

MANAGING A CONTINUING CRISIS

*... what happens when your crisis wants
to move in permanently?*

By Roger Pynn, APR, CPRC

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Crisis Communication is an opportunity

– sometimes not even a tragedy or life threatening situation – that demands immediate attention, intense effort and strategic planning.

It is often not necessarily what you do in the ensuing hours after crisis occurs, but rather what you did long ago when writing your crisis communications plan that counts the most.

Most crisis communications plans are written around specific events – natural or man-made disasters that have a beginning, middle and an end – where the most important element of the plan is often the clean-up that begins when the crisis is over. Notable exceptions are reputation crises that shake the public's trust in an organization due to personal lapses in ethical or moral behavior.

Public relations professionals have been tested time and time again by everything from poison-laced Tylenol to horrific storms to earthquakes; from Bill Clinton's romp with Monica Lewinsky to the Oklahoma City bombings. Veterans of the business are assumed to be able to develop a crisis communications plan as routinely as an entry-level practitioner drafts a news release.

Effective crisis communications plans are inextricably linked to operational plans by which an organization responds to a crisis ... so when fire strikes a nursing home and loved ones are wondering if

their relative is all right, a system is in place for communication that informs and reassures, works in concert with emergency response officials and respects the rights of patients protected by federal law.

But what happens when a crisis strikes more fear into the hearts of your loyal fans than actually into your daily operations ... and what happens if that crisis ebbs on for weeks and then months, places you in the national media spotlight every day and threatens the commercial viability of your community?

That and more faced the community of South Walton when its 15 beach neighborhoods were trapped in the apparent path of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in summer 2010 for nearly 100 days despite the fact that only minor amounts of oil ever floated far enough east to reach its pristine beaches ... and then only after nearly 60 days. South Walton lived on pins and needles not just until the day the well was capped; but

even a year later was deeply engaged in crisis communication.

Strategic Planning

When a crisis goes on so long it begins to feel like a bad new neighbor, you'll be grateful for what you did long ago. Given what South Walton endured, practitioners developing crisis communications plans must look beyond the tactical to strategic questions that include:

- How to avoid brand devaluation in the process of communicating?
- How to engage internal brand ambassadors for message consistency?
- How to avoid the urge to communicate when silence is more powerful?
- How to carefully integrate positive brand messaging without selling?

The great and sad lesson of the Tylenol crisis in 1982 was that the company never recovered full market share. Although the brand is still alive today under different ownership, it is not the market giant that existed prior to the deaths of seven Chicagoans from cyanide-laced capsules that set off a worldwide scare. Considered by many a textbook case of crisis management because Johnson & Johnson pulled its product from shelves around the world, it also clearly demonstrates the importance of sweeping contingency planning to assure rapid, comprehensive communication.

South Walton's brand equity lies in its impressive affinity relationships with brand loyalists who return year after year to enjoy its unique Northwest Florida beaches. A 2010 survey indicated the average visitor

had traveled to South Walton 11 times (84 percent of respondents were repeat visitors, and 36 percent had visited more than 10 times).

Those who visit will say that people who work in the hospitality industry are like old friends. That made those workers critical connections to tourists who braved headline coverage every day, and non-stop video online and on television of the spewing BP Deepwater Horizon well hundreds of miles away from South Walton beaches. They were also a major source of information for reluctant loyalists wavering back home on whether to visit their favorite beach. Millions of dollars for both the local economy and tourist tax collections stood at risk.

In today's digital world, consider what we did for South Walton ... establish a separate Web presence for crisis communications; not just a dark microsite turned on as part of your website. South Walton's simple Wordpress blog, now dark, was known as SouthWaltonUpdate.com and today sits ready on a moment's notice in a crisis. During the Deepwater Horizon, it kept the stain of the oil spill away from www.VisitSouthWalton.com, and the beautiful images used to attract visitors.

It drew 650,000 visits over the six months it was used to fight misinformation ... becoming not only the leading source of information for loyal South Walton fans but media nationwide. At the height of the crisis, it exceeded 23,000 visits in a single day.

Other key elements included:

- Regularly updated "palm cards" shared with industry workers to ensure they were using consistent messaging;
- Constant communication with bed tax collectors

and county leaders to reinforce the dangers of speculation;

- Messaging prepared not only for current conditions but all potential outcomes, agreed upon in advance and developed for all communication platforms (advertising, Web and social media, media relations, etc.); and,

- Open appeals to media with whom we'd built relationships ... we not only shared current information about beach status, we also asked for help from the media who had covered the destination over the years, asking them to assist us in getting the word out. Many did.

In the end, South Walton not only survived ... predictions of up to 50 percent or more loss of business were held at bay and the summer's loss was in the neighborhood of 13 percent. South Walton's 2011 tourism is outpacing pre-Deepwater Horizon numbers ... meaning the dedication to targeted communications paid off.

About the Author

Roger Pynn, APR, CPRC Curley & Pynn Public Relations & Marketing Communications



Roger Pynn, APR, CPRC is president of Curley & Pynn Public Relations & Marketing Communications in Orlando counseling clients on strategic communications in a variety of sectors. The

2009 recipient of FPRA's John W. Dillin Award, his newspaper, corporate and consulting public relations career spans more than four decades.

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