

STRATEGIES

Keeping a crisis under control

Problems mushroom into disasters without strategy

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How management communicates with employees and the public during and after a crisis can make the difference between whether the company is seen in a positive or a negative light.

Hopefully, most businesses won't experience terrorist attacks, air crashes or oil spills, but they're not immune from crisis.

Any company can be damaged by problems such as sexual harassment and discrimination suits, weather emergencies, deaths of key employees, online hackers, workplace violence, fraud, product recalls or

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

- Can you identify at least five problems that could negatively affect your company?
- Can you list the repercussions of each, as well as the potential damage to your company's reputation?
- Do you have primary key messages to respond to each one?
- Can you name the people on your crisis team?
- Can you name the person who would respond to the media? When was that person's last media training? Would that person know what to do in an ambush interview situation?
- Have you reviewed your company's liability insurance and do you know what it covers?
- Do you have a working relationship with the news media?
- Do you think "no comment" is the most efficient way to answer media questions? (It isn't.)
- How much does your company spend on advertising campaigns?
- How much does it spend on crisis training and planning?

angry consumers and shareholders.

A crisis communication plan can help prevent delayed or inappropriate response in the event of a disaster.

One of the most glaring examples of executive mismanagement comes from the recent Firestone tire recall crisis, said Rebecca Hart, president of Hart & Partners, a Jacksonville-based public relations firm.

Top management ignored warning signs of defective tires and continued manufacturing them without identifying and fixing the problem, she said.

"The company took too long a time to respond to the crisis, and was unprepared for a recall."

When someone is less than completely honest in his initial response to an inquiry, he will likely end up explaining himself later, Hart said.

CEOs can increase the effectiveness of the plan by having communication executives in the room when business decisions are made to help weigh the possible impact of those decisions.

Rick Ferrin, executive director of the Jacksonville Port Authority, says the agency believes in planning ahead.

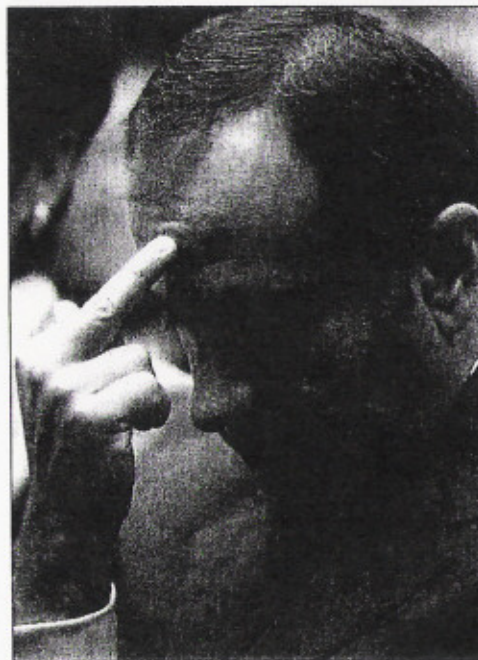
"When it comes to a crisis, there is no substitute for planning well ahead of time. We have identified potential crisis scenarios which could strike Jaxport and organized an internal crisis management team, which has planned our response," he said.

"Of course, we hope we never have to respond to a serious situation, but the worst time to plan for a crisis is when you're in the middle of one."

The YMCA of Florida's First Coast, which has 15 family branches and 65 program locations from St. Augustine to Fernandina Beach, has investigated crisis management.

"We realize that most reputational damage happens when an organization mishandles the early phases of crisis, not from the crisis event itself," said Paul McEntire, chief operating officer of the nonprofit organization.

"With more than 65,000 people coming through our doors every year, we take every safety precaution and we know it is our responsibility to think clearly and act responsibly even when that's hard



Ford President Jacques Nasser at a House committee meeting about the company's Firestone-tire crisis.

to do."

The YMCA has an "Emergency Response Procedures" wallet card that lists emergency procedures and home, mobile and office numbers of key executives.

The organization also conducts crisis response, safety and media training for employees so they will know how to respond in critical situations.

Laura Link Maggio is a correspondent with The Business Journal.