

Effective PR and communications

Paul Philpotts of BSMG examines some of the key issues in handling public relations when a problem strikes.

Some 10 years ago, in the aftermath of the Exxon Valdez oil tanker disaster, I wrote in an industrial management journal that "major crises on the scale of Exxon Valdez are relatively rare and the challenge for managers is to keep their company in a state of readiness when it is so unlikely to happen to them".

Now, with the speed of news communication, personal liability litigation commonplace and the public glare under which firms find themselves routinely, the likelihood has increased that it *will* happen to your company, and you need to be prepared.

Previous tactics

Before the 1990s, crises were mainly 'physical events' (such as product recalls and spillages), rather than corporate crises (such as fraud, trading difficulties, kidnapping and management defections), which were often viewed as operational problems and crisis preparedness was typically focussed around a comprehensive review of what was possible – scenario planning – followed by a detailed analysis of the appropriate response.

Now, with so much depending on the perception of a company, and when the rate of change in business has become so rapid that reality overtakes any conventional planning, the approach has changed to one of setting up appropriate processes to enable the best people to manage crises as they happen, using proven procedures which they have practiced and learnt. The traditional crisis manual and other materials should act as an *aide memoire* on the process and provide a central reference source for factual information that may be needed to brief affected audiences.

The crisis preparedness process

The following are the core requirements to the successful anticipation and

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management of a crisis:

- to provide key personnel with the awareness of, and sensitivity to, issues and events that could grow into a crisis;
- to increase knowledge of and experience in crisis management procedures, both in theory and practice;
- to conduct realistic exercises to enable key personnel to practice crisis communications handling skills and expose strengths and weaknesses in the procedures – before any real crisis occurs; and
- to provide the crisis management team with systems that keep them informed in real-time.



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The crisis management process

The key steps in the required crisis management systems and procedures are, in summary, as follows:

- **drawing up a crisis management map** – essentially an 'architecture' for areas of the business which are susceptible to crisis and a summary of the issues that may arise. This will include identifying the central crisis management team, asking business managers to define threats and risks and current procedures for dealing with them, and then analysing these threats and procedures;
- **setting up crisis management workshops** – these would cover further refinement of the crisis management map, desktop decision simulations and discussion and agreement on a programme of introduction, testing and validation of crisis procedures, plans and systems across units. The latter is essential as a means of securing management commitment to overcoming the "it'll never happen to us" attitude that prevails in most businesses;
- **preparation and issue of the crisis management plan** – essentially a combination of the crisis management map and the more traditional manual. This should be an action-oriented document likely to include: flowcharts or diagrams explaining principles and procedures, regional, unit and project team roles and responsibilities, systems and procedures for informing other parts of the company about the development of the crisis, key contact lists, and specialist central crisis management support available (an internal team or an external consultancy, or both). After approval, the plan should be issued to key managers with instructions on how it should be kept

updated, circulated and practiced; and

- **training, testing and validation** – this would seek to give management a full understanding of, and confidence in, the plans and procedures to be used in a crisis. It would be executed through a training workshop for each 'unit' management. The central crisis management team should provide support, helping to manage consistency in the process, advise on specific local or business unit issues and ensure that any new data is properly fed back into the centralised planning process.

A critical element

Training is a critical part of the feedback process to ensure the crisis management process is valid. It should identify further issues which may grow into crises, 'road-test' key crisis handlers and test the messages.

Training also builds confidence that the theory of the plan will work in practice, which is essential if the process is to be trusted and acted upon.

It is important to get the balance right between theory and practice. If participants have exercises with crisis after crisis, frustration sets in and learning is limited. If too much theory is introduced too early, the attendees become too nonchalant and fail to respond to the emotion which is so much a part of handling a real crisis situation; the major lesson in good crisis simulation is experience of actually feeling stress, surprise, time pressure, weakness, frustration, annoyance, ignorance of key facts etc.

Theory does not get this across. But working alongside practice, theory can capture and consolidate it.

Elements of the exercise

A crisis communications exercise should include all, or most of, the following elements:

- handling calls from journalists, bereaved relatives, affected citizens, police, local politicians, financial analysts and other interested parties;
- compiling briefing documents for the crisis handling team(s);
- writing media statements;
- developing and improving the crisis communications plan, detailing who should say what, when, where, how and why;
- preparing questions and key messages;

Training is a critical part of the feedback process

- briefing spokespeople and key senior executives;
- deciding on communications activities – such as whether to hold a press conference or not, where, when etc;
- facing live and pre-recorded TV and radio interviews or a press conference simulation;
- 'interpreting' news and providing assessment to the corporate HQ etc;
- recording and keeping accurate notes of significant events;
- contributing to colleagues' assessment of the crisis;
- demonstrating diplomacy, sound judgement, control and teamwork; and
- learning to use the crisis management plan and procedures.

Key points

During training, the following elements will be some of the points raised and discussed:

- a crisis is different because what was once control becomes chaos – in reality or, at least, in public perception. What was private becomes public; what was 'confidential' becomes a media 'revelation' and so on;
- the crisis team must learn to change its viewpoint from company introspection to public perception and it should work as a team;
- the worst time to learn how to handle a crisis is during a crisis – prepare as much as possible before. But, at the same time, recognise the flaws in procedure that a crisis exposes and record them for inclusion in a revised plan;
- the company should keep talking – and listening. It should define the real problem and centralise information flow;
- when communicating externally, the company must recognise the emotional involvement as well as the intellectual response. Understand that the media writes about people even when it writes about issues (if someone dies, the company may see it as a failure in safety systems, but

the media will rightly see it as a story about a bereaved family);

- recognise too that communication is not just about speaking – going to the scene of an accident is much more appropriate than being interviewed on television about how upset you are;
- recognise all the audiences involved in an issue and make sure you speak to each of them, either through the media or directly;
- remind all participants that the business continues. Act during the crisis, but retain the medium and long-term strategy; and
- accept that each crisis is different. Flexibility and fast decision-making, based on sound experience, must be retained during such situations.

Use of technology

As the scale of the media and the involvement of interested parties has increased, so it has become more difficult for companies to keep all personnel fully up to speed on all that is happening. But the availability of secure intranets as a means of sharing information rapidly among all those involved internally enables companies to overcome these difficulties.

Crisis communications practitioners now routinely establish intranets to monitor crises and share a wide range of information rapidly.

The technology is cheap, widely available and any company that does not use it is at a disadvantage when set against those externally who can access news on the situation in real-time.

Coping in a crisis

Having a crisis management plan in place will help your managers to act rapidly and think clearly, but companies still often react in a completely inappropriate way corporately – when their natural reaction on a personal level would have been exactly right, giving due regard to regulatory and other legal requirements.

Handling a crisis well is often about using your common sense and caring about the people affected. Don't let panic or procedures get in the way of your natural instinct to act like a human being. ■

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