

Handling a Public Relations Crisis

Few people ever expect to have to deal with a public relations crisis until they are in the throes of one, and by then it may be too late. In addition to resolving the issue that sparked the crisis, your organisation will need to handle the fallout stemming from news of the crisis. This may include responding to angry customers or probing reporters.

Public relations employees who are accustomed to little more than crafting marketing press releases may find themselves ill-equipped to deal with an onslaught of tough questions and false information from the public and the media. So how can you help them respond in a crisis?

Before a Crisis

The first and best step you can take to improve how you handle a public relations crisis is to plan your response beforehand. Start by establishing a crisis communication team.

If you're a larger business, this team should consist of senior management, legal advisors and communications advisors. For smaller businesses, this team may simply consist of you, a public relations advisor and a solicitor you've established a relationship with and can call on at a moment's notice.

These individuals will be responsible for creating and executing the crisis response and managing the situation as it unfolds. All planning and communications—internal and external—should be dictated by the team. Nobody outside of the team should make any crisis-related decisions or speak on behalf of your business. Having a unified internal team

is essential to maintaining control, which is difficult to recover if lost.

Crisis Prep

Once a team is assembled, prepare a list of reporters, investors, customers, business partners, advisors, employees, third-party experts, community leaders and anyone else who should be notified during a crisis. Have this list in an easily accessible location, along with contact information for your internal crisis team members, for immediate reference.

The first and best step you can take to improve your organisation's handling of a public relations crisis is to plan your response beforehand.

You should also prepare a company fact sheet, listing up-to-date information about your organisation. If a crisis occurs, this information can be distributed to reporters at press conferences or during interviews.

A crisis communication plan is only good if it's vigilantly maintained, updated and rehearsed. Members of the crisis communication team need to meet regularly to double-check contingencies and make sure all team members are well trained in their roles.

During a Crisis

When a crisis happens, do not wait to go public with any problem that affects your customers. While it will hurt to reveal an internal failure, the blowback your

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organisation receives from the public will be much less painful in the long run than it will if you try to cover up the problem. An immediate disclosure will prevent people from questioning your motives for sitting on information and may even earn some respect from customers who feel they have been apprised of the situation in a timely fashion. You don't need to have all the answers, but you do need own up to the problem.

Put together a release to be distributed describing what happened and the situation as it stands. Let customers know what your next action will be and what changes they can expect in the meantime. Also tell them where to direct their comments. If necessary, hold a press conference to avoid having to deal with multiple media requests.

Control Your Message

Depending on the nature of the crisis, several outside entities may start talking about the situation within your organisation. These may include media, police, solicitors, banks, hackers, disgruntled customers and social media users.

In the face of all the discussion, you want to make sure your organisation is controlling the conversation as much as possible. As reflexive as it might be to choose not to comment or say only that you are taking the matter seriously, that is not helpful. If the story is big enough, people are going to be talking, and if they don't get information from you, they will get it from a third party, an internal leak or rumours.

Instruct all employees who are not part of the crisis team to direct requests for comment to the company spokesperson. Talk to reporters and post messages on your social media accounts. If necessary, consider using paid advertising to get your message across. In all instances, however, make sure your message is the unvarnished truth. If any false or inaccurate statements are uncovered, the damage is practically impossible to reverse.

The best thing you can do to prevent a public relations crisis from turning into a public relations disaster is to anticipate what could happen and train to respond to it. When a crisis is unfolding, the quickest and least

damaging way to steer through it is to immediately alert your customers, disclose how it impacts them and deliver timely updates as you work towards a solution.

After the crisis dies down you can begin the work of repairing relationships with clients and determining how to prevent problems from occurring in the future. But it's important to remember that no matter how perfect the fix, if the crisis is handled poorly, it may already be too late.