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Training for crisis management

By Chris Kwan

THINK you're immune to a crisis? Think again! Many public relations nightmares could have been mitigated if the organisation responded quickly with the right message.

While most companies and organisations periodically recognise the importance of preparing for a crisis, too few of them do anything about it. My own investigation in Malaysia shows that none of the companies is equipped for such a situation. One company even goes as far as to say that it will sue even when it is clearly in the wrong.

However, this situation is not unique to Malaysia as recent statistics indicate only about half the major businesses in the US have anything that could be recognised as a bona fide crisis plan.

Barring the periodic questioning of crisis man-

agement capabilities that usually goes away within a few days or a "near miss", most organisations live by the code that they are somehow immune to crises. They simply believe that things like product tampering and the like only happens to the other guy."

Today, it is not so much a question of whether an organisation will encounter a public relations crisis, but when. But being prepared can help you weather even a major crisis, and it might even prevent a would-be crisis from becoming a real-life disaster.

As one company executive who believes in crisis plans and training likes to say: "The more prepared we are, the luckier we get."

The fact is that many incidents that ultimately turn out to be major crises could have been drastically mitigated or even averted if the organisation had responded

more quickly with the right message.

A quick, unmistakably clear message is essential in controlling a crisis. But, without some preparation for facing a media crisis, developing and delivering that message can be difficult at best. Even if you eventually decide on the right course of action, it may be too late to prevent a media nightmare. Instead of taking the lead on an unfolding story, you'll simply be swept along with the flow of events.

While no crisis plan is likely to provide you with the perfect solution for every conceivable disaster, good crisis plans combined with media training and disaster drills will help you with the essentials of how to develop the right message.

If your crisis plan and training programmes cannot do that, you ought to start thinking more seriously about how your organisation would fare in a crisis.

Take this simple test: Questions:

1. Does your organisation have a "workable" crisis plan?
2. Would it be of any real use in a crisis?
3. Does everyone on the crisis team have immediate access to a copy of the plan?
4. When was the last time your crisis team and other possible spokespersons participated in a bona fide media training programme?
5. Has your plan (or your team) been tested within the past 12 months?
6. Do you have adequate backup spokespersons and have they been trained?

Answers:
1. If the immediate answer to the first question is "no", you need to start work immediately

on developing at least some form of a crisis plan that would provide you with who to call, where to go and what to say during an emergency.

2. Make sure you answer the second question honestly. If your answer is yes, you're miles ahead of most organisations.

3. If the plan isn't with you when you need it, it isn't of much use. If necessary, develop abbreviated versions that members can carry with them in their briefcases or cars.

4. Here, the "use it or lose it" phrase rings true. If you want to stay on your toes, you need to go through a realistic media training at least every other year. Listening to lectures, reading books and watching videotapes aren't the same thing.

5. If you don't test it periodically, how do you know if it works? Better to find out now than to discover it in a real crisis.

6. There's a rule in crisis situation that the primary spokesperson is on vacation or has laryngitis when the crisis hits.

If you're just getting started with a crisis plan - or you feel it is time to give your existing one an overhaul - take a look at what you already have. If you don't have a real crisis plan, take a look at your emergency response plan. Even though most of them are somewhat bulky and give little emphasis to crisis communications, they're still a good place to start.

Take a look at the types of crises that could impact your organisation or a particular plant.

In a food processing plant, for instance, you already know that contaminated products, fires and industrial accidents are a possibility. If such an incident did take place, you need to have a system in place to ensure



to date. Also consider getting these people together with the journalists and keeping all information under strict control. Above all, keep your plan simple for practical use. You don't need a lot of philosophical prose about how to define a crisis or the different kinds of crises.

If it's a real crisis, you'll know it.

A crisis plan's real value comes from whether it can provide you with any help speedily.

Don't forget that the people using the plan are far more important than the plan itself. Unless they are properly trained in what to do and how to do it, even the best crisis plan will fail.

As a result, crisis teams and all potential spokespersons need to go through media response/crisis management training on a regular basis. They need to be able to think on their feet. These are valuable people for the organisations and well worth keeping. The training should force them to develop and deliver the right message in a crisis situation and how to handle tough questions from reporters and the general public.

More importantly, the training raises awareness of what could happen in a real crisis and the need to prepare it.

A solid programme that combines a workable plan with realistic training may not prevent a crisis from happening, but it can prepare you to deal with it and hopefully prevent a public relations nightmare.

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JOB WATCH

Top six jobs advertised in
New Straits Times
(From 24th Aug - 30th Aug 1997)

MANAGERS	193
EXECUTIVES	175
ENGINEERS	167
CLERKS	92
SUPERVISORS	45
TECHNICIANS	40

Note: All figures are conservative. Some advertisers did not disclose the number of vacancies available for a given position.

it is reported as soon as possible to the project people. Ultimately, the crisis team - or at least your designated spokesperson - needs to be notified.

Here's where most crisis plans seem to fail. While most designate a spokesperson, they provide little guidance on what that person should or should not say. If you want your crisis plan to work, it should contain pre-written statements and news releases that can be modified for use in a real crisis.

And those statements have to say more than just repeat the obvious. They should express concern and reassure people that your organisation is in control. When appropriate, they need to

express compassion and not anger or repulsion.

Beyond the prepared statement, the spokesperson needs a pre-prepared list of questions the media might ask as well as pre-prepared responses to those questions. Try starting with "What happened" and follow it with "What caused it?" and "is your organisation taking responsibility for it?"

You may not be able to answer every question but you should be able to respond to them.

This will be clearly reflected by examples such as the willingness to consider compensation, agreeing to cooperate and being decisive and open to discussion in order to buy time. In a crisis situation, there is only one

objective and that is to get out with as little damage as possible. Timing is most critical so all plans must be practised to perfection.

Additionally, your new crisis plan needs an easy-to-read quick reference page where you can look up those statements and news releases. And, it needs a quick check-list to make sure you don't overlook any important details in the midst of a crisis.

Then there are all those telephone numbers. You'll need the work and home numbers of every person on your crisis team and don't forget the alternatives. Make sure you have pager numbers too. This may be the most used page in your plan and it has to be up