



INCIDENTALS *quarterly news letter*

Winter 2007-2008



Crisis Communications

We often ask for submissions of articles on topics related to emergency response or business continuity. In this edition, we are pleased to share with you a submission from Mr. John Larsen, who is the Principal at Corpen Group, a firm specializing in Crisis Communications consulting.

ERMC has worked with Corpen Group in integrating crisis communications plans into ERPs and we think the article that John has put together pretty well says it all.....certainly better than we could.

Perception is reality

Successful emergency response management necessitates effective crisis communications, pure and simple. In fact, the degree to which how well communications are conducted often becomes the public perception litmus test of how well a critical incident was handled. We all remember the Tylenol tampering crisis as the case book example of a successful response, and the reaction to the Exxon Valdez oil spill stands as the low-water mark (pun intended) of an emergency response that didn't go as planned. But neither of these impressions have much to do with the actual emergency management processes themselves; they have everything to do with how the company 'positioned' itself around the crisis – how well it communicated.

The personality of an organization is revealed in times of crisis, and its success in relaying messages with timeliness, conviction and competence serves to enhance stakeholder trust. As such, it is critically important for emergency response managers to understand how effective communications can support their efforts. Four key ingredients are needed for communications to support and advance the larger set of emergency response actions.

Weave, don't bolt

First – the organization needs to recognize the importance of effective communications as an integral, versus an optional, component of the overall ERP. Put simply, the crisis communications process needs to be woven into the larger crisis management approach, not simply bolted on. Although it may be necessary to build a separate crisis communications plan that outlines the details of various media and stakeholder outreach responsibilities, the key components of the communications approach also need to be firmly rooted in the operational ERP. This will be an iterative process that will require understanding, coordination, and agreement on the capacities of operations managers to undertake various communications roles (i.e. select media appearances, employee communications, etc)

Write it into policy

Second - if crisis communications is to work at all it needs to be actively considered in advance and the approaches codified into policy. Who speaks on behalf of the organization, at head office and in the field? How quickly will the organization respond? Who is the information approving authority? When and how is legal / HR involved in communications?

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You can't be a "wing-it" on these points, there isn't the time, and there won't be measured discussion or agreement. A key principal to any effective crisis management is to streamline responses as much as possible; by writing out the communications policies, everyone gets on the same page and expectations are clearly understood.

Designate responsibilities

Third - crisis communications tactics need to clearly outline who will do what when an incident occurs. This may seem obvious, but the point to be made here is that these decisions need to include more than the traditional PR folks. In times of crisis, and given the importance of the communications function, non-PR folks need to be clearly brought in to support the communications effort. They need to understand the importance of their new roles, and how those are to be performed. This could be the main receptionist who will take the initial media calls; it may be the field manager who needs to serve as an initial media contact; it may be the corporate accountant who will be tasked with setting up a room for a press conference. Your communications officer can't be everywhere at once; the operational planning process needs to effectively diffuse secondary public relations functions.

Tell 'em and test it

Fourth - lastly, make sure that once the plan has been conceptualized, designed and approved, that it is thoroughly tested. But, even before going to that step, efforts must be made to introduce staff to the new plan and its increased scope of responsibilities, its points of operational integration, and its trigger points. Ideally this can be done on three levels: first, familiarize participants on the new plan in an open, iterative and constructive environment. This step is particularly important for the non-PR folks who'll be supporting the communications effort, and might take a couple of hours. Second, once understanding of the plan is set through effective familiarization sessions, then move to a communications-

centric table-top exercise. This is where the communications function is exercised in stop-time, where corrections are made and clarifications outlined, and this might take half a day. Third, run an operationally integrated real-time joint exercise where communications is specifically tested. With de-briefings, this might take a full day.

These are some core suggestions. The bottom line is that in times of crisis the operational ERP manager might need to change their thinking about the importance of communication. It is not merely a series of checklist items for 'the PR' guy to do; it is core to mobilizing an effective crisis response that builds reputational value.

John Larsen is the Principal of Corpen Group, Inc, a leading consultancy specializing in issues management, crisis and risk communications.

Disaster Forum Update

Well the speakers are all confirmed and this year, the line up looks to be as good as or better than the last 2 years! Disaster Forum is back at the Banff Centre, **APRIL 21 - 24, 2008**.

Mitigate | Prepare | Respond | Recover

PLAN TO RESPOND!

April 21 - 24, 2008 Banff, Alberta

The graphic is a black rectangle with white and yellow text. At the top, it lists the stages of disaster response: Mitigate | Prepare | Respond | Recover. Below that, the words "PLAN TO RESPOND!" are written in large, bold, yellow and white letters. At the bottom, the dates and location "April 21 - 24, 2008 Banff, Alberta" are written in white.

Keynote speakers include **Andrew Clancy** from New Scotland Yard speaking on the London Terrorist Bombings and Counter Terrorism - he is even doing a Pre conference workshop! We also have **Mr. Mark Ackerman**, who is Vice President at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, which is just

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