

THE WHO, WHAT, WHEN AND HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN A CRISIS

This article was published by CommPro, a website for public relations professionals. While it's aimed at corporate communicators, its concepts can be applied to city governments.

By Andy Shane

No matter where you stand on the new Texas law allowing college students to carry guns on campus, one thing is evident: those colleges allowing students with concealed carry licenses to bring their guns onto campus are updating existing crisis communication plans.

Planning for a crisis may sound like an oxymoron to some – much like a little pregnant, good grief and larger half. However, proactively identifying and preparing for probable negative situations before they occur is critical and will better help with the overall management and communication of the problem if/when it occurs.

When a crisis does hit, you don't want to spend your time on developing foundational elements that should've been planned and addressed before the crisis.

Now, there has been much written about crisis communication plans. Simply Google crisis communication plans and you will see a litany of entries from an array of reputable sources. What I'd like to do is provide some thoughts on certain aspects near and dear to me: the who, what, when and how of communicating during a crisis.

The Who

Generally speaking, there are many factors that will impact the breadth of the crisis communication plan and the number of spokespeople needed: company size, industry, office locations, public or private., external audiences (vendors, partners, etc.). You get the idea...

The number of spokespeople should be limited, but only you know the necessary amount to best represent the company by quickly and effectively communicating the appropriate messages to your target audiences.

One thing that can't be allowed to impact the plan is the CEO's/management's lack of willingness to communicate. Meaning, I don't care if the executives don't typically see the value and benefit of regularly communicating, in a crisis it is imperative. In most crisis situations a company's reputation is at stake. Could be safety. Livelihood.

No matter the company, a crisis communications team should be established ahead of time, made up of – among others – heads from all of the company divisions (financial, sales, procurement, HR, customer service, etc.). Most likely these will be key leaders/executives/C-suite members.

These individuals should be the company's only spokespeople.

Let me be clear, a spokesperson is not just someone relegated to talking to media. A spokesperson is anyone who will be communicating key messages to target audiences – employees, analysts, vendors, customers, etc.

Each spokesperson should go through rigorous training – not just “media” training – ahead of time on how to answer questions and how to get your messages across. When communicating, the spokespeople need to be using the same key messages (the same “base” or primary key messages; there will be key messages specific for each audience).

One of the major hiccups I see with crisis communications is when “unauthorized” individuals talk on behalf of the company. Not just to media. Tweeting his/her thoughts. Responding to a Facebook post or a question from someone. Most often the individual is trying to be helpful, but is responding with outdated or wrong information.

To best combat this, policies should be established – with consequences – and made part of employee handbooks. For media inquiries, employees should say they cannot speak on behalf of the company and direct the reporter to the appropriate person. For social media and general situations, employees shouldn’t respond, but forward the post/Tweet to the appropriate established in-house person (could be social media department or boss).

The What

Understanding each crisis will have its own set of messages, there needs to be a willingness to be as upfront as possible: explaining what is happening and what is being done. That said, there will be instances where you can’t/shouldn’t provide all of the information.

It could be that the company is involved in a police matter and there are certain details that could impact the investigation; security concerns could put employees at risk; or talking about union negotiations may sway those very negotiations one way or the other. The key is to honestly explain why you are not able to provide all of the information and not create false crutches so you don’t have to be forthright.

The When

When a crisis occurs and the team meets to ascertain and gather facts, establish roles, review the plan and develop messaging for the appropriate audiences, you’ll want to establish regularly scheduled checkpoints, based on the specific incident. During these checkpoints, you’ll provide/learn updates, tweak the plan accordingly, revise messaging and determine which groups/audiences are contacted first.

Be sure you are comfortable with whatever you send making its way to a greater/larger audience and be sure to avoid inappropriate language or slang. No matter best intentions and For Employee Use Only, “private” information can and will find itself on Twitter, Facebook and/or the local newscast.

The How

Use all available means/technology that is appropriate. Employee town hall meetings. Webcasts. Podcasts. Emails. Conference calls. The media. Twitter. Facebook.

It comes down to knowing how your different target audiences are receiving information, which method(s) will most effectively tell your story, and which will best receive your message. What is the crisis? What do we want to say? What is the best way to communicate that will be easily understood by target audiences?

Perhaps, for example, the VP of Procurement sends an email to a top vendor with a general note from the CEO and additional, vendor-specific messages.

Or, in responding to a media request, you determine you don't have anything positive to say so you issue a statement explaining what occurred and what you are doing.

Remember

At best, a crisis is something you can prepare for ahead of time that has minimal ramifications; at worst, well at worst, an unforeseen crisis occurs where there are lives lost. Knowing ahead of time who possible spokespeople are and having them properly trained will help as you determine what messages need to be said to which audiences.

About the Author: Andy Shane is a Dallas-based, New York-bred public relations and Media relations professional, with more than 20 years of agency and corporate experience. He has developed media relations programs for, and attended the Sydney and Salt Lake City Olympics; worked with Christie Brinkley and Chris and Stefanie Spielman on two separate Breast Cancer Awareness Campaigns, benefiting the Komen Foundation; created the American Lung Association's State of the Air Campaign; was part of the World's Largest Latte and the Community Olympic Development Program; rang the Opening Bell at the NYSE and NASDAQ; and developed the internal and external communications surrounding two bankruptcies and the ensuing emergencies. Andy blogs about public relations. Follow him on Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest or Google+.