Public Relations Tools
Crisis Communications in the Technology World

by **Stephen Loudermilk**, @LoudyOutLoud

The mere thought of crisis communications can make one's blood pressure go up significantly.

But in the technology world — whether it's using technology tools to monitor crises or helping a company prepare for a possible corporate or technology issue — crisis communications should no longer be an afterthought in anyone's communications strategy. Crisis communications should be an automatic part of our "proactive" communications planning arsenal.

We know this to be true because of all the examples of "how not to handle a crisis."

Remember all the headlines during the BP oil crisis or Chipotle's recent E. coli food crisis? What about Carnival Cruise Line's missteps with poor communication during high-profile incidents? Those, unfortunately, are just a few of the worst examples.

Most companies are simply not prepared. They have not created a crisis communications plan — despite knowing the chance of a crisis or critical issue. And the impact of a crisis — even a small one — is multiplied as stories spread like wildfire across Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google+ or other platforms.

Technology public relations professionals should look for an opportunity to bring crisis communications planning to the executive table. Start building your crisis communications plan now because it could make or break your company or client's reputation and brand before you know it.

Here are the top 10 tips for successful crisis planning and implementation:

1. Team up with your business continuity or disaster recovery team. Understand how communications are conducted throughout your company or client's company in the wake of a potential disaster. You should be prepared to meet with executives and the technology team (CIOs, technical managers, data center officials) to go through the process of handling a crisis the minute it happens.

2. Assess every possible crisis situation that can happen. Is there a social media policy for addressing hostile or confrontational dialogue on social media? What happens if an executive gets in hot water? Document the process or workflow for monitoring crisis issues. Define who on the team needs to be involved in case a crisis situation happens overnight.

3. Communication, communication, communication. Collect information from members of the crisis team, including office, home and cellphone numbers, work and personal email addresses, and most significantly, roles and responsibilities of people on the team. This information should be shared with the crisis team on a quarterly basis. In addition, equip your team with connectivity devices such as smartphones, iPads and videoconferencing in case a crisis happens off-site.

4. Don't wait to craft messages, Q&As, sales communications, standby media statements or press materials. Companies that do a poor job with crisis situations wait a week or more to develop succinct crisis communications. In many cases, this is too late to slow the full-fledged media, customer or investor firestorm brewing.

5. Be consistent in messaging and your spokespeople. Developing consistent and succinct messages for each crisis scenario is a "must-have." Be proactive in your media approach, and don't wait to have your first conference call with the continuity or disaster recovery team to help you. Also, identify one or two spokespeople who are media-trained and can be the spokespeople in time of crisis. Prepare yourself if you are the designated crisis spokesperson and need to carry the torch to mitigate reputation damage.

6. When in doubt about what you should do in a crisis, refer to your crisis communications manual or handbook. Just like a football player needs to study a playbook to understand plays on the field, you should review your crisis plan to make sure you understand what to do in every situation.

7. Monitor social media constantly. While there are trolls on social media that love to create controversy, there are also customers, partners, media, analysts and investors who have a vested interest in the success of your company. A good way to reduce negativity on social media is to communicate directly and quickly with customers and other key influencers to assess their situation or issue before they can air issues online.

8. Follow through on a plan of action to address additional crises after the initial crisis has been mitigated. Crisis communications is tough work, but when you keep your action plan updated, you will know how to be better prepared next time.

9. Train spokespeople to be humble and acknowledge fault. If your company or client's company launches a technology product that's a massive dud and has hundreds of bugs, make sure your company has a way to respond to those product issues. A great way to mitigate further product technical issues is to take it back to the lab, re-engineer it and launch it again when your company has positive customer endorsements.

10. Finally, learn from your mistakes and conduct a post mortem, "lessons learned" briefing session. It's an exercise that helps you thoroughly understand your crisis planning and be better prepared for the next big issue.