Communicating During a Crisis

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

Headline news. Something you may dream of having — when it showcases your nonprofit organization and your products and services in a positive light. Unfortunately, the news media thrive on tragedy, drama and scandal — not the good news. Crisis in the nonprofit sector feeds the frenzy, because the organizations are community-based and community-serving. What better way to pique the interest of readers, viewers and listeners than to run a story that gets them where they live and grabs their hearts.

Q: What's the difference between a crisis communications plan and a crisis management plan?

A: A crisis communications plan aids quick response, clear thinking and inclusiveness under fire. It works hand-in-hand with a disaster plan to mitigate (or reduce) the damages, focusing on presenting the situation in the best possible light. Creating the plan in advance of the crisis allows you the luxury of having time to think through what's needed undistracted, and frees up time to handle the crisis when it occurs. The goal is to gather all critical information in one place, so you won't have to search for it during the actual event.

A crisis communications plan outlines:

- who should speak and who shouldn't comment
- materials that need to be produced
- who should be involved in the process and who shouldn't
- who needs to be in the loop and who should be left out both internally and externally
- the organization's crisis telephone directory with the numbers for reaching critical people 24-7.

Q: The top person should speak for my organization — right?

A: Not necessarily. Although your CEO/executive director/president/mayor holds the position of authority, how many other traits does he or she exhibit? Your spokesperson needs to be calm under fire, know how to deliver the organization's message no matter what question is posed, be able to reframe the message to serve varied audiences, and speak in "sound bites" — 30-second clips.

The top person may be knowledgeable about the organization, but personality or demeanor or vocabulary might be a detriment to the organization's message when broadcast to thousands. The people who speak for your organization need to understand all the ways they communicate: choice of words, speech cadence, stance, facial expression and attitude. They need to know the media are tools to get the organization's position and message across. They also need to realize that they are the media's tools; the reporters want a compelling story. They don't care if your spokesperson's quote nails your organization as the bad guy — all the juicier for them. The reporters aren't going to look out for your organization or protect the spokesperson. That's the job of organization's spokesperson.

Q: Are there materials I can produce ahead of time?

A: The media will want basic information about your public entity's, company's or nonprofit's background, mission, and products or services, which can be prepared ahead and updated each time things change.

You can also outline generic initial statements expressing your concern and commitment. Leave blanks to fill in

facts pertinent to each specific event.

You can even craft specific responses to the most likely crises you think could befall your operation. Different crises demand different responses. For instance, a fire at your nonprofit daycare center would require a different reply than a child's death from choking. A statement following the death of the company's CEO from natural causes would be quite different from one following the fatal shooting of the CEO and several board members by a former employee. Similarly, a community-wide power outage would be handled differently than the issue of exploding manhole covers maiming several citizens.

You can train the people selected to speak for the organization in a crisis to be at ease and work with the media to the organization's advantage.

You can identify your stakeholders: the people who make your operation function. These are your target audiences. They might include media, government, community groups, business groups, citizenry/customers/service recipients, and investors/sponsors.

Q: How do I select what to tell to whom?

A: The questions you need to answer are: Who needs to know? What do they need to know? When do they need to know?

Picture a drop of water falling into a pond. Around the drop concentric rings appear, forming a target, until the rings disappear into the broader pond. Likewise people closest to the crisis have the strongest need to know. People furthest from the event — in the larger pond — need to know the least information. For planning purposes, identify who belongs in each ring. The further you get from the drop of water, the more diluted the information becomes.

The people who need to have the whole picture would be your key advisers or decision-makers: the board chairman, your attorney, your insurance agent, your spokesperson — who else? The next tier of people who need information are the people who help your organization fulfill its mission: your employees, volunteers, vendors, suppliers, regulators — who else? They need to know what happened and how it will affect them. Do they come to work? What time? Usual location? What do they tell your service recipients? The next tier would be your service recipients (and their parents, if clients are under age). The next tier would be the community in general. And so forth: county, state, country and finally the world.

You need to formulate your message to satisfy each audience's need to know that you are in charge, you understand the problem and you're working to fix it or offset the damage.

Q: How can I ensure that I remember everything I'm supposed to do in a crisis?

A: A media strategy checklist helps you focus on the steps you need to cover while the crisis is whirling around you. You can adapt the sample to specific crises, such as an earthquake or incident of workplace violence, or use this generic one.

Media Strategy Checklist

Task Completed?

_ Alert the spokesperson.

_ Gather who, what, where, when and why of the situation.

_ Confirm the facts.

_ Clarify and verify technical information.

_ Prepare a summary statement.

_ Prepare a fact sheet.

_ Notify stakeholders (people key to the organization).

_ Tell volunteers and clients about changes in services/operations.

_ Respond to the media.

_ Keep a media log of callers and questions.

_ Update media as situation develops.

_ Follow up implications; prevent backlash.

_ Evaluate and tweak the system.

More Information

Read our book on crisis management: *Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving Crisis in a Nonprofit*.