



The Evolving Nature of Crisis Communications

By John Larsen, MCS, ABC

Crisis communications has been around, in one form or another, since Noah was told of a huge impending storm. We've evolved since then, and although crisis communications is relatively effective from a technological perspective, it requires a reshaping of our philosophical considerations for continued success. As business communicators, it's our responsibility to understand the emerging trends affecting crisis communications, regardless of what specific function we might fulfill in our organization.

Crisis communications was initially all about putting on a good face on things gone wrong. It focused almost exclusively on mechanisms for effective media management, and wasn't too concerned about closing the loop between what we said to the media and what the public might truly perceive. Accident spokespeople would cite safety records, health incidents would be refuted with medical research, and breaches of trust were treated as singular 'bad apple' cases.

Today, the public is wiser. Perhaps it's cynicism, perhaps it's the availability to unfettered information, perhaps it's simply that the old lines sound tired. Whatever it is, the reality is that stakeholders – investors, employees, publics – demand a greater level of openness and honesty in how we deal with crisis communications. They are no longer intent to have critical planning done behind closed doors, and to receive pre-scripted mechanical communications when emergencies arise. And, that's a good thing!

Crisis communications today needs to be much more iterative and bilateral than it has ever been in the past. It needs to get inside stakeholder perceptions, anxieties, and expectations long before a crisis ever occurs. Only then can messaging be aligned to the ever shifting winds of public opinion, and reflect the reality of our ever-changing world.

When people talk of updating a crisis communications plan they most commonly refer to enhancing process graphs, updating names on org charts, and identifying new communications tools. They hardly ever refer to rigorous need for messaging that needs to be built from an outside-in perspective, that is rooted in recent history, and that works to build the kind of trust that allows people to believe in, and act upon, our communications in times of trouble.

Crisis communications has become as much about the "what" of communications as about the "how" of communications. It has evolved to become more of a science involving the tenets of risk communications. Effective crisis communications today strives to acknowledge, not mitigate fears. It works to contextualize potential threats, not dismiss them, and it aims to partner with audiences rather than see them as threats. As Will Rogers once said, in times of crisis and uncertainty, "people want to know that you care, more than they care what you know."

What this means for us, from a practical perspective, is that we need to build new and important elements into our crisis communications planning models. We need ongoing outreach and stakeholder opinion feedback. We need enhanced linkages with operations to understand and effectively communicate risks. We need to foster and maintain various chains of advocacy among our various stakeholders. We need to ensure a real-time involvement in emergency messaging where we sit alongside our legal and other cohorts.

With a broad range of literature available to us, and with extensive case studies to pull from, we've done a good job of getting the mechanics of crisis communications right. Where we now need to focus our attention is to improving the softer, but equally important, attitudinal component of the discipline. We need to understand that at root we are communicating to people when psychological barriers to communications are highest, credibility is eroded, and time is limited. Only if we connect with people by truly acknowledging them can we ensure that the mechanics of our plan are effective.

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