

ABERFIELD

POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Ten Top Tips for Crisis Management

1. A crisis is like a fire – starve it of oxygen

Back in the day, before 24-hour rolling news, citizen journalists, bloggers and social networks, a crisis could smoulder away for days before turning into a full media blaze. If, in fact, it ever did. If you were quick and clever, you could have the fire out (literally or metaphorically) almost before anyone noticed.

Thank to smartphones and social media, the gap between spark and inferno has narrowed to just a few minutes – sometimes less. A crisis can hit before you've time to spell it.

Like a fire, a crisis needs oxygen. In this case, the oxygen is information. Facts preferably, but rumour and speculation will do.

So to put out the crisis fires, you need to shut off the air supply as quickly as you can. And how do you do that? Well, read on to find out...

2. Be prepared

Not every crisis can be anticipated and planned for. If it could, we would only talk about issues management, because we would hope to prevent an issue becoming a crisis. A crisis, by definition, is unexpected. But that doesn't mean you can't prepare for the worst.

Carefully consider all the possible crisis scenarios you could imagine hitting your organisation. You won't think of all of them – for the reasons we gave above – but it's still a useful exercise. Then think about how you would respond to each. Start with the audiences first, and then the messages and the delivery mechanisms – never the other way round.

3. Have the right team in place

As part of your preparation, make sure you have an experienced crisis management team in place, with clear roles and responsibilities. Always separate the operations side of the crisis from the communications. And don't automatically make the CEO the team head. He or she may have other priorities, or may simply not have the right skills to lead it.

4. Be visible

Don't hide behind media statements or an occasional tweet. Be prepared to engage with your audiences. If that means going on TV or the radio to explain what's happened and what you're doing about it, then do it. If it means holding 'town hall meetings' with staff, customers or shareholders, then organise them. Be available. Be out there. Don't hide and hope it goes away on its own. It won't.

5. Know when to keep out of the limelight

OK, now ignore what we just said about being visible, because sometimes you may need to keep your head below the parapet.

If it's not your crisis (it's industry-wide, perhaps?) then don't make it your crisis until you have to. Is there a professional body who can represent you, or an independent "expert" who can explain what's happened on your behalf? If you're not responsible, you don't take all the flak.

But once your organisation has been named and the spotlight's on you, revert to the rule above.

6. Use social media, don't fear it

We all know about brands and individuals who have been attacked on Twitter, vilified on Facebook or the victims of fake news. Reason enough to keep away? Quite the opposite, in fact.

Social networks are a great way to get out information quickly and accurately. You can post (and/or link to) videos, images, press releases, statements, customer notices and the like. In 2018 there's no need to wait until the next TV news bulletin to update your customers when those customers will be following your every move on social media.

So when you're preparing your crisis responses, think about how you can best use the range of digital channels and social networks available. Take a deep breath and start engaging with your audiences online. They may genuinely thank you for it.

7. Remember the 'What', 'How' and 'Who'

A crisis typically has three phases: what happened, how it happened, and who (or what) was responsible.

Our brains compute information in stages, so once we've established the bare facts of what happened, we want to know what – and possibly who – caused it, and how we prevent it happening again. And that's exactly how the media used to deal with a crisis.

The problem is, those phases no longer follow a distinct timeline. In fact, in our connected world of instant information, the phases will often overlap.

So, in a crisis situation, don't just think about your current 'phase'. Think about the next one, and the one after that. How might they play out? How will you deal with them? Ideally, consider each and every phase at the same time.

8. Be open and honest

OK, you've got a crisis on your hands. You've done all the preparation you can. You've decided you want to be as visible as possible, you've thought about each phase of the crisis, and you even have a social media crisis plan in place. What do you actually say?

Clearly, your messages will depend on the nature of the crisis, so we can't advise you here on what to say. But the rule of thumb in crisis communications is: be open and honest.

Don't try to 'spin' the story, or hide the facts. A crisis is no time to be losing the trust of your key stakeholders, whether they are customers, employees or shareholders. And nothing erodes trust like being caught in a lie.

So even if everything you do is being challenged and criticised, remain open and honest.

9. Keep calm

Without resorting to a Kipling quote (that's Rudyard, not 'Mr'), the importance of remaining calm in a crisis cannot be underestimated.

If you panic, not only will that make those around you more prone to panic, but it's more than likely you will make the wrong decisions as a result. And, from an audience perspective, the last thing you want to project during a crisis is the sense of a downward spiral towards oblivion.

The best antidote to panic is teamwork. If you have the right crisis management team in place, with roles correctly assigned and responsibilities clear, then – at least above the waterline – all should appear calm. Feel free to paddle away under the water as fast as you can!

10. Don't forget the post-crisis phase

Even if you have substantial reservoirs of goodwill to draw from, it's quite possible that a crisis will damage your business or your brand. Hopefully (if you've followed these tips and you've employed the services of an experienced crisis communications team like Aberfield!) that won't happen, but let's just assume the worst.

The post-crisis phase needs to be planned just as carefully as the crisis phase itself. Consider how you will rebuild your reputation or your sales. Do you need to organise a stakeholder roadshow? What about an advertising campaign? Or a sales promotion for your customers? And even if your media encounters have left you battered and bruised, now's definitely not the time to be putting your PR on hold.

And so there's your top tips! Admittedly, it's an extreme simplification of what is a complex area of communications. If you'd like more substantial help and advice, call us on +44 (0)113 880 0444.