

Controlling Rumors

Experts emphasize the importance of going public with a rumor, rebutting it openly, immediately, and forcefully. This turns the rumor into news and cuts its negative impact. This strategy flies in the face of conventional wisdom, which says that a public denial only calls more attention to the rumor.

Communicating Risk

When the public learns of an environmental health hazard, such as contaminated water, there will be concern over the dangers involved and what can be done to avoid them. But as Professor Peter Sandman of Rutgers University emphasizes, managers too often do not treat the public fairly and honestly, ignoring their right to make their own decisions concerning risks. Instead, they concentrate on the scientific basis of the hazard, which in many cases is unclear.

Risk communicators need to understand the public's concern for risk. Treat it seriously, and be empathetic.

Types of Crises

Public Health and Safety:

Chernobyl, groundwater contamination, AIDS

Legal and Political:

Savings and loan crisis, embezzlement and fraud, international incidents

Industrial Relations:

AT&T layoffs, union actions

Public Perception:

Three Mile Island, Tylenol

Product Failure:

Perrier recall, Dalkon Shield, Rely Tampon

Environmental:

Exxon Valdez, Alar in apples scare

Takeover Battles:

Phillips Petroleum, NCR

Money Problems:

The banking industry, Chrysler Corp.

About Communications for Management, Inc. Int'l

Communications for Management offers on-location media, crisis and other communications training programs throughout the U.S. and abroad.

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Communicating in a CRISIS

A C4M POCKET GUIDE FOR EMERGENCIES

by Frank M. Corrado



Why Many Organizations Fail at Crisis Management

Failure to manage crisis is everywhere in the news: failed public institutions, doomed products, and dishonored managements. The reality: most crises are surmountable and many are avoidable. Here are two reasons why a crisis is more difficult to manage in today's world:

1. The world now communicates in “real time.”

When little Jessica falls down a well in Texas, the world knows immediately. The information “float” of earlier times—the time between an incident and when people learn about it—has shrunk to near zero because of satellite communication links.

2. Unprepared organizations flounder.

The unprepared have always floundered in a crisis, slipping quickly into shock and post-traumatic stress syndrome: denial, anger, and grief. This is even more dangerous in today's high speed communications environment. This trauma can be avoided—if organizations have a plan and test it regularly.

Planning for a Crisis

Here is C4M's five-step process for developing a crisis plan:

1. Sell the idea.

The hardest job is to sell top managers. Suggestion: Brainstorm with them about what the most likely crises might be and the many situations that could happen. Ask them to analyze how prepared the organization is.

2. Come up with a process.

Once the idea is sold, suggest a team approach involving top managers and specialists from law, HR, operations and other key groups. Meet at least once a month.

3. Prepare a plan.

The team needs a plan that provides for notification and sets procedures and rules for talking to the media and providing them with information. The plan should also spell out

different approaches depending on the crisis (e.g. responding to an accident compared to a strike). The plan should state company policy on communications and be applicable to field locations as well.

Key Elements of a Plan include:

- A precise chain of command spelling out who does what.
- Key spokespeople designated by location.
- Rules on release of information.
- A plan for communicating with employees, government agencies, stockholders, and the community at large.
- Background information on **products** (what your organization does), **processes** (how you make or do things), and **people** (biographical information).

4. Organize a crisis center.

It doesn't have to have blinking lights. Your crisis center could be a corner of a conference room. More importantly, it should be the place where the crisis team meets regularly and monitors information.

5. Provide training/simulations.

All potential crisis participants should receive media and crisis training and regular refreshers. Also, crisis simulations should be held at least two or three times a year to keep everybody on their toes and to test new potential problems.

Logistics

1. Have easy-to-understand graphics available for briefings (the lesson of Desert Storm).
2. Provide good background materials: fact sheets, photos, diagrams, and file videotape.
3. Have some depth in communications staff. Crises continue round-the-clock.
4. Know how to get help in a hurry: outside counsel, phones, copiers, transportation, and satellite uplinks.

Crisis Communications Rules

The Cardinal Rule of Crisis Communications is:

“Tell it all, tell it fast”

This means...

- Speak from one platform, with only one chief spokesperson.
- Don't be invisible. Silence is perceived a guilt.
- Don't hold anything back. Make everything possible public. Be preemptive if necessary: release the bad news before others do.
- Update frequently. It shows people you're managing the problem.
- Stay on-the-record at all times.
- Don't play favorites with the media.
- Cooperate with the media. Let them get information from you—not outside sources (competitors, unhappy employees, industry analysts).
- Talk in English (no jargon).
- Get outside parties to support your position.
- Don't play down what happened.
- Don't worry about getting sued. It's inevitable.
- Above all else, tell the truth. Once your credibility is gone, it's all over.

Crisis Communication and the Law

In a crisis, communicators will be thinking public image, but attorneys instinctively will be thinking torts. Your argument to management must be for **truthful disclosure** and **empathetic communication**.

In at least one state, Massachusetts, the law has been amended to allow organizations to say “We're sorry” in a crisis without it being held against them in court [Mass. Gen L. ch 133, Par 23D (1986)].

The best help you can give lawyers in a crisis is to keep good records of everything you do for the inevitable court case. Remind senior management that in cases involving public health and safety, the court of public opinion is going to render judgement long before the court of law. **DON'T SPECULATE** on costs or damage, specific causes, or blame.