

Principles of good crisis communication

GOOD CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

GOOD CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS

BAD COMMUNICATIONS

chapter **2**

Chapter 2: Principles of good crisis communication

Good crisis communications strategy

Tell the truth;

Tell as much as you can;

Tell it as quickly as you can.

Show you care

Always be 'human', never 'corporate'. Recognise the human-interest aspect of the situation, that people have suffered loss, been injured or killed. Always remember that you are dealing with people, not profits and show that you care about this first and foremost. What does this mean? It means going to the scene of whatever has happened; it means thinking about how to help people in practical terms; it means saying that you are 'sorry' that the tragedy has happened.

Saying 'sorry'

Many lawyers will have a fit at the idea of saying 'sorry' for something that may have gone wrong in your organisation. If this is the case in your own organisation, then you are getting poor legal advice. Expressing regret is in no way an admission of liability, and it is essential that as part of any planning process, legal advisers are involved at an early stage in the development of standby statements and forms of words that are acceptable from a communications point of view, and are also acceptable to both lawyers and insurers. This topic is covered in more detail in chapter four.

Be seen to protect the public

Always be seen to put the public interest and public safety first, not yours or your organisation. Johnson & Johnson was praised for its openness and honesty. It was seen to put the public interest and public safety first. The company took the view, correctly, that the best way of safeguarding the company and shareholders' interests was to put the public interest first and be seen by the public, their customers, as trustworthy and safe.

Lasting perceptions are set quickly

The first hour or two of a crisis are vital in setting the news agenda. If you can respond quickly, and establish yourselves as a reliable source of information, you have a better chance of safeguarding your reputation.

In a world of 24-hour news, the media operate around the clock, and so must you. If the media cannot get hold of you at 2.00am, they will write the story as they see it, without any input from you or any chance for you to get across your side of the story. As a result, you will forever be on 'the back foot' and playing catch-up in the media and news management process.

The other factor is that it is the first images of any event that stay in people's minds. It is the first few hours that dictate the news agenda for a story, and people will remember the first reaction of the key people or how the organisation reacted.

It is essential, particularly in any organisation that is a local affiliate of a global company, that decision-making can take place at a local level. Local management must be able to issue statements and make key decisions without having to wait until HQ wakes up in North America, Japan or wherever.

The story will change direction

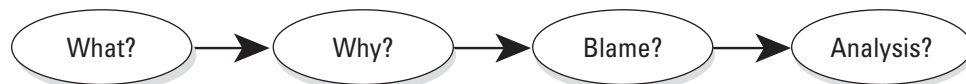


Figure 1: The evolutionary life cycle of a crisis news story

The story will start with 'what happened?' it will move onto 'why did it happen?' then 'who's to blame?' and finally in-depth features on trends and similar incidents in the past. This trend is common in all stories, although the timescale for it will vary. It may take a few hours to develop, or a few days, but all crisis stories in some way follow this pattern. This is helpful in that in the planning process you can anticipate the way the media will look at the story, and plan and prepare accordingly.

In particular, there is a need to be prepared for the analysis period. At this time, the media will want to ask questions such as: what did you know, and when did you know it? Where else does your organisation operate? What other problems have you had recently?

Emotion will be used, not reason

Relatives of those injured, pressure groups and politicians will use emotion – facts, particularly statistics, will not counter this.

The general public do not understand ‘risk’ and concepts of risk. ‘One in a million’ means nothing if the ‘one’ is a child that has been hurt. This lack of rationality is highly frustrating for organisations, however it is essential to recognise it as a reality and act accordingly. The correct way of responding is to recognise and acknowledge the human story, and then place it in context. An approach such as, *‘What has happened to little Billy is truly awful, however fortunately such cases are very rare’* is the correct way of dealing with these sorts of issues.

Pressure groups in particular are very successful in extrapolating a specific example or incident into a scare story. These should be handled with great care as pressure groups are usually more respected and trusted by the general public and the media than are corporations.

Good crisis communications tactics**Centralise decision-making within the organisation and centralise all contact with outsiders**

There is a time and a place for democracy in an organisation – this is not it. Decisions need to be taken quickly. The speed with which a story can develop can be breathtaking. Within a few hours, the media will have gathered a vast array of information and spoken to a wide range of commentators and pundits.

A key tactic will be to try and ‘divide and rule’ by trying every contact that they have within an organisation, even to the extent of telephoning extensions at random, and trying to get a quote out of anyone who answers the phone.

Communicate internally

Keep colleagues and staff informed, using any and all means at your disposal. This should include e-mail, intranet, and meetings, anything that will re-assure and also squash the inevitable rumour mill.

This will be very important, as quite understandably your staff will be worried about the future of their jobs and concerned that their organisation has hurt people. They will not feel valued if they hear news first from the media, rather than management, and their families and friends will also be concerned and asking them about what has happened. They are also some of your best ambassadors to the outside world, in particular to the local community.

Put your case, no-one else will, and explain your options

During a crisis you have very few friends that you can trust. In particular you have to remember that a great many other people will have their own agendas or interests. In particular, you should bear in mind that organisations such as the Police, Fire Service, Government, local Council etc, all have different objectives that may well be in conflict with your own. The Police in particular will be more concerned about apprehending criminals than in safeguarding your business interests.

Recruit third parties to your cause

Even though you may not have many friends, maximise the ones you have! Get others involved, both in order to support you with the media, and also to share the spotlight if possible, or indeed to divert the spotlight of media attention away from you. These may include people or groups that you have built relationships with in the past, such as local politicians, industry experts, pundits and academics, even in some cases the competition if it is an industry wide problem.

A crisis could become a world story – keep other territories informed

A brand or organisation that is known worldwide will become a world news story within hours. It is essential that all other countries are kept informed of your actions, so that there is consistency of message. The media will get in touch with your local operations around the world, seeking a comment as to how the crisis will impact them locally.

Bad communications**Minimal contact with the outside world**

If you do not communicate, how can the outside world know your side of the story? If you hide in the corporate ‘bunker’, people will not be able to see that you care about what has happened, nor will you keep in touch with the reality of the situation. It is very easy to become cut off from what is going on and either over react or under react accordingly.

It is difficult, but important, to be objective about the crisis. Whilst it is the most important thing that is happening to you, your colleagues and your organisation, this is not the case normally for most of the general population.

It is also important to understand that it is very easy for the crisis to become all consuming from a corporate point of view. First of all, everyone in the organisa-

tion will want to 'help' and get involved, and second there is a danger that the day-to-day management of the organisation will be neglected. It may be important to set rules, that crisis team meetings will only happen at specific times and with a clearly defined time limit.

Any tone of arrogance or complacency

You will not gain the sympathy and support of the public if you come across as arrogant or complacent. Humility and humanity, however annoying it may be to you, is most likely to gain public support. It is also important to audit how you are perceived by the outside world and key audiences. Are you seen as 'faceless' or 'monolithic', and ask internally, are we over-confident in our decision-making, do we believe that we know all the answers and we are always right?

Communications by too many sources

Journalists will try every contact they have. It is essential that they do not get conflicting messages.

Engaging in conflict with opponents or the media

Journalists, particularly high profile broadcast journalists, will not take kindly to any kind of accusation that they may be biased or have their own private agenda, even if it is true! They see themselves as the guardians of truth, honesty and the debunkers of pomposity, cant and falsehood. This view is on the whole shared by the public, to whom most of the media start from a position of being seen to represent the general public and being even-handed and honest.

If you try to attack a journalist, it is they who will get the public support, not you, as they will be seen to be asking you questions on behalf of each listener and viewer. It is also a mistake to underestimate the expertise of journalists or attack them personally, they are the professionals, not you.