Crisis Communications

Amid a rising news media crisis, those less traveled in that treacherous terrain will often seek refuge in the infamous phrase, “no comment.” This is a recipe for a rockslide into more trouble. The only way out is to share correct and largely unchangeable information quickly. The chapters that follow look at the practice of crisis communications in general and how these theories relate to several industries I often advise. There are tips and takeaways, however, that are applicable to any industry.

CHAPTER 1

Reducing "crisis" in your communications takes planning

It's as certain as the sun rising every morning. Sooner or later, your business or organization will face a moment where a crisis will force its leaders to offer a response that could shape and define public perception of your reputation for years to come. No one likes to think about a crisis. Even fewer want to plan for one. But like insurance, good crisis communications planning can prevent a disaster from destroying an organization's reputation.

Unfortunately, too many companies and organizations struggle at these critical moments by failing to respond quickly and adequately enough to make a difference. That's why I spend a significant amount of my time training leaders to work more effectively with the news media and preparing for the inevitable day when a crisis communications plan will be taken off the shelf and put to use.

There is a long list of potential crises that could pop up with little or no warning. While predicting what kind of crisis is most likely difficult, predicting that *some* crisis will occur is rather easy.

While this complex topic could fill a book of its own, here are some key elements you need to consider no matter the size or scope of your business or organization.

An overview of things to consider

Preparing to effectively communicate during a crisis involves several critical steps:

- Organizations must take stock of current situations and envision worst-case scenarios. Does a crisis communications plan exist? Is there an identified crisis response team? What are the worst and most likely events that could thrust your organization into a negative light? Do we have pre-prepared and approved potential responses? Are we working with an attorney who respects and understands the importance of defending the organization in the court of public opinion?

- An effective crisis communications plan must be in writing and it should be reviewed and updated frequently. The plan itself doesn't need to be long, but it must be concise, practical, and user-friendly. It should be easily referenced in hard copy and on your company's intranet. (Today, I advise placing these plans on cloud storage services such as Dropbox, OneNote, or Evernote in case of a complete system failure. This also makes them available via smartphones and tablets.)

- Appropriate training must be provided to the crisis management and communications team. Thoroughly brief those who are most likely to deal with a crisis on the plans and have them participate in practical simulation exercises. Executives and associates dealing with the press and public should attend media training and participate.

Always comment quickly

To the initial dismay of some clients hoping I can somehow bury their bad news, I always recommend making an initial comment to reporters and putting out statements on social media to directly reach the public. Even when all the facts remain unknown, it's smart to at least explain that you're working on the problem and want to resolve it.

Giving your side before an opponent can offer a more critical perspective can help you gain and protect credibility throughout the incident. This is the concept of primacy — whatever an otherwise unbiased observer hears first is seen as more credible than information received later.

The need for this approach is best illustrated by what happens when siblings fight.

We've all been there. One sibling usually runs crying to a mom or dad or calls out that "Joey hit me." The response of most harried parents likely would be to assume that the information is correct and then ask, "Joey, why did you hit your brother?"

Acting on the only information available, this parent just accused Joey, based on the word of another child. Joey may have been provoked, responding to his brother taking a toy from him, or an innocent angel guilty only of minding his own business. Regardless of the facts, Joey is presumed to be in the wrong.

Sound familiar?

The same thing happens in the court of public opinion when your organization comes under news media scrutiny. What the public hears first will largely shape its opinion, unless there's a compelling and well-argued counterpoint that finds its way into the news stories as quickly as possible.

Many otherwise intelligent leaders presume that an early response is imprudent because they hope the problem will go away or because many facts are still unknown. When the press calls, they offer up "no comment" as their magic mantra.

But most people automatically translate a "no comment" into "guilty as charged," a decision that can harm confidence in your organization. Even worse, refusing to return calls from professional reporters comes off as rude and suggests you have something to hide, which often leads journalists to dig harder for dirt.

Ideally, it's best to get in front of headlines by releasing the news on your timetable with your carefully planned fact points leading the way. If that's not possible, it's imperative to respond as quickly as possible, especially in today's digital age where news, such as videos, can go viral without warning.

Consider the 2016 scandal involving Wells Fargo, which exploded in the media when federal regulators fined the company $185 million for opening millions of accounts without customers' knowledge. The company's failure to get in front of the story cost it much more, including expensive image advertising.

Remember, the longer you wait, the more likely public opinion will become harder to change or shape.

Carefully craft crisis messages

When you're ready to make a comment, it's imperative to understand what messages are most likely to work.

It's best to plan ahead by creating a series of responses that could come in handy for your business or organization's likely crisis scenarios. This will allow you to respond quickly and more thoughtfully during a stressful moment. Having a "we're aware of the situation and are working on it" holding statement ready to send out when an incident occurs can also buy you time to collect facts and determine the best strategy.

Now, before you write anything, think about what you're trying to accomplish.

Imagine you're trying to swim your story to shore in an ocean directly against an outflowing riptide, which keeps you from advancing while exhausting your energy. If you keep fighting the current (the bad news), you could easily drown. If you go with the current, you're

taken out to sea and the news is presumed to be true. If you swim to the side — neither challenging hardened public opinion nor agreeing with it, and messaging on an issue the public will believe, that will help you - you can escape the danger.

That's what needs to happen during most inbound crisis communications events. Messaging against preconceived notions (the riptide) presents many obstacles that can derail your story. By messaging sideways – in a safer direction -- you can share key facts without directly disputing what people believe to be true. This means your targeted audience will be less likely to erect mental barriers to your message, since you're not directly at odds with their preconceived perception.

While you can't change the fact that you've been sued for harassment, you can tell people all about what your organization does to protect employees and follow the law.

I recommend organizing all information about the situation into three categories:

- **Red light:** This is information you must not talk about for legal, ethical, or professional reasons. You can't defame someone or release information that is confidential by law, for example. Despite your belief that doing so might help you look better, discussing red light information is likely to make the situation worse.

- **Yellow light:** This describes facts or information you'd rather not talk about because it's either less important or somehow is distracting from the message. Avoid answering hypothetical questions, sharing personal opinions, and talking about processes and procedures. This doesn't mean a reporter won't ask about a yellow-light topic or that you won't answer the question, but yellow-light information won't help you advance your message.

- **Green light:** These are the points that help show the public that you're doing the right thing. It's information you want to talk about to spread the desired message. Normally, I recommend selecting the three most important points. This might include examples of hard work or a good effort, reiterating your mission, and showing why the problem at issue is important to your organization. For each green-light point, try to develop three anecdotes, three memorable statistics, and three punchlines.

Going back to our harassment lawsuit example, a green-light point could look like this: "All of our employees are trained on equal employment laws and encouraged to report discrimination."

A supporting anecdote might state: "One of the women who conducts our annual training is an expert witness for the U.S. Justice Department on how to protect employees from sexual discrimination."

A memorable statistic might include: "Over the last decade, we've held more training in this area than any other type of training."

And a punchline might say: "We train all of our team members to treat people fairly and follow the law."

While your spokesperson may not share every point during an interview, they will be well prepared to make a statement and answer questions.

If you have evidence refuting the allegations, share it quickly. You could note the plaintiff has sued her last five employers and lost every case, for example. Or that the plaintiff and the person she is accusing never worked together in the same office or on the same projects.

Sharing this information could flip headlines your way, putting you ahead in the battle for public support. Waiting even a few hours can lead to unfavorable headlines that never go away.

Being concise matters

Framing the facts in your favor requires some practice and paying close attention to how the media will use your comments.

It's highly unlikely TV reporters and their editors will give your spokesman more than one or two short sound bites of 8 to 10 seconds. Newspaper reporters will probably be limited to 400 or 500 words, of which your side may get a few paragraphs.

It's important to keep your points concise, use power words that convey clear meaning, and stick to your message. Your vocabulary should be understandable by eighth-graders as not everyone can or will understand more complex words or industry jargon.

It helps to avoid using pejorative words offered by the opposition or reporters. Remember, the question asked is rarely in the story. Imagine that, following a scandal, you plan on staying in your job and helping your organization recover. A reporter might ask, "Will you resign?" Notice the word "resign" comes from the reporter. If you use it in your answer by saying, "I will not resign," you have given credence to the possibility of resignation and you've used a word that you wouldn't have used on your own. It would be better to say, "I'll continue to lead this effort."

In short, when you want to rebuff, you don't repeat. Imagine if President Nixon had said "I'm a trustworthy person" instead of "I am not a crook." His phrase would have been a lot less memorable.

Involve attorneys in responses

While commenting in some form or fashion is always the right choice, there can be legitimate legal concerns complicating your public message.

Volkswagen couldn't just admit to tampering with its engines to ensure new cars passed environmental tests without creating even more liability issues. That would not help the company.

At the same time, there are attorneys who can create unnecessary reputational risks by refusing to make any comments or instructing

you to do so. This is where I use my legal background to help clients communicate in a way that will protect their reputation without hurting (and maybe even helping) their legal position.

It's critical to understand attorneys think much differently than people who are not "J.D. impaired." We're trained to be defensive and protect clients from legal exposure at all costs. Some lawyers are so focused on winning over one judge in a court of law months from now, they risk allowing their client to lose bigger in the court of public opinion right away.

I've taught hundreds of future attorneys in my class at The Ohio State University Moritz School of Law. My focus was preparing them to speak with reporters in a way that's both ethical and effective. I remind people that I'm bilingual — I speak lawyer as well as plain English.

When a crisis occurs, it's critical to sit down with your legal counsel and hammer out what can be said as soon as possible. Responses can't waste words with meaningless dribble such as, "We'll have a lot more to say in court as we aggressively defend this case." Nor can they create more legal issues by accusing plaintiffs of wrongdoing.

Yes, there are some risks to answering questions in the media. But a carefully crafted statement always beats hiding behind a "no comment."

Understand the role of reporters

Like any profession, there are good and bad reporters, although in my experience, I've encountered far more ethical journalists striving to get stories correct.

Anyone working in crisis communications must learn how the media operates and build professional relationships with reporters and editors who routinely cover their industry. Journalists who know you and key players on your team are more likely to extend professional courtesies in their reporting. Being respectful of their deadlines and needs can go a long way to helping your organization thrive during a crisis. Being combative can backfire quickly.

Reporters are trained to tell all sides of a story, meaning even if you share strong facts supporting your side, they're obligated to share the other side. They're also under near constant deadline pressure to update stories for online and social media readers, meaning they don't always wait until the end of the day or the next broadcast to publish or air a story. Yes, they will update articles with fresh facts, but that doesn't automatically mean headlines will be updated, too.

It's also important to understand the different mediums. While the power of newspapers is shrinking, print media still play a large role in shaping public opinion, especially with older folks.

Print reporters, who also write online stories and take videos these days, tend to be the most accurate and complete in their work, benefitting from more space and time to tell their stories. Visuals are increasingly important to print reporters and their editors, who are heavily focused on growing their digital audience. Reporters work for editors, who often write or edit the headlines and control the flow of news to print and online. Having a relationship with a reporter and their editor is recommended.

While ethical reporters are careful to avoid sharing their opinions publicly, some newspapers also employ columnists and editorial writers who are expected to share their opinions on op-ed pages, making them important opinion leaders in the community.

Radio reporters always need short sound clips, which can be recorded over the phone, if necessary. I prefer to dictate a higher quality audio statement into a smartphone, which can be shared with the radio news staff by email or a cloud service. It's important to speak clearly, talk in self-contained sound bites and remember that your voice's inflection and emotion matter. You don't want to sound uncaring.

Some of the same rules apply for television news reports, which tend to carry the most impact with the public while being the least accurate. Ratings drive many coverage decisions, but the extreme brevity of reports, juggling of many new stories every day, and wide geographic coverage area makes it challenging for reporters to deliver a

complete story. Television reporters rarely have defined beats like their print counterparts, meaning you could be interviewed by a different reporter every time. These journalists also need video to go with their story, so they prefer on-camera interviews, even if only a few seconds ever gets used.

When conducting TV interviews, make sure you dress appropriately and always look at the interviewer, not the camera, when speaking. Engage the reporter before going on camera to build some rapport and comfort. For taped interviews, it's OK to stop after a mistake and start over. Answer in those same short self-contained sound bites and never address the interviewer by name.

When news breaks

Several of my clients are universities, so I took note of a strong crisis communications effort by The Ohio State University during a terrorist attack on campus in late 2016.

There are good lessons here for any organization that might need to quickly inform employees or others of a threat, which inspired me to create a simple preparation checklist to summarize this chapter.

On that morning, Ohio State students and employees were alerted to an attacker on campus by both text messages and social media with the same "Run Hide Fight" message.

The university's new alert system sent the pre-written messages with the simple push of a button, eliminating any notification delay. As the crisis unfolded, subsequent updates were distributed in the same manner, keeping students, parents, faculty, and media updated at the same time.

Unfortunately, not every campus is as prepared. Not long ago, one of my higher education clients was holding a senior staff meeting, when someone interrupted with a report of a shooter on campus. As police and news helicopters descended, the team quickly decided to send out a campus-wide alert. Their only available method to send the message was an app on a staffer's iPhone. Yet, the phone's battery was

nearly out of juice. As the team wondered if they were in mortal danger and worried about how to alert students and faculty, the president left the meeting to find a charging cord.

Moments later, the apparent shooter called to say he was just fooling around with an airsoft gun. So, the danger was somewhat imagined. But the flaw in the crisis communications response was real.

Ten things every crisis communications plan should consider:

1. Every organization needs a clear chain of command for issuing alerts or news information at all hours. If the normal decision maker is out of town, who's in charge?

2. Your system for sending alerts and releases needs to be ready 24/7/365. Dying iPhones don't cut it if lives are at stake. Portable chargers should be ready and accessible.

3. Depending on your organization's mission, you may want to have pre-written messages for everything from robberies to active shooters and tornadoes.

4. Those messages should include holding statements, which buy you time while alerting people to danger. For example: "Report of dangerous criminal activity on site. Please take necessary caution until we get more information to you."

5. Alerts clearly need to be sent out as text messages, but don't neglect Twitter. Tweets can be shared and don't have comments attached, which protects the original message.

6. Tell people all updates will come from your Twitter feed. Followers, especially media, can amplify it from there.

7. We don't recommend using Facebook for immediate messages, although it can't be ignored. User comments can confuse your communication, which also can be missed due to Facebook's content algorithms. Create a Facebook post linking to your Twitter or an alerts page online.

8. Your crisis plan, including all phone numbers and prewritten messages, must be stored in the cloud somewhere. Don't count on your computer system to be working. Your data should be accessible from any device anywhere.

9. Have someone on your staff monitor social media for rumors that need to be squashed.

10. Practice your plan routinely.