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COMMUNICATIONS & CONSULTING

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” – George Bernard Shaw

OVERCOMING A CRISIS:

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY DEVISE & EXECUTE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Vital to any crisis communications plan is understanding that COMMUNICATION must take place – taking into equal consideration the message and the medium in which to deliver that message. Of nearly equal importance is establishing a clear crisis communications plan and protocol – in this situation, a crisis checklist is invaluable.

THE CRISIS CHECKLIST

When operating in a crisis, you are working in a high-intensity environment under an accelerated timeframe and every move you make is under a microscope. To avoid any missteps, have a crisis checklist in place with components that you can spring into action at a moment's notice.



Plan Ahead

In some instances, you have a small window of time to plan for what you know will be an impending crisis. Do not stick your head in the sand and hope for the issue to not come to light. In this case, plan ahead and get ready, so that you can set the message and define yourself or your organization as it relates to the crisis. It is better to be ready, take control of the message and set the tone.



Draft Holding Statements

Prepare holding statements the minute a disaster strikes or prior if you know one is coming. When breaking news happens, the media will not hold their story to ensure you have time to prepare a comment. Have a written statement ready to go that you can give to them immediately. Likewise, if a story has already been published without your comments, send them the holding statement and ask them to update their story. Sometimes it is necessary to have a few statements from different people; however, they must all follow the same message and theme.



Establish a Media Spokesperson

During a crisis, it is imperative to establish one - and only one - media spokesperson. This person should be well informed, have proper media training and have the ability to stay on message at all times, even under times of intense scrutiny. This instance may only change if you have a legal or technical question, in which case a second subject-matter expert should be trained and on deck.



Establish Media Contact Protocol

Ensure all representatives of the organization are alerted to who they should direct the call to in the event that they are contacted by the media. After the appropriate parties are contacted, the media spokesperson should return the media's call in a timely manner, preferably in writing when able.



Develop Talking Points

Once a media spokesperson is established and your media protocol is in place, draft talking points for utilization by the spokesperson. These talking points should anticipate questions that an interviewer may ask and also be reflective of the holding statement you have already given to the media to ensure the spokesperson remains on message. These internal points should be carefully distributed, so as not to be released to the media or leaked.



Draft Internal & External Correspondence

Prepare appropriate, proactive correspondences to anyone who may inquire (both internal and external audiences) about the current crisis situation, including employees, community leaders, elected officials and the general public. These correspondences preempt and should prevent key people from speaking before being fully aware of the issue and making the crisis worse.



Establish List of Outside Third-party Validators

Third-party validators will lend needed credibility to the statements that are being made by the organization responding to the crisis. Establishing a list of supporters who are well versed and educated on the organization and current situation who can speak to the media, may make the difference in establishing a credible message that will penetrate the target audience.



Plan for New Weaknesses & Follow-up Coverage

Immediately identify other problems or weaknesses that may come to light because of the current crisis and spark follow-up coverage. Evaluate and plan for these weaknesses. Then take the same steps to establish responses to likely questions and be prepared to combat misinformation with fact. Again, be careful with these points, as they are weaknesses and should not be leaked or distributed outside the trusted circle. Verbal preparation may be deemed appropriate in these instances.



Stay Consistent, Stay on Message, Ride it Out

By following the crisis checklist, the tools and protocol needed to stay consistent and on message are in place. *Now, stay focused. This, too, shall pass.*



Be Realistic

Do not plan for, or expect, new, positive coverage immediately after a crisis, as this will merely give the media license to continue to cover the crisis situation. There is a time and place to rebuild your brand or reputation, but it has to be once the crisis has passed.