

Crisis Communications Planning/Media Training

Executive Summary

An effective corporate *Crisis Communications Program* consists of three elements: the ***Crisis Communications Strategy***, a ***Crisis Communications Plan*** and ***media-trained spokespersons***. During a crisis, companies must do the right things... and say the right things. Failure in either area can mean disaster. Below we review these three elements.

Crisis Communications Strategy

Before creating (or improving) the ***Crisis Communications Plan***, it is helpful to have a strategy that company leadership agrees upon. When creating the strategy, consideration is given to the role of company employees who may encounter the media. (Hint: This is everyone.) We break them into four groups:

All Employees - While most employees will not act as spokespersons, there is a difference between telling them "You are not allowed to speak to the media," and instructing them to politely refer the media to a spokesperson. An employee media policy should be widely circulated with this guidance, including spokesperson names and contact information.

First Responders - In a crisis, media will often encounter company emergency response personnel, guards, receptionists, help desk reps and others representing logical and expected points of contact. While these employees are not spokespersons, a much higher awareness of how to interact with media representatives effectively is appropriate - and easy to achieve.

Media Triage - When a crisis occurs at a facility, e.g., plant, warehouse, office building or customer location, society will not accept the excuse that local management cannot make a statement - in fact, you WANT them to do so. Typically, media arrives to the incident scene before corporate communications staff can be engaged. With some basic media training, site management can effectively talk to the media in a triage mode until the pros are available.

Corporate Spokespersons - If the crisis warrants corporate senior management engaging the media, then the situation is likely critical, and the media possibly adversarial - not to mention the news is probably very bad. It is at this time that companies, even if they are doing the right things, can fail because of what they say. In-depth media training is a powerful tool to survive these types of encounters with reporters.

Crisis Communications Plan

An effective ***Crisis Communications Plan*** is exactly that - a plan. One of the typical errors companies make is confusing media training with the ***Plan***. A good plan expects adequate trained spokespersons will be available at any location the media may visit. A ***Plan*** should not include guidance for the spokesperson such as: "Don't say 'No Comment,'" or "Make sure you know your Key Messages." If you are executing the ***Plan***, it is too late for media training. So what is in a good ***Crisis Communications Plan***?

Overview - A brief introduction to the plan helps readers understand the plan's purpose. The overview explains the interaction between the **Crisis Communications Plan** and the Company's **Crisis Management Plan**. It defines a crisis, what triggers the **Plan**, and the scope and principles of effective communications during a response. Finally, it provides a definition of responsibilities and a high-level explanation of the process.

Crisis Communication Organization and Responsibilities - This section defines the general constituencies to which we might communicate (employees and their families, customers, regulators, society, investors, etc.), and within them, specific key audiences (e.g., families of injured employees). It identifies trained spokespersons: Corporate, Regional, Local and Business-specific and an Executive Crisis Communications Advisory Team. Finally, it identifies the roles required to effectively meet a serious media challenge, including who will: meet and credential the reporters, "guard" the spokespersons, manage core messages, monitor conventional and social media, and handle calls and statement distributions. Each of these roles has a detailed "Action List" that defines specific tasks the person may undertake during the response.

Operational Guidance - This section describes various strategies for response based on the type and conditions of the incident, e.g., could the company be blamed or is it a victim, were there fatalities, injuries damage to property in adjacent communities, environmental effect. Each of these conditions requires a different set of tactics that are defined and described. This section also describes the facilities and equipment that can be deployed during a response, including situation rooms, monitoring centers, a media briefing center, and individual interview rooms, and contains a guide for setting up the facilities and equipment. Finally, this section defines plan maintenance and training requirements.

Media Training

You will recall the types of media training are defined in the beginning of this paper. The two key audiences for extensive media training are the Media Triage group and the Corporate Spokespersons group. The goal of both types of training is to instill a deep sense of confidence in the spokespersons along with effective communications skills.

The training includes tutorial content about how the media works, message development and delivery, how to act on camera, how to deal with adversarial media, and many other subjects. The typical session provides several opportunities for each participant to get "on-camera," and respond to a specific, customized crisis scenario. Most session also include writing exercises to help participants how to create statements the media can "take and use," written the way reporters write.

Conclusion

By developing a solid Crisis Communication Strategy and Plan, and conducting the right level of media training for those that are charged with media interaction, any company can SAY the right thing, which, along with DOING the right thing, will help that company survive even the worst-case scenario.