

Not All Press is Good Press: Managing a Crisis Effectively

Much as we try to avoid them, mistakes happen and difficult issues arise in business life. However, as Jane Fowler, Managing Director of Aquila Advisory, the boutique forensic accounting company explains, it is in how businesses deal with these situations that often dictates the outcome and the slant the media will take. How good or poor the response is to an incident can determine much of the outcome ... and whether it becomes a full crisis or not.

A 'crisis' is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your company, often escalated by adverse or negative media attention. These situations can be any kind of legal dispute, fraud, theft, accident, fire, flood or man-made disaster that could be attributed to your company. It can also be a situation where, in the eyes of the media or the general public, your company did not react to such a situation in an appropriate manner. This definition is not all encompassing, but gives you an idea of the types of situations where you may need to be prepared to communicate with the media, shareholders, staff and/or the general public.

If handled correctly the reputational damage and the media scrutiny can be minimised, enabling you to address what caused the situation in the first place, to repair any damage done, and to prevent it from reoccurring.

Preparation

Don't think "It Can't Happen To Me." If an issue arises and the media comes calling, make sure you have a crisis communications plan prepared. Whilst you cannot plan for every eventuality you should, as a minimum, plan responses to the most likely threats to your business and have these important steps in place:

1. **Select your crisis committee** – a member of senior management; a member with media expertise; a lead investigator of the facts to ensure details released are accurate; and, when appropriate, a legal adviser. If you don't have an in-house PR officer (or anyone with adequate crisis expertise), appoint an external crisis media expert to advise you as and when required.
2. **Assign two spokespeople** (for in case one is unavailable) – able to deliver your messages with authority and deliver responses in a reassuring and calming manner.
3. **Undertake media training** – so that your spokespeople are prepared to respond in an optimal way. Media interviews are not easy and training enables your spokespeople to practice how they deliver their responses and deal with difficult questions in a 'safe' environment. It gives them the skills and confidence to take control of any media interview and to get your message across, thereby minimising the risk of the information being misunderstood or misinterpreted.
4. **Establish a clear media response process** - so your group's members know who is going to speak to the media if an incident occurs. It is vitally important that all staff are clear on procedure and who to refer the media to in case they receive calls or enquiries from them.
5. **Establish an effective notification process** - to enable senior leadership to get together quickly, gather information so they are well briefed for media enquiries, and to enable the spokespeople to quickly respond with accurate and timely information.

Everyone on the crisis committee should be clear on their responsibilities in the event of a crisis.

6. **Prepare a crisis communications plan** – to anticipate issues before they arise and deal with potential scenarios and desired responses. It sets out tactics to address the most likely business risks and prepares the business and its spokespeople to respond most effectively. The plan should allow clear and accurate communication with the public through the media, and also to staff, stakeholders and suppliers. Its aim is to prevent long-term reputational damage.

First steps

Crisis incidents, by their nature, tend to occur without warning and can lead to intense scrutiny of your company. If you find yourself in the midst of a media furore, the most important steps you can take are:

- Notify the relevant members of the crisis committee, triggering points 4 and 5 from above;
- Identify as many of the facts as you can as quickly as you can;
- Communicate the relevant facts to the relevant audience in a calm and confident manner.

The first and most instinctive reaction for many people, especially those not used to being in the media spotlight, is to run from the situation and hide. Simply put – don't. Trying to ignore the problem in the hope it will go away will not work and you risk damaging your company's good name even further. Better to positively influence the story by addressing the issue quickly, accurately and in a proactive manner, encouraging accurate and fair reporting.

Positioning

If you don't communicate immediately, you lose your greatest opportunity to control events. Your first news release should include at a minimum the who, what, when, where and how of the situation. The primary goal is protecting the integrity and reputation of the company, so it's important to consider the wide range of consequences (e.g. legal, financial, public relations, impact on administration, impact on operations). Keep in mind that people tend to remember what they hear first and last.

Initial media statement

- Keep things short, factual, accurate, confirmed and clear.
- Don't include speculation or any additional material that has not been thoroughly verified.
- If you do nothing more than show concern for the public and for your employees in your first press interaction, you are already on the right track.
- You must have a prepared statement on hand that can be used to make an initial media response to when the crisis first becomes known.
- Stick to that statement and do not get drawn beyond its agreed contents.

Practicing Tough Questions

It is important, at the onset of the crisis, that the spokesperson, backup and advisors spend some time rehearsing prepared statements and answers to possible 'tough' questions that may be asked by reporters. If possible, similar rehearsals should be conducted prior to each media interview, briefing or news conference. It is also important to anticipate and practice new questions as the story evolves. It is better to over-prepare than to be surprised.

Tips on handling the media in a crisis situation

- Acknowledge there is a crisis, so you can start to find a solution
- Remember that first impressions count – be open and sincere and know what you're legally able to say
- React as quickly as possible and say only what you know to be true don't speculate
- Correct information in the press that you know to be wrong, so that it's not repeated
- Don't use corporate jargon
- Ban the words "no comment" – you don't want the press to fill in the details for you
- Don't shoot the messenger – the press is there to report on the story, so help them be as accurate as possible. It may even be worth considering bringing them into your company to an honest briefing, showing them you have nothing to hide

Tips on handling press conferences

When preparing to give a speech:

- Use a full script with large type for easy reading
- Leave wide margins for notes to yourself
- Leave pages unstapled for easier handling at a podium
- Highlight and mark your script to guide your delivery
- Time your presentation to fit the programme schedule and timeframe of the media you will address
- Practice: Read it aloud using a mirror and tape recorder until it sounds like you are talking, not reading

When you arrive at your engagement:

- Be at least 15 minutes early
- Check equipment in advance if possible
- Check the lighting around the podium to be sure you can read easily

When you are speaking:

- Stand erect and direct voice toward audience
- Speak loudly, slowly and distinctly
- Establish eye contact (or appear to do so) with audience from time to time
- Stay within the allotted presentation time

When you are answering questions:

- Remain friendly, cool-headed and confident
- Answer only the questions asked and do so as succinctly and clearly as possible
- Remember that you do not always have to know everything. You can say, "I will have to check that out for you – I will confirm back to you after this press conference"
- Avoid allowing one person to dominate the questions by moving on: "Thank you for your interest. I'll be glad to talk to you about your concerns after the meeting. Right now let's see if anyone else has questions for the company"

When you are finished with your presentation:

- Remain long enough to give individuals an opportunity to talk with you
- See to it that arrangements are made for distributing information materials to the company, if requested/appropriate
- Make sure that the media is given a written copy of any official statements to help

ensure that important information is not misunderstood or misheard

Tips on handling newspaper Interviews

- If possible, obtain advanced knowledge of interview topics
- Make sure you are prepared in detail; print reporters may ask more detailed questions than broadcast reporters, who may have more constraint on broadcast time available for any given news story
- Begin the interview by making your major points in statement form
- Try to maintain control of the interview - don't let the reporter wear you down
- Set a time limit in advance
- Avoid jargon or professional expressions
- Explain anything overtly technical in clear terms that are easily understood
- Reporter may repeat self in different ways to gain information you may not want to give
- Don't answer inappropriate questions; simply say it is "not an appropriate topic for you to address at this time," for example
- Be prepared for interruptions within your answers to questions... it is legitimate for reporters to do that.
- Do not speak "off the record."
- Remember, the interview lasts as long as a reporter is there.
- You can ask to check technical points, but do not ask to see advance copy of the story as this is rarely, if ever, agreed to in these circumstances.

Sometimes with crisis situations you will be aware that a storm is brewing. Other times events can take a business completely by surprise. It's therefore best to have a crisis committee and plan in place beforehand, know who's best placed to manage the plan, practice the plan ... and be prepared.

At Aquila Advisory, we are experienced in managing crisis situations and we work closely with crisis media experts, making sure the right team is in place to effectively support your business when a crisis looms.

So contact us today for a free initial consultation and find out how we can help you protect your business reputation.

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