

Crisis Communication Affects Everyone at Your Firm



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You're in business development, and you're having breakfast with decision-makers. You're meeting government program managers and check-signers. You're getting your messages across to potential customers. Many questions are asked.

What happens if one of those questions deals with negative press your company has received recently?

Well, this is where a crisis communications plan comes into effect. It is imperative that everyone in an organization, including the business development team, is aware of the procedures involved in the plan.

Having a plan in place ensures that one message with one voice represents the company as a whole.

So before you head out to the first of three networking events, look over the following tips on how you can play an integral part in your company's crisis communications process.

1. Know your plan and know your place. If you don't know whether your company has a crisis communications plan, e-mail your department head or your marketing gurus to find out. It's important that you know what to do when confronted with questions.

Let's face it: If you are in business development, you often are the face of your company. Partners and potential customers depend on you for accurate

information. A carefully considered communications plan will help you know what to do in a crisis.

2. You are not the spokesman. The crisis communications plan should designate someone to represent the company to all external audiences. That person should be trained in handling tough questions and sensitive issues.

There are a number of constituencies that must be kept informed during the crisis, and your spokesman will know exactly what to say and how to say it.

Above all, do not speculate or share "just between us" information. Loose lips don't just sink ships. They produce clips. Press clips.

Let's assume that as a business development person you will not be the official company spokesman. But you still will be responsible for conveying accurate information when asked.

Work with members of your crisis communications team to determine what you should say.

They may advise you not to say anything. They may advise you to point people to your company's Web site for official information. Or they may advise you to walk the company line and repeat what has been officially released.

3. Stay on point. The messages created for dissemination during a crisis are crafted to benefit the company and everyone it serves.

A lot of effort and time (and legal review, I might add) went into the messages, and it is important that all communications be on point.

You need to follow those messages to the letter and not deviate. This is not a situation that calls for your

opinion. A uniform message will help your company cope and overcome the crisis.

4. Forewarned is forearmed. As a key part of the business development team, you are often the first to get news (or gossip) that may hurt your company's image.

Going to all those events and meetings, you are likely to hear something about your company that could signal a crisis on the horizon.

If you do hear something negative, it's almost guaranteed you are not the first—and you definitely won't be the last—to hear it. Gossip and bad news spread quickly within and outside the Beltway, and true or not, your company should be prepared for it.

Immediately contact your department head and marketing departments. Tell them where you heard the negative information and from whom.

If warranted, they will act with due diligence and go to their crisis communications plan for the next steps.

Again, be sure to ask for instructions regarding your role in helping to stave off this potential crisis.

I have a number of principles that guide my thinking on this issue. The ones I consider most important are those I turn to immediately when a situation arises:

- Crisis communication must be 100 percent consistent with your company's brand.
- All your key audiences will either confirm or revise their perception of your organization after a crisis or problem situation.
- A major crisis will have a profound and long-term effect on your organization and its leaders.
- The whole company must work as a team.

About the Author



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