

## A minor hiccup or a reputational crisis – the role of internal communications

It would be fair to say that many businesses understand why a top-level strategy is important for longer term decision-making. They appreciate the importance of strategic communication with clients and stakeholders and they see the benefits in working with a communications specialist who will guide them in developing their external messages.

What is surprising is how few business leaders address internal communication in the same way – what should be communicated to staff, when it should be communicated, how the information is delivered and by whom. These decisions are often made in the heat of the moment when there's a crisis, major upheaval, a change in company structure or a round of redundancies. But it is this reactive response to dealing with internal communications that often leads to both immediate and longer term reputation problems for businesses.

Employees are a key stakeholder group that must be communicated with effectively, especially during a business crisis or change situation. Here are some tips to help decision makers at all levels manage internal messaging in times of uncertainty and change.

### 1. Plan for the worst and be prepared

Think ahead. Plan your communications strategy so that you know how you will respond before a crisis hits. Identify vulnerabilities, review crises faced by other businesses in the past and build a realistic communications plan so that you can respond successfully under pressure, should the need arise.

A well thought out plan will enable effective employee communication which is crucial in helping to minimise crisis-related damage and help you preserve and even enhance your business' reputation.

### 2. Identify and train your spokespeople

Designate the people across the business that will be responsible for delivering your internal messages. Formally train them to handle tough questions and sensitive issues in a calm, confident, open and reliable manner. Develop question and answer sheets to facilitate internal discussions. Draft pre-prepared statements which can be adjusted according to the situation at hand.

Your leaders must be seen to be leading and your line managers must be given the information they need to communicate efficiently.

### 3. Make sure communication is consistent from all directions

The information flow should be clear and consistent throughout your business – from the top down and the bottom up. Conflicting messages will leave employees confused and a crisis situation is no time for speculation and gossip.

The more upfront management is about what is happening, the more equipped employees will be to accurately represent the business and protect its reputation.

Also remember to keep messages short ... a crisis breeds concern and concern breeds short attention spans.

### 4. Set up notification systems

Technological innovation means that new communication channels are becoming widely accessible, so use this to your advantage. Intranets, interactive websites and email will help to keep internal audiences updated. But don't forget that face-to-face communication can be one of the most effective ways of communicating internally, especially during a crisis. Small, personal gatherings tend to be more appropriate than large meetings and, where appropriate, it might be useful to gather a list of questions and concerns before the meeting. An interactive Q&A forum can be a simple, effective way to provide answers to concerned employees.

### 5. When the crisis is over ... planning for the future

Recognise those who have played an important role in dealing with the crisis situation by using your communications channels to thank them.

Get back to 'business as usual' as soon as you can – share good news stories ... the positive things you're working on and what you have planned for the future.

If you have had some strict controls in place during the crisis period, lighten up. Sweep clean any old messages that only serve to remind employees of recent difficulties and start to focus on the present and the future.

#### **6. Look externally to help manage internally**

If you don't have the necessary crisis communication experience, consider retaining a qualified external consultant who will help you to implement a thorough crisis communications plan, and be on hand to guide and support you when a crisis hits. An independent person is often better in a crisis situation, as they are a step removed and can advise without the emotion that a business owner or manager may be experiencing.

## **In Summary**

No matter how much time and emphasis a company places on crisis prevention, it is inevitable that at some point in your business lifecycle you will be faced with adversity. The key to coping successfully lies in the preparation of a comprehensive internal communications programme. After all, who could be more credible in telling a business' story than its employees? And if employees are uninformed or misinformed, what message does that send to prospective clients, investors, potential future employees and other organisations who your employees may be speaking to?

Remember, in a crisis the situation may be changing fast, so plan ahead and be prepared. This could mean the difference between a minor hiccup and a crisis that haunts your company for months, or even years.

**To find out more about setting up an internal or external communications programme, promoting your products and services, or managing your brand and corporate reputation, contact Georgina Swain on Tel: 020 3286 8817 or Email [georgina.swain@bridgecape.com](mailto:georgina.swain@bridgecape.com)**



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