

An Ounce of Preparation Equals a Pound of Good PR

By David Von Behren, MPH, APR

Some of the best advice I've heard about crisis public relations came from former U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona. While planning for an emergency medication dispensing drill in Tucson several years ago, he told a group of public health professionals that the time to pass out business cards is not in the parking lot during the disaster. Dr. Carmona stressed to us that during a crisis, the power of relationships and planning will go a long way toward determining if the right message reaches the right audience at the right time.



For every organization, the definition of crisis is unique. At a business, it may be a catastrophic fire that challenges every resource to keep the company going. In an organization, it may be an unexpected set of circumstances – good or bad - thrusting its leadership into an unfamiliar media spotlight. While many companies have contingency plans for keeping their products and people going in unforeseen circumstances, few are fully prepared for the critical communications aspects of a crisis.

Planning ahead for communications issues during a crisis helps to ensure that timely, accurate and appropriate messages about your company reach the publics you depend upon. If you aren't planning for what will be said about your organization during a crisis, how will you know that the right message will be heard?

Decide now how you will manage your messages during a crisis, because being first, being right, and being credible are paramount when your organization is thrust into the public eye unexpectedly. Maintaining a sense of well-being among your employees, customers, investors, and suppliers is not something you can organize effectively in the red hot stress of a challenge involving the news media.

The relationships you build and the preparations you make today will go a long way toward determining how your business navigates the public relations challenges of a crisis. Below are some tips for planning and managing a communications crisis to help jumpstart your planning.

- Include crisis communications as a part of your organization's overall public relations plan.
- Build relationships now with the organizations and individuals who will be called to assist you during a crisis.
- Maintain hard copy contact lists for the people critical to your organization and update those lists annually within your crisis communications plan.
- Clearly define your organization's rules for working with the news media during a crisis and communicate them regularly to your employees.
- Be the first source for information about your organization. The cardinal rule of crisis communications is "tell the truth, tell it first, and tell it often."
- Keep your message simple, accurate and consistent. During a crisis, everyone affected will process and act on the information you give differently.
- Remember that the public's reaction – and often over reaction – should never be underestimated when preparing statements and conducting news interviews.
- During news interviews, if you don't know the answer to a question, say so – and offer to get the answer as soon as possible.
- Seek communications resources such as Rene A. Henry's excellent crisis communications book "You'd Better Have a Hose if You Want to Put Out the Fire."

- Connect with the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America at www.prsatucson.com to reach public relations professionals who can help you plan for crisis communications challenges.

What is said publicly during a crisis can have a far-reaching impact on the future of your organization. If crisis communications seems daunting now, imagine how it will feel if you haven't prepared - as you stand in a parking lot with your organization going up in flames behind you and the news media standing before you.

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