

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

August 2007

Business should be ready for crisis



It goes without saying that it is difficult to prepare for the unexpected—in everyday life as well as in

business. Still, businesses can take some key steps before, during and after a problem or crisis that, with the help of a good crisis team, will enable them to respond effectively. Sometimes the events that lead us to a crisis are beyond our control, sometimes not—no matter the cause, however, crisis communications is something that every business has the opportunity to handle well.

Take Tylenol, for example, which was faced with a horrible scenario in 1982 when several deaths were caused by cyanide-laced pills. While the damage from this crisis was monumental, the company took swift action in response, spending \$100 million to destroy 31 million capsules. Their CEO appeared on television and at news conferences to inform the public of the company's actions. During just the first few weeks of the crisis, Tylenol developed and promoted tamper-resistant packaging to regain consumer confidence.

The proactive response from the company was critical in saving its image during an otherwise challenging situation. When an authority fails to respond to a crisis, or responds with the phrase “no comment,” there is always a pause that hangs in the air, and in that pause one thought tends to cross everyone's mind: “Guilty as charged.”

Whether your business is large or small, crisis management boils down to dealing with a pressing problem or issue in the here and now. It is important to take action and identify the issue and level of response that is needed. While the moment when a situation arises may feel like a full emergency, often times it is a problem or conflict that, with the help of a strong crisis communications team and a plan, can be managed effectively. In instances like these, education and awareness-building are often the best cure.

Technology is another tool that plays an important role in crisis communications. In the case of the recent Virginia Tech tragedy, the school's Web site was heavily used to disseminate information both during and after the emergency. In fact, Virginia Tech rapidly utilized its Web site as a media resource from which


news outlets and ordinary citizens alike could find out the latest official updates as the crisis unfolded. Within 48 hours of the initial incident, it had launched a separate memorial Web site for people to post their condolences.

A crisis, by definition, catches us off guard. Emotions run high, and reputations—to say nothing of profit margins for businesses—can be at stake. The greatest aid any organization can provide itself is a detailed plan that outlines steps for responding to a crisis. Consider partnering with a communications firm that offers a strong reputation in crisis communications, to whom you can turn to provide critical counsel, an objective viewpoint and assistance with the implementation of your organization's response.

At the very least, making sure you have a plan in place to deal with emergencies will give you a resource to go to when crises surface, and will help you to provide a response that is organized, thoughtful and effective in not only resolving the situation but conveying to the media and the general public that you are concerned, you are honest, and you are committed to seeing the situation through to a positive resolution.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

There is probably no time when having a communications plan is more important than during a crisis. By being prepared, honest and proactive, you can not only effectively manage the crisis but maintain and even enhance your business's image among the media and the general public. And like most things that truly work, it is important to conduct follow up after the crisis is over: What was effective? What wasn't? Preparing for a disaster might help you wade through it, but avoiding disasters in the future comes by learning from the experience. 



Karen Moore, APR, CPRC
CEO and Founder at Moore Consulting Group

Karen's Crisis Tips

- **Start work on a potential crisis before it becomes public.** Plan out key messages, identify a spokesperson, and implement steps to resolve the situation. Refer to your pre-approved crisis plan.
- **Speak in plain English.** Make sure people understand your message; avoid industry-specific jargon that can confuse the general population.
- **Convey your sympathy.** While addressing key issues, be sure to let the audience know you understand the feelings of the parties involved.
- **Keep everyone informed.** The media, the general public, stakeholders, neighbors, etc. Update every target audience regularly with what you know, what you don't know, and what you're doing.

What to say...

- When asked a high-emotion question, respond with **Compassion, Conviction and Optimism.**
- When asked a “**what if**” question, repeat the question, state the actual situation, and state what you know factually.
- **The triple positive:** When breaking adverse news or stating a negative, balance the bad news with at least three more positive, constructive or solution-oriented messages.

Karen Moore, CEO and founder of Moore Consulting Group, Inc., offers additional crisis tips on her blog at moore-pr.com.