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Best Practice Short Guide

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A CRISIS IN A YEAR OF
UNCERTAINTY

We are often asked by our clients for guidance on how to prepare for an unexpected crisis situation and what is important to consider when handling communications in a crisis. As a result we asked Worldcom Public Relations Group experts from Europe and the US to respond to commonly asked questions.

The content of this Guide is based on the questions answered by our experts in a Webinar first aired in February 2017. You can listen to a recording of the Webinar by clicking on this [link](#).

We hope you find the Guide helpful. Have a look at our [Insights](#) page for more useful content as well as other webinars from our global experts.

How would you rank 2017 against previous years in terms of the need for organisations to have well-prepared crisis management policies and procedures in place?

2017 has been labelled a year of uncertainty. With unpredictable political decisions, and growing threats such as cybercrime, carrying out a thorough risk assessment is more important than ever.

Which sectors should prepare for potential crises in 2017?

All sectors should be ready for a crisis in 2017. A new array of threats is becoming real for all companies.

These include the rising threat of cyber terrorism, data privacy laws and wide ranging changes in the political and economic landscape.

What example would you give of a brand that mishandled a crisis – and what was the worst mistake they made? Do you think any company is immune from a crisis?

No business is immune from a crisis – some are just at more risk than others. As a result, a regular risk assessment is essential to ensure that crisis plans are not out of date.

It's also important to sense check if the company is living its values and whether management understands the impact that ill-considered decisions will have on the financial and reputational success of the organisation.

Being right is not enough – you have to be seen to be doing the right thing and that requires active communication to get all stakeholders onside. If you are an international brand, you have to be prepared to consider the impact of a crisis internationally or you may find you are hurt well beyond the epicentre of the crisis.

Should every company have a crisis policy and procedures?

All companies, whether big or small, have the potential to be severely damaged by a crisis.

Therefore, it is an essential business discipline to have in place a crisis policy and the procedures to support it.

If we think about a crisis in terms of three phases – Before, During and After – where should most of the effort be focused?

All phases of a crisis are important. However the 'Before' and 'After' phases should have the most focus as these will condition how the organisation performs in the 'During' phase.

It is vital to learn from a crisis. There needs to be a rigorous review in the 'After' phase to identify the lessons to be learnt and to embody these in the policy and procedures.

Is telling the truth always the best policy?

Telling the truth in a crisis is essential. It is hard to recover from the 'Trust' damage caused by lying.

You will need to consider how much information you provide to make sure you do not confuse audiences and make the situation worse.

What language would you use to manage a crisis?

In general, the local language should be used when communicating during a crisis.

This may pose an issue for multinational companies who may have to translate the communications for numerous regions.

The use of different languages needs to be a key part of the crisis policy and procedures.

Who should lead the crisis team? Should a crisis away from HQ be managed by HQ?

Crisis response should always be led by a local representative.

HQ should be involved to ensure that a local crisis doesn't become an international brand disaster.

These clear lines of authority and responsibility need to be established in the policy and procedures.

What role should legal counsel have in managing a crisis?

Legal counsel plays an important support role in a crisis, but should not be responsible for setting communication policy or handling communications responses.

The organisation needs to make sure it has an effective response for both a court of law and the court of public opinion.

How fast do you need to be able to respond to a crisis?

An immediate response to a crisis by someone in possession of the key facts is essential.

In today's social media centred world, it is important not to allow a communications vacuum to develop that is filled by rumour and speculation.

What would be the recommended approach for handling personal character attacks?

When dealing with an attack on someone's character, it is essential to avoid an emotional response.

It is important to deny the attacker the oxygen of publicity and to only deal in facts.

Which would you put first in dealing with a crisis – people, the environment, property or reputation?

People always have to come first when dealing with a crisis. Once individuals are taken care of, the environment, reputation and property can all be considered.

Remember, your response will be judged in the court of public opinion. There will be no sympathy for an organisation that does not put people first.

If you had one piece of advice for handling a crisis that you would put above all others – what would it be?

There is no substitute for being prepared for a crisis. Ensure that you go through drills and practices to cement procedures.

Do not let a communications vacuum develop that is filled by rumour and speculation.

Provide certainty about what will happen next by providing regular updates on the situation and how you are responding to it.

Panelists

Brian Ellis – USA

With over 27 years as a public relations and marketing counsellor to dozens of Fortune 500 companies, Brian helps clients create crisis management strategies, and prepare to respond in the most effective way. Brian has over 10 years of experience as a broadcast journalist in multiple markets, thus offers a unique perspective on how the media operates during a crisis to such clients as Girl Scouts, Pfizer, Ford Motor Company, Atkins Corporation, The Federal Reserve.

Crispin Manners – United Kingdom

Crispin has helped a wide variety of clients respond to crisis scenarios. These include assisting a security firm defend its reputation against eco-warriors, a global education brand manage an international crisis and government departments.

Hans Karperien – Belgium

Hans is a specialist in crisis communications based in Belgium. His clients operate in the Aviation, Logistics, Food, Electronics, Healthcare and consumer goods industries. Hans has helped to manage a wide variety of crisis communication situations such as food recalls, work accidents, airline crashes, strikes, fraud, and CEO dismissals.

Matt Barkett – USA

Matt draws on more than 25 years of broad-based experience in senior corporate communications and journalism when counselling clients from the boardroom to the plant floor or accident scene. Matt has played key roles in numerous high-impact engagements.

Theo Snijders – The Netherlands

Theo Snijders is crisis communications specialist counseling clients in healthcare, manufacturing and the (petro)chemical industries. His crisis management expertise has contributed to his company being named one of the Top 10 Dutch Communications consultancies. Theo offers a unique perspective through his experience as a journalist and chief editor.

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