

Crisis Communications Planning

Idaho Horticulture
Expo 2010
Kerstin P. Ouellet



What is a Crisis?

- In plain English, it's any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your company

Possible Crises for your business:

- Natural Disasters
- Devastating crop loss
- Serious plant disease infection
- Employee or customer injury/death
- Child goes missing in nursery
- Chemical/pesticide/fuel spill
- Fire
- Lawsuit

Possible Crises for your business:

- Government investigation
- Accusation of discrimination
- Food poisoning case
- Physical violence between coworkers
- Death of the top executive
- Computer system crash resulting in data loss
- Etc.

Disaster Plan vs. Crisis Communications Plan

- A disaster plan deals with the crisis itself and spells out how to prepare for it / handle it
- The crisis communications plan details how to communicate about the crisis with the media, the public, and your customers & associates.

Why does every business need a crisis communications plan?

- Information will get out
- Only you can make sure that the correct information is distributed

A crisis communications plan makes it easier for you to distribute correct information and frees up your time to deal with the crisis itself.

It should be rehearsed, updated, and practiced like your disaster plan.

Steps

- Identify the person who decides whether a situation constitutes a crisis or not. If in doubt, use the plan
- Identify a company spokesperson
- Work with your in-house PR staff and/or your PR agency
- Crisis communications plan must be given to key management people
- Everybody should know that the plan exists

Components

- Decision maker(s)
- Spokesperson
- Technical advisor
- Back-up for all of the above
- Evening & weekend phone numbers
- Non-exclusive list of potential crises
- Contact lists of key audiences that need to be notified, depending on crisis (local media, trade media, customers, etc.)
- Check list of communication pieces that need to be produced

When a crisis strikes...

- "Switch to crisis communication mode"
- Notify the receptionist!!
- Notify spokesperson
- Notify everybody in the office

Spokesperson responsibilities

- Immediately create interim message for receptionist and office personnel
- Create & distribute communications pieces for respective target audiences (press releases, customer notifications, internal memos, etc.)
- Handle media inquiries
- Handle all inquiries unless plan identifies other persons

Prepared Statement

- Who, what, when, where
- Minimum: "We are still gathering facts but more information will be available at 5:00 PM."
- Better: "A fire at XYZ Nursery's facility at 1234 Main Street in Anytown occurred today, July 16th, at 10:00 AM. More information will be available after 12:00 PM."
- Include only confirmed information
- Written, posted on web site, able to be read, e-mailed, or faxed

Communication pieces

- Prepare them according to target audience (local media, trade media, customers, etc.)
- Minimize the use of technical terms for general media
- Use supporting collateral material if available (company map, fact sheet, etc.)
- Don't forget your employees!

- Keep track of media phone calls/inquiries
- Follow up as promised
- No exclusive stories!

Press conferences & interviews

- Be yourself
- Be truthful
- Prepare a speech or write down key talking points
- Answer only the questions asked
- Don't answer for a 3rd person
- Don't talk "off the record"

Press conferences & interviews

- It's ok to not have all the answers but promise to get them and follow through
- Address controversial issues before they come up in questions
- Keep a call-log with necessary follow-up info

Remember...

- It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation but only a blink of an eye to lose it

Kerstin P Ouellet
Pen & Petal, Inc.
www.penandpetal.com
kerstin@penandpetal.com
760-944-7889