

By **Angela Calzone and Christopher D'Marco, C&RS**

Don't overlook crisis communications planning

Regardless of industry or company size, the primary focus of any business owner or executive management team is generating revenue. A significant amount of time is spent planning for it. Planning our marketing strategies, prospect presentations, how to best cultivate referral sources and once the client is secured, we plan how to best manage and satisfy its needs and expectations.

There is another type of planning, however, which is equally important yet often overlooked: crisis communications. Typically part of a company's business continuity plan, which every organization should have, this plan identifies which internal personnel are responsible in the event of a crisis to strategically communicate developments both internally and externally.

Crises can take many shapes, from natural disasters (fire, flood, earthquake, death of a CEO) to manmade (sabotage, theft, strikes) to economic (competitor lawsuit, broken mergers) to legal/political (scandal, investigation). But the cri-

sis communicator has to be prepared to navigate everything from the unforeseen to the unthinkable. And how the crisis plays out depends if a company has a strong business continuity plan containing a crisis communications plan that is clear, concise, straightforward and action oriented.

To begin crisis communication planning, we must first answer questions pertaining to who, what, where, when, and how. When is it time to deploy the plan? Who will be the crisis communication team? In a smaller company, it may be the partner group, the office manager, and their outside marketing/public relations consultant; in a larger company, it may be the executive committee, the chief marketing officer, and the human resources director. The crisis communication team may also include outside counsel and a crisis communication strategist. Each team member's role and responsibilities must be clearly delineated so that there is no confusion or fumbling during the crisis. Who will be the voice of the company? And if that individual

is embroiled in the crisis, then there should be always be a back up which may be an internal representative, outside counsel or a crisis communication strategist.

What are the key components of the message the company must convey irrespective of the crisis? An example would be the company's resilience and commitment to providing quality service and a high level of attention to clients. Where would the crisis communication team meet if not on site? A location must be designated in advance, whether it is at someone's home or a conference center. When is it time to deploy the plan? Finally, how would communication be delivered? While frequency of communication may be driven by the type of crisis and how long it takes to resolve it, the venues for communication to the company's various constituents will be constant and must be identified and documented in a place that will be accessible to the crisis communication team at any time and under any circumstance.

Once the "who, what, where, when and how" are sufficiently defined and documented, the next critical step in crisis communication planning is training. With clearly developed roles and responsibilities for each crisis communication team

member, a "fire-drill" training is required. This drill tests the overall communication plan's effectiveness as well as the clarity of roles and responsibilities to ensure that all bases are covered. Further suggested trainings include business continuity and communication planning for all staff, crisis management, conflict resolutions, and decision-making under pressure.

The final step in the crisis communications planning process is keeping the plan current. As a company evolves, technology, personnel, clientele and the business environment may change. It's important to update the crisis communications plan regularly so that it remains aligned with the company's current situation. The last thing you want to do is make changes during the crisis itself.

Of course, the goal of prudent business continuity planning is to avoid a crisis altogether. Make sure that there are established and clearly communicated policies, procedures and codes of conduct, not only for personnel, but also for clients to observe when interacting with the company and its people. Should crisis occur, however, swift response and clear communication are the keys to a company's survival.



Angela Calzone



Chris D'Marco