How to handle a PR crisis: practical tips

When big mistakes are made, the damage done to a company's image and reputation may be worse than any material fallout. With customer trust at stake, careful communication is crucial.

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Think a reputation-destroying crisis will never come calling at your company? But in the event that it does, are you confident that you could handle it?

Like any other pressing business risk, a possible PR crisis should be approached with deliberate preparation and planning. That is the best way to cope with the day you hope will never come, argues **Yago de la Cierva** in his practical book on the subject, *Leading Companies Through Storms and Crises*.

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Responsible leadership should include crisis prevention, preparation and a calm, straightforward approach to communication in the event that a PR disaster must be weathered.

The ABCs of crisis communication

Based on common-sense principles, crisis communication aims to minimize risk. De la Cierva highlights a series of action items that consider the person, the organization and society carefully. In times of crisis, key actions include:

- **Address perceptions.** The gravity of a crisis is directly proportional to the public's perception of it, rather than to what has actually happened on the ground.
- **Listen to protesters.** It is very important to try to understand what is making people angry. Anger hinders communication, and the person you are addressing will not listen to your message until they have had their say.
- **Tune in emotionally.** You need to know how to interpret the public's mood. Communication should not be treated as an impersonal means for spreading ideas.
- **Speak from the other person's point of view.** Make it clear that the company is defending the interests of the people it serves.
- **Differentiate between law and public opinion.** You may be in the right, and yet be wrong. It's best to have both legal advisers and communications experts on hand.
- **Always tell the truth.** Honesty is essential to credibility. In times of crisis, one of the worst things you can do is lie.
- **Answer for your actions.** Assume responsibility. That may mean fixing the problem, acknowledging the mistake or mistakes that were made and repairing whatever damage has been caused.
- **Be prepared.** Crisis communication officers must have a service-minded mentality. They need technical skills and the ability to formulate clear, inoffensive and unequivocal messages.

Ready, set, crisis!

There are three parts to preparing for a crisis: foresight, prevention and provision. Foresight requires knowing a company's internal and external context thoroughly enough to see crises coming and to perceive their likely consequences. Prevention means taking a proactive approach to avoid obvious crises. Provision requires creating an action plan.

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Or, more plainly, a crisis plan: that is, a series of immediate measures to respond to each situation adequately. But how does communication fit into all of this?

The first step is to form a crisis management team to gather information, assign responsibilities and decide on the organization's position regarding the crisis. The trick is to think before acting.

The crisis team's tasks also include defining the problem, assessing whom it will affect and then deciding how the company should act. Members of the team should also, ideally, consider how the situation might evolve or play out.

Next, information should be collected systematically to create an understanding of each group that has been affected by the crisis. This data will also be used to form the company's official response.

To communicate this response, choose a spokesperson adept at transmitting the corporate message to the various groups affected and to the media. The choice of spokesperson will depend on the nature of the crisis (technical or personal), its relevance, its location and how long it is expected to last.

Once the company's message, spokesperson and next steps have been decided, communication channels also need to be chosen. These will normally be the same channels used for day-to-day communication; however, for rapid responses, priority should be given to interactive tools — namely, social media.

In addition, an overall plan encompassing all channels is needed. The company web site should serve as the backbone for all communications — including the intranet to keep employees informed. The media should be kept up-to-date via press conferences and email.

But the most important factor in all this is that the company takes the initiative in communication. It must transform itself into a trusted source, acting positively and creatively to control the dimensions of the problem and manage time. Updates should be made continuously and should anticipate people's needs.

What happens next?

Each action plan should be measured and analyzed afterward. Even while the communications plan is still being executed, it's necessary to analyze the press and social media landscape and monitor how well the plan is working. Once the crisis has passed, an

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overall assessment should be carried out, and a plan for the post-crisis period needs to be agreed upon.

Accounts of the crisis and analyses of them are highly valuable for the future. But in order for such learning to be useful, internal reforms need to be devised and implemented.

Crises pose grave threats to an organization's relationships with its public. Strong ties, therefore, are key to the company's durability: the stronger the ties, the more likely a company is to weather a storm. Effective communication plays an essential role in making those links as strong as they can be.

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