

THE CRISIS PLAN

BY RODGER ROESER, THE EISEN AGENCY

My firm specializes in media training and is the premier crisis communications management firm in the Midwest. And, while most any PR firm can provide solid media relations guidance and planning, what it actually comes down to is quite simple – how the audience perceives your message. The main reason our firm has been so successful and is considered by most experts as one of the top crisis communications firms in the nation is that our program is easy to understand, thus easy to implement by clients – and is almost universally accepted and appreciated by the media. The following is a generalization of a crisis plan, but when you find yourself in a crisis situation, we highly recommend hiring an expert (preferably before you need one.)

Our program also assumes that you or your spokesperson is skilled at delivering messages to a target public, and undergoes regular media training such as what we offer at The Eisen Agency. The program also takes an adage from the Boy Scouts – “always be prepared.” With that, the Crisis Communications Program at The Eisen Agency focuses on two main concepts: 1) the WCS and 2) the 3 Ps.

STEP 1: DEVELOPING YOUR WCS (WORST CASE SCENARIO)

Work through with your internal (and perhaps external team) and lay out what you anticipate “could be” the 10 worst things that “could happen” to your business. For example, if you’re BP, you could say “a catastrophic oil spill” or “a burglary that turned into a shooting/murder at one of our stores.” And so on. Once you have identified the WCS situations, it then comes down to the “3 Ps” – People, Perception & Practice.

STEP 2: THE PEOPLE

Now that you have identified your WCS situations, you must take a look at the people with whom you are trying to assuage, convince, protect or calm. In order for the message to resonate, it must be specific to a certain group of people, offering general suggestions and/or recommendations that will provide closure to those affected by the crisis. For example: “What we are going to do to the men and women living along the gulf that are affected by this situation, we will provide x, y and z.”

STEP 3: THE PERCEPTION

It is critical that you have or are endeavoring to have all the facts – the absolute gospel truthful facts. Not that you have to “spill” everything (spill, crisis pr humor), but you need to understand or know as much as is reasonably possible. Because...

In a crisis situation, you don’t have time to whine or opine, but rather you must manage perception. And to manage that perception you must (everyone in harmony now) know what that perception is or is likely to be. Regardless of “how” the spill happened, understand that there will be a perception of fault and anger. It is paramount that you understand exactly what the perception to what happened is likely to be. You must put yourself in your public’s shoes, regardless of whether you believe that perception is unfounded, you must understand what it could be and why it could be perceived as such – so you then may be able to respond with understanding and empathy.

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STEP 4: PRACTICE

When a crisis happens, and since you've already undergone several rounds of expert media training and you had your WCS prepared and corresponding responses, you must keep your chops sharp. Why are professional athletes so good, or great guitarists? Practice. Yes, they have some given talent (that's why YOU are the spokesperson) but you need to practice. Grill yourself, go through anticipated questions and responses. Review and hone in on the responses, and most importantly, while it's paramount to answer the question truthfully (or as forthcoming as you can be) be certain to stay on message. A good reporter is trying to capture that sound bite or get that nice little nugget. As you are mindful of this, practice being "tripped up." This practice will serve you well.

The nuts and bolts of a crisis management plan go something like this:

1. Establish your WCS and corresponding responses by public with whom you are trying to relate.
2. Create "online dark sites" with as much material as possible that is pre-prepared, including audio, video, releases/background information and clearly identified contact information. When a crisis hits, you can "tweak" the dark site accordingly to more specifically respond to the given situation without having to build it from scratch. Time is your enemy and in this 24 hour news cycle, if you don't have the information the news station needs, they'll get it from someone or somewhere else.
3. Have a clear employee protocol and practice response at least two times annually. In the event of a crisis, HR/Internal Communications should immediately eblast all employees and hold an online conference call with all relevant internal publics – quickly and immediately.
4. Prepare your response and provide that response directly to your target publics BEFORE sending that information to the media. Utilize existing networks, such as your website, blogs and other social media outlets. This allows you to communicate directly to your stakeholders with no media filter. Once you've provided the information to your clients, customers, constituents or general public, then contact the appropriate local or national media outlet with which you have an established relationship. If you need to call a press conference, a simple media alert faxed and emailed to the media will suffice. If a press release needs to be issued, be certain to obey all compliance issues and material event issues and file accordingly. A release on the wire should do the trick.
5. Be available to the media. The last thing you want to do is issue a statement then NOT be available. Make yourself available, be honest and advise as to the situation and what you are doing to rectify it or address it. And remember, if it's "going to come out anyway, get it over with." Remember, don't lie and don't ever speculate. If you don't know the answer, say so, and offer to look into it further and get back to the media.

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6. Track your coverage with available tools, such as Meltwater or Argyle. This will serve two things: it will allow you to review what is being said, and will also allow you to see the crescendo and ultimate decline point of the chatter. The “decline point” is critical because at the point of initial decline, you no longer need to push communications but can rather wait for an outlet to then come to you for further information.

7. Finally, your long term response in making sure the issue doesn’t happen again. This is not the role of “PR” per se, but in reality – operations. You must actually “fix” the oil spill, not “spin” it.

My best tip is, of course, hire me. We’ll handle everything.

About the Author: Rodger Roeser is the owner and president of Greater Cincinnati’s largest and most award winning public relations firm. Roeser is one of the foremost national experts in crisis communications, crisis management and media training. He can be reached at RRoeser@TheEisenAgency.com.