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A Crisis Communications Primer: A Review of PR's Basic Roles

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Each crisis is an individual living and breathing event, and no two are alike. The hundreds of possible elements and combining circumstances dictate how each crisis unfolds and runs its course. These variables demand that we must be prepared to have flexible planning abilities and modify actions, strategies and tactics on the fly to stay ahead of the everchanging factors of a given crisis.

To keep PR staff on point, we need to develop a written Emergency Crisis Communications Plan in advance. The plan will never accurately track all the unknown and moving parts of the crisis, but the plan will serve to keep us thinking straight and provide a guideline and checklist of the necessary steps and actions we need to follow to best manage the situation.

As I drafted this White Paper, I wanted to make it concise and easy to remember. It had the working title: "The 7 C's of Crisis Communications." But similar to an actual crisis, I had to change my plan as many new elements came up that needed to be included, which resulted in more C's than I have ever used in a single document. Crises (I had no idea of the spelling for the plural!) are just that way, too ... everchanging.

Let's start examining the ocean of C's that guide your behaviors, messages and actions at the

onset of a crisis, and then we'll look at some basic elements of a written Emergency Crisis Communications Plan.

The 7 C's of Crisis Communications (Actually Many, Many C's)

- **Calm, Competent and Contextual**

- From the minute tragedy strikes, you and your crisis team must remain calm and clearheaded. This is not the time to panic or display off-the-cuff actions. The early period of a crisis will set the stage with the media and your target audiences on how candid, capable and credible your company is acting.

- **Communicate Circumstances with Compassion**

- Demonstrate your knowledge of the issues and deep concern for those affected. Focus on known facts and avoid all speculation, and never provide specific measurements of damages (that will come in the follow-up remediation stages.) Don't be afraid to "confess," comply or concede if the issues warrant. You may have to battle your lawyers on this one, but the public respects facts and honesty, and grandstanding denials will not eliminate liability nor help preserve your company reputation, which is at stake.

• **Commitment to Communication and Correction**

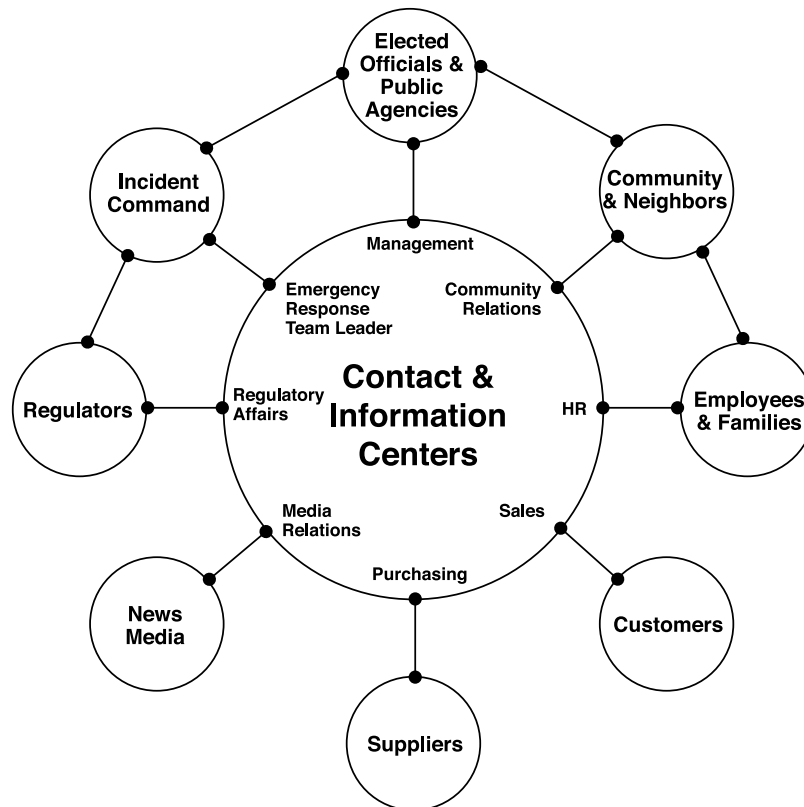
- Pledge to solving the problem and preventing it from happening again. This can include immediate steps to mitigate its effects and plans for future prevention and remediation. Be sure to include legal and risk management departments.

• **Clear and Consistent (Messaging)**

- Develop message points that are easily understood by the general public and avoid industry jargon and deep details that

distract from communicating short, factual, understandable messages. Keep these message points absolutely consistent with all top management, legal, employees, stakeholder audiences and of course, the news media. Keep message points consistent when delivering variations of the messages to different stakeholder audiences as the media will have sources to access all company message viewpoints.

– See diagram below as a guideline to reaching stakeholder audiences.



• **Competent and Credible Spokesperson**

- Spokesperson selection should be done well in advance as a part of the company crisis plan. The spokesperson must have an excellent grasp of the situation and clearly impart to the media and public that they “get it.” This builds confidence with all audiences. Do not

use the “boss” just because they are the boss if they are not a competent and credible spokesperson. Also decide whether to “present or protect” top management during a crisis. News media tend to judge the severity of a crisis by the level of executive spokespersons, so don’t elevate the situation with the president

when a mid-level operations executive is best suited for the particular crisis.

- **Continued Communication and Caring**

- Throughout and after the crisis is resolved, continue to communicate to the news media and stakeholder audiences the current facts and continuing prevention and remediation plans. Create a media log to identify media inquiries and who responded to them. The media, general public and stakeholder audiences must perceive that your company grasps the situation and is capable of solving the problems.

- **Cleanup and Consensus**

- After the crisis is over, conduct a survey with the media, community leaders, the business community and affected audiences to measure a “how did we do?” benchmark. Use these data (fact: data is plural) to decide if further crisis-related action is required and also to make modifications to the company’s crisis communication plan from the “lessons learned.”

An Overview of the Basic Elements of an Emergency Crisis Communications Plan:

I hope you have all those C’s digested, as now we move on to some basics to help you get started with writing down a plan on paper.

- **An Emergency Crisis Communications Plan should include the following basic elements (plus many, many more customized to your corporate requirements):**

- A swift response to media is essential. Executive management (including the legal and risk management departments) must be kept

apprised of the ongoing crisis elements and PR actions in enough detail to solicit feedback. Less detailed reports should be delivered to employees and stakeholder audiences. Setting up a “dark website” in advance should be considered and used for internal executive staff communication and timely notice of actions, results and changes.

- Establish an Emergency Communications Director (ECD) position that has across-the-board authority to directly request help from other corporate departments for services, goods, staffing, etc. necessary to provide support for victims, emergency workers, PR staff, etc. For example, needs may include additional administrative support, food and beverage services, additional security, transportation vehicles and merchandising assistance for blankets, clothing, foul weather gear, etc. This ECD position is an “unfilled” and temporary position that commences with the crisis and ends when the crisis is over but is endowed with “CEO-like authority” to instantly command requests from all departments and divisions companywide without red tape, delays or regard to budget, to help support the needs to manage the crisis. The first PR team responder will take on the role of ECD until a more senior PR staff member arrives (consulting by phone until their arrival). This ECD slot helps to assure swift and rapid proactive actions in the early crisis minutes and during the hours the crisis begins to unfold.
- Have a phone and email list of all PR staff, executive management, operations management and facilities management. This should include contact information for heads of government (city, county and state), regulating agencies and emergency personnel,

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- as well as adjacent neighborhood homeowners associations and management of nearby businesses. Also have an “information blast” system (phone, text or social media) set up to deliver updates to entire lists of significant stakeholders.
- Develop a crisis-specific question-and-answer statement for use by PR staff and designated spokespersons for a response guide to media inquiries. This needs to be updated as the crisis unfolds.
 - Only designated spokespersons will make statements to news media or other stakeholder audiences on behalf of the company.
 - Names of injured or dead will not be discussed or released by the corporation, but rather by appropriate law enforcement agencies. Sensitive information (deaths, injuries, etc.) should not be relayed by two-way radio or cell phone, as these channels may be monitored.
 - The ECD has the immediate power to purchase radio, TV or newspaper advertising space, as well as post paid or owned content on selected social media platforms, for means of communicating to the public, employees and stakeholder audiences.
 - Create an “emergency information page” on your website, and keep this informational page updated on a timely basis (facts of the crisis, employee work notices, parking lots/roads closed, etc.). Be aware a crisis can create a huge volume of additional website hits that can cripple your main website. Investigate your website’s ability to handle a “high hit” situation and, if necessary, build in an element to handle a potential onslaught of online inquiries.
- **Establish restricted responses, access and actions:**
 - At no time are the media to be allowed to enter any on-property crisis scenes unless approved and escorted by corporate PR staff.
 - No dollar damage estimates or blame will be reported until it is investigated, appraised and approved by appropriate company officials, including law and risk management departments. Do not comment on estimates or blame that may be reported by police, fire, hospital, etc. Send media back to the source for additional comment.
 - Employees must be prohibited from taking live video or still photography of on-site crisis events for distribution to any person or entity other than corporate executive staff to determining cause/ effect and remedial actions. This restriction should be in the “employee contract” signed at the time of hire.
 - **Actions as the crisis unfolds:**
 - Strive for timely, consistent and candid flow of accurate information to the media, executive staff, the public, employees and stakeholder audiences. While these message points may vary to these targeted audiences, be aware that media have sources to garner copies of all outbound corporate communications.
 - All outbound information and messages must be truthful and include full disclosure, even if some information is not glowing for your corporation. Getting the entire story out quickly reduces the cycle of the media digging for additional facts and keeping the issues in the news. This is the high-road approach and will compress the news cycle and set a good foundation to protect the corporate reputation.
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- Have corporate communication sources open 24/7 during the hours or days following the crisis situation to respond to incoming inquiries.
 - Set a goal – based on achieved control of the crisis – for when you will cut back on public and stakeholder statements and work toward moving the story off page one by maintaining your policy of complete and honest disclosure.
 - Don't allow the entire corporation to become consumed with the ongoing crisis. Regular day-to-day business operations must continue as normally as possible (given some operational modifications due to interfering crisis effects.)
 - Create a media inquiry log to keep track of media questions and company responses. This should include time and date of call and name of staffer who responded, and details of data exchanged.
- **After-crisis evaluation:**
 - In the aftermath, reconvene the PR and executive crisis team to evaluate actions and identify areas of concern. Likewise, conduct a survey of the public, businesses, government leadership and stakeholder audiences to gauge “how did we do?” and use the combined data to make changes to the crisis plan structure and actions.

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About the Author



Joe has practiced public relations in Florida for more than 40 years and is now semi-retired. He was the co-founder and president of one of Florida's largest PR firms, Curley & Pynn Public Relations Management in Orlando, which he sold in 2004. Joe has been retained for the past 29 years by Universal Studios Parks & Resorts as Senior Corporate Communications Counsel, international marketing & PR. He was directly involved in theme park projects in Singapore, Japan, Russia, China, Dubai and South Korea. Joe is currently a public relations and marketing consultant at his own firm Stingray Solutions, Inc. He is a past state president of Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA) and currently on the Board of Directors for the Central West Coast Chapter of FPRA. Joe has been honored by FPRA over the years by receiving virtually every high performance and leadership award the Association recognizes. He is a past multi-year national Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) board member, past national president of the PRSA Foundation, and he is a graduate of the Executive Management Program at Rollins College Graduate School of Business. Joe also served for eight years on the Communications and Public Relations Advisory Board for the University of Florida, which he cochaired for 2 years. Joe was one of two alumni that were inducted into the Evergreen Park Community High School Hall of Fame (Chicago). Joe resides in Bradenton, Florida, and enjoys his free time restoring and showing his classic car collection and is also an active and avid power boater. jocurley@tampabay.rr.com - 941-761-1263