



Operations for Crisis Planning

While many companies have contingency plans that call for back-up generators and alternate production sites, many do not have crisis communications plans in place. Crisis communications includes strategies, plans, tools and an explicit understanding of processes and responsibilities for sharing information with employees, business partners, the general public, local officials and the media.

This is especially true for middle market and smaller businesses. And, some larger corporations would prefer we did not know that they hadn't gotten that deep into their own crisis communications planning as of yet.

If our antennae aren't poised for action after the past year of natural disasters, then it is a wonder as to what will motivate us. From Southeast Asia to Guatemala to the American Gulf Coast and Pakistan, businesses have been interrupted. Sources of raw material, production facilities, assembly plants, service centers, and corporate headquarters have experienced temporary disruptions, if not complete disarray.

Some basic preparations that your organization can engage in now include:

- Develop procedures and databases for contacting employees, vendors and customers
- Set clear policies about who will represent the company with public agencies and the media
- Have clear policies or directional strategies in place for addressing the needs of:
 - displaced employees
 - communities affected by an incident related to your company's operations, or
 - communities affected by natural or other crises in areas where your business operates

Selecting a PR or Risk Management Firm

There are many public relations consultants and agencies, as well as risk management companies. Some have experience and a positive track record developing and implementing crisis communications strategies, while others have less or none.

Here are some helpful criteria to apply when selecting a crisis communications advisor:

- The type of crisis communications services the firm provides
- The experience the individuals who would work directly on your business have in developing crisis communications strategies and implementing them
- Assessment of strategies the firm has delivered in the past - have they been customized to meet the unique needs of a company and industry, or do they apply a "one-size-fits-all" solution?
- Their track record for successfully working with the media on complex issues and subjects
- The ability to work strategically on the topics most relevant to your potential incident
- The availability and bandwidth to ramp up for your unexpected situation and need
- The ability to develop a strong preventive and response plan
- Clear communication about the agency's role and how your company and executives would be expected to participate in the communications process during crises

Relationships and Policies Matter Year-Round

Corporate policies, practices and relationships have everything to do with how a company comes through a crisis. While some companies have thoughtful and sound policies about industrial waste, toxic disposal, employee health care, and labor safety, others postpone doing anything about them, thinking that if an incident would arise their insurance companies and lawyers will get them out of a jam.

There are three ways to approach corporate vulnerabilities:

- 1) Take one's fiduciary responsibility to shareholders and employees seriously, and anticipate and prepare to mitigate problems and prevent them
- 2) Establish clear policies in areas that companies in your sector may encounter, and develop relationships with opinion leaders in related areas that can help with your information, access and credibility if an incident were to occur
- 3) Put off addressing any vulnerabilities and hope the corporate reputation can withstand the media frenzy, interest group and community attacks and allegations in the midst of an incident

Incidents that Make Companies Vulnerable

- A foreign substance is discovered in your plant
- Discrimination claims are filed against your largest supplier
- Workers in an overseas factory have a different pay scale than those in the US
- A corporate officer has been using company resources for his extracurricular interests
- Riots or demonstrations are taking place in a city your company operates in
- A building your company owns did not hold up in an earthquake
- Your industry is experiencing unusual price hikes
- Your products require petroleum or other scarce or price sensitive material to operate
- Several employees have come down with a rare illness
- Oil is spotting leaking from a ship at sea