anything said internally can be leaked to the press. It is also beneficial to find allies and to have them in place before a crisis happens. Allies are the only ones that can help move you out of the villain role with the media, as they will vouch for individuals and companies.

It is also important to note that you should avoid the saying “no comment.” No comment is basically “Latin” for guilty. It is completely acceptable for you to not discuss specifics and to explain why you are unable to comment, but a simple no comment can seriously hurt your reputation.

So, who wins in a crisis? The first one to talk to the media, address the issues, confront the allegations, recruit the most allies and engage other audiences. Make sure your crisis communication plan includes winning strategies, and you’ll be better positioned to protect your most important asset – your reputation.

*This article is a summary of material presented by Michael Robinson, Vice President, Levick Strategic Communications, during his “Crisis Communication Made Simple – or at Least Manageable” presentation at the 2006 AAM Summit: Mile High Marketing.*

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