

Crisis Communications: You Need More Than a Plan

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"Having a [crisis communications plan] is a lot like having kids. Of course it sounds like a great idea in the beginning, but once you have a plan, you can't just forget about it. You have to review it often, revise it, update it and help it grow with your organization."

I've used variations of this anecdote to pertain to social media strategy and other nuisances of our day-to-day lives in sports communications, but the basic idea is still the same. Having a crisis communications plan is more than just checking a box. Many organizations may have a crisis communications plan, but it's more than five, 10 or 15 years old. It may not account for social media strategy and other emerging communications tools.

When it comes to crisis communications, you can have a great, airtight plan that you want to follow step by step to lead your organization to the light at the end of the tunnel. However, most plans don't go as planned. Don't fall into the trap of forcing yourself to fall rigidly between the boundaries of your designed crisis plan.

There will be areas of your plan that will fail. It will happen. But how you adapt and take emotion out of your thinking will dictate the success or failure of your crisis plan and procedures.

A few things to note about your crisis plan: Make sure you have a checklist of steps in the plan, a list of people involved in the process, defined roles for those involved, designated spokesperson(s) and the goals of your crisis plan.

Above all, potentially the most important thing to note about your crisis communications plan is that you must be adaptable. Things will change. Roles will change. The step-by-step process will change. You need to allow yourself to be flexible and to adjust on the fly.

Thanks to Twitter, everything is #BreakingNews — whether the news is worthy of the "breaking news" tag or not. So how do you address a breaking news story that has gone viral on Twitter? According to what we've learned and practiced in public relations, it was long believed that staying silent was the right way to go. In some instances, I would agree with this tactic (based on the situation or the confidential information involved), but now the voiceless have a voice on Twitter. The longer you stay silent, the larger the public outcry and social media mob grows.

BSM (before social media), we had hours to plan and prepare a response to a situation. ASM (after social media), we are dealing in minutes. *But the public is banging down your Twitter door with pitchforks and ready to steamroll anyone in its wake. What do I do?* You may think I'm a bit unorthodox, but your plan in this ASM world is surprisingly simple (*in most circumstances):

1. Acknowledge the story: This first step will work in many instances outside of legal matters. If you can legally, acknowledge that there is a story. For example: "We are aware of the XYZ situation. We are gathering information and we will provide an update at a later time." If your #BreakingNews story or crisis is related to matters of the law, consult your legal counsel. Your best course of action would most likely be staying

silent.

2. Gather information: Ninety-eight percent of everything you read on the Internet is false (results from my unscientific poll), so we need time to A) confirm/deny the story, and B) gather the correct information.
3. Once you've gathered the information, you must share the information with your internal stakeholders — those that are directly affected by the story and/or those that need to be involved in the communication and decision-making process. At this time, there may be more information provided to you, or you can edit the information into a more concise manner.
4. Issue a statement. Sometimes a simple statement may lead to additional statements in the future. That happens. Before you issue that statement, make sure you have a plan in place about the release of future statements and other information.

These four steps are not foolproof, but they are a start. I've seen too many individuals, companies, teams and brands go silent on social media during a crisis or #BreakingNews story. That's not a good look. It is social media, not silent media. You can't be all about sunshine, rainbows and puppy dogs. There will come a time (or times, if you're unlucky) when you will be faced with a crisis and you have only minutes or seconds to acknowledge it on Twitter before the avalanche swallows you.