



Crisis communications is critical to operations

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Crisis communications is a responsibility everyone hopes to avoid, but every operator stands a very good chance at some point in the life of the company of standing right at the epicenter of a serious situation. No one can predict when such a crisis will occur, which has a lot to do with why it is a crisis. But no one is completely helpless to how these events beyond control unfold.

Prepare for a crisis in advance and be ready when the unpredictable strikes. Crisis communications is one important area of concern. The secret to effective crisis communications lies in establishing company protocols that keep an organization from being caught off guard, and help mitigate the damaging effects of a crisis situation. Do not think about what you plan to do *after* the event. For example, your response only after H1N1 hysteria has led to mass cancellation of school charter trips.

Preplanning goes a long way to increase the comfort level during the most discomfiting circumstances times — such as when camera lights are on and reporters looking for a “gotcha” interview shove a fuzzy microphone in your face the moment you open your front door. While you cannot predict the course of the H1N1 virus spreading, and its potential effect on travel — or the damage a bus crash by rogue operator might bring to the industry — you can put communication safeguards in place if a crisis situation breaks and a media frenzy ensues. Here are tools you can implement through company policy manuals, practice exercises, and crisis drills to be ready.

Establish clear communications channels beforehand. Unforeseen emergencies are, by their inherent nature, chaotic. But your first role in any crisis scenario is to ensure you get as much reliable information on the situation as quickly as possible.

Know who will be the voice and face of your company. Decide now that a pre-determined company-designated spokesperson will be the only voice representing your company with the media, law enforcement officials, federal or state agencies, and the public. The company president/CEO is often the best choice, as s/he ideally brings gravitas, solemnity, poise and a sense of control to the chaos, exuding an air of authority that instills confidence among the public — and your customers.

Practice your messages beforehand and stick to them. Determine what your key messages will be, script them, memorize them, and practice them. Most important, keep them simple.

Strive to regain control of the situation. In any crisis communications situation, regaining the offensive must be integrated into every action you take. You ultimately must reposition your company from a reactive stance, where events are driving your responses, to one of reclaiming control over the situation, where your actions are driving the swift resolution and containment of the fallout from what has happened.

Transparency is credibility. You must at all times be open, forthright, and candid. Make sure you are conveying accurate and reliable information. Doing so will build good will and help ease crisis tensions, thus solidifying your credibility.

Detail the corrective actions in place. Compile a detailed list of everything you’re doing to rectify the situation, step by step, action by action.

Do not blame, speculate or refuse to comment. Any or all of the three will only make worsen the situation worse. The media relations maxim is: *If you fight it, you ignite it.*

Clear everything through legal counsel. This is where those billable hours are worth every penny and then some. Ensure your attorney reviews everything you plan to say, do, release, or share with anyone outside the company for your own legal protection.

Remember, this too shall pass. Although the early stages of a burgeoning crisis may seem like an eternity, they won’t last. That is, provided you have taken these steps to contain the event.