The Communication Of CRISIS

by Kenya McCullum

AS the damage from the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion spread, tempers boiled and anxiety about the accident bubbled to the surface, like the crude that spewed from the earth. The Gulf Coast bled black, politicians and pundits pontificated, fishermen watched their livelihoods get washed away, wildlife became collateral damage and BP did nothing to inform or reassure the public. And when the oil company's executives did respond, their messages didn't seem to help matters. Some of the company's messages to the public were evasive, while others were downright insulting—like when CEO Tony Hayward told reporters that he wanted his life back and Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg expressed concern for the "small people" of the Gulf Coast.

Not surprisingly, the public face that BP executives presented was not well-received—largely because it was antithetical to how organizations in crisis should behave.

Crisis communication refers to the actions that an organization takes during a time of instability. When successful, these actions can relieve the stress and fear associated with a crisis, while giving the public vital information on what to do. When crisis communication is not done well, people can be left feeling stressed, confused and afraid.

Steps Of Effective Crisis Communication

Just because a crisis takes an organization by surprise does not mean it has to be a catastrophe. To avoid a deer-in-the-headlights response to a crisis, organizations must think of crisis communication as an ongoing process that occurs in three stages: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis.

The pre-crisis stage. During this stage of crisis communication, a company needs to consider what could go wrong and what the response will look like. This is the time for company leaders to ask themselves "what if," and create a plan around possible scenarios. This is a time for organizations to decide who will engage the media during a crisis and what kind of messaging will be used to reach the general public.

While it's impossible to plan for every contingency, there are circumstances that a company can reasonably conclude will be a possibility—such as a fire or natural disaster that may affect the company's facilities, a change in the economy, a workplace violence incident or a major change in management. Also, organizations should think about their own central issues and consider what action will be taken if those issues escalate into a crisis.

Similarly, it's smart for organizations to pay attention to the issues of other companies in their industry and learn from these crisis responses.

"Look at other organizations in your industry and the kind of crises they've endured and try to learn vicariously through them," said Timothy Sellnow, professor and associate dean for graduate programs at the University of Kentucky. "If I were an organization that engages in deep-water drilling, I would be watching BP and what they've gone through very closely—reconsidering my own response strategy in terms of back up systems, who would communicate to the public, and what kinds of messages would be appropriate."

Crisis stage. During the crisis stage, companies must make sure that they have the appropriate resources to deal with the situation. During this time, open communication is imperative, and companies should select a main spokesperson who delivers a consistent message to the public, which can help instill confidence in an organization's response.

What does not instill confidence is the appearance of evasiveness. The best route that a company can take to avoid this perception is engaging the media as often as possible with a focused, central message. Anything less than transparency will make the public wonder what a company has to hide. Reporters will look for it. Organizations must remember the importance of the court of public opinion and avoid the appearance of guilt.

Another appearance that companies should avoid is that of indifference. People who are affected by a crisis want to know that an organization understands what they are going through and is working to fix the problem.

"It's very important to remember that you are communicating to humans," said Karen Hilyard, assistant professor of public relations at the University of Tennessee. "Every message in a crisis should include an expression of empathy. It is best to acknowledge the emotion your audience feels, which can help defuse a tense situation."

Post-crisis phase. After a crisis, an organization needs to implement policies

to ensure that the problem is corrected. An organization's ability to demonstrate that it has learned from a crisis can go a long way toward restoring the public's confidence. For example, how the BP oil spill is remembered will, in part, be contingent upon what the company does now that the crisis has ended and the Gulf Coast is trying to get back to normal.

"The best thing BP can do is to adopt some of the highest and most rigorous standards for safety and crisis planning that the industry has ever seen," said Sellnow. "It would be expensive, but anything less than stepping forward as a leader in the industry for safety and precaution is going to diminish BP's opportunity to establish a positive reputation."

The Internal Effects Of A Crisis

Crisis communication is not only directed toward the public; in some cases, crisis communication must take place inside of an organization in response to the concerns of employees. When a company lays off workers, changes leadership, or responds publicly to consumers—such as during product recalls—internal crisis communication is needed to lessen any fears that employees have.

One important step to alleviating employees' fears, and restoring their confidence and trust, is to address any information circulating through the company rumor mill. This may sound counterproductive—these are rumors after all and may have no basis in fact—but paying attention to workplace gossip is a way to monitor what employees are thinking about and the beliefs they have about an organization.

"If you are aware of rumors, there should be no delay in responding to them because human nature is such that perception is reality," said Sellnow. "If people perceive that there's a problem, or they're fearful that there's a problem, then even if the organization's leadership knows that the rumor is untrue or doesn't exist, they have to respond."

By responding to these concerns, workers will feel like management is listening to them, which increases the likelihood that employees will give the organization more leeway as the crisis unfolds and also speak well of their company in public.

"The more that an organization does to follow through on its obligations, and to treat its employees in a manner that makes the organization's leadership believable and trustworthy, then the more time, patience and flexibility that employees will afford the organization," Sellnow said.

Just as there are consequences for not communicating with the public during a crisis, a lack of response to an internal crisis can only exacerbate the problem. As the anxiety of a crisis increases, employee morale and production will eventually dip. If the crisis continues with no leadership response to reassure workers, employee turnover is likely. The best workers will generally be the first out the door. Not only is a company left without the quality talent it once had, the remaining employees will become disengaged from their work.

The employees that weather out this crisis may not be engaged in their work, but that won't stop them from engaging in conversation with people outside of the company. The more workers speak negatively about an organization, the worse the community's public perception will become, which can have the same effect as a botched PR campaign.

"A company can have a workforce that creates the same kind of public relations that you have through any kind of marketing or branding effort but in a very negative way," said Sellnow.

About the author:
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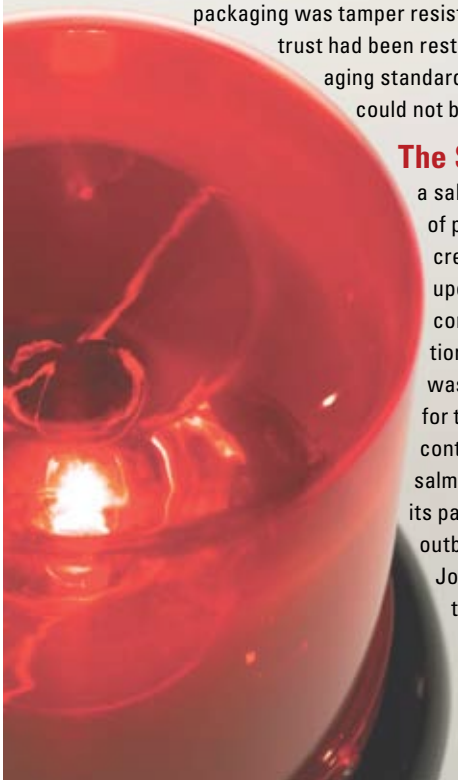
A Tale Of Two Crises

Since the Gulf Coast disaster began, BP's executives have epitomized some of the pitfalls of crisis communication. But other companies have exemplified crisis communication at its finest.

In the 1980s, Johnson & Johnson faced a crisis when seven Chicago residents died from Extra Strength Tylenol capsules that had been laced with cyanide. The company immediately mobilized its response by fully cooperating with the local police, the FBI and the FDA, while apologizing to the public and pulling the entire product line from the shelves—despite the enormous cost. When Johnson & Johnson reintroduced Extra Strength Tylenol, the product's packaging was tamper resistant and sales skyrocketed because the public trust had been restored. The incident helped raise industry packaging standards and led to the introduction of caplets that could not be cracked open and inserted with poison.



The Schwan Food Company became linked to a salmonella outbreak in the 1990s, when dozens of people became sick from the company's ice cream. The organization immediately embarked upon a public awareness campaign to warn consumers, issued a recall, and stopped production of its ice cream as the cause of the outbreak was investigated. Schwan's also offered to pay for the medical bills of those who had eaten the contaminated ice cream. When the source of the salmonella was discovered, Schwan's redesigned its pasteurization process to ensure that another outbreak did not occur. Just as with Johnson & Johnson, Schwan's customers responded positively to the way it handled the crisis and over time, the company's market share exceeded what it had been before the incident.