



Las Vegas Valley Chapter

Newsletter - July 2008

Crisis Communications – The Human Touch

BY KEVIN R. MALONE – LVVC COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE

This issue of our PRSA LVVC newsletter focuses on crisis communications. I'd like to share what I consider a simple bit of wisdom that has served me well both in times of crisis and in day-to-day PR practices. Like many such nuggets, it came from an unexpected source. I was a reporter covering the controversial relocation of a chemical factory some 20 years ago. The manager of the plant, a man under siege by any measure, handed me a brochure on media relations published by the EPA. In it was the best explanation of the tug-of-war between the corporate world and the media that I've ever read.

Just about everyone doing a job, the EPA explained, is primarily concerned about processes and results. We plan, execute each step and then, sometimes years later, reap the rewards or learn from the failure. We deal in cold, hard facts. The press, on the other hand, deals in the immediate emotions of a situation. News reporters, and the general public in times of crisis, want answers. What is the impact of this crisis and what are you doing about it right now?

These differing viewpoints can be a recipe for a PR disaster. The natural reaction in the executive suite is to circle the wagons, say nothing until the complete plan is ready and then deliver carefully measured statements. Yet the press and the public are clamoring for answers now. So we trot out the CEO. He or she has rightfully been concerned about every angle of the crisis and every detail of the response. The CEO has a head full of facts and figures. But he or she is walking straight into an emotional minefield.

This is exactly where the PR professional should step in. Be in that executive suite, for starters. Do your best to counter the circle-the-wagons mentality. Emphasize the need for a quick response even if there's a lack of answers. And when it's time to deliver the response, you need to grab the stick shift and help your CEO change gears from cold analysis to heartfelt empathy.

Yes, you need to formulate a message and stick to it. But, more importantly, the message and the person delivering it need to be human. What is the impact on people and their families? Health and safety are the first concerns, of course, but jobs and livelihoods are a close second. Keep your employees informed and don't forget your stakeholders.

Hopefully, you have all of this and much more in a crisis communications plan that your company has practiced. If you don't, see the following article and the links below. But either way, the human touch is the thing to remember in a crisis...and every day.

Thrive in a Crisis

BY JOHN HANKS

In your client's business, they don't part with their hard earned revenue without a thorough cost-benefit evaluation. It's the same with a crisis. They need to anticipate the cost and be prepared to maximize the benefit while minimizing the negative impact.

Disasters will happen...from flash flooding and fires to a robbery, internal chicanery, civil unrest, or a terrorist incident. The question is whether a business is prepared.

There are five steps to thriving in a crisis: **K.E.P.P.E.R.:** Know the Environment, Plan, Practice, Execute, Review.

Know the Environment. Have your client ask these basic questions: What kind of target does my industry make? What has happened to other businesses like mine? Would I survive if the business had to be shut down for weeks or months or for an entire revenue season? What do I have planned for myself and my employees in that situation?

Here are the risk identifying questions: What facility, building or equipment could my company not survive without? What if there were a prolonged power outage? No phone service? What if all company records were destroyed? What does my insurance cover? Could I still pay employees and vendors during a prolonged shutdown?

Plan. Prepare an impact assessment of the business: a prioritized list of potentially serious incidents, current business continuity plan/program, media and security systems, training, and internal and external communications mechanisms; Develop a business contingency plan: identify milestones to move from disruption to normal status, rate critical business functions and decide which of them are to be resumed and in what order after a crisis, identify alternate methods of work processing during a crisis, key individuals, emergency services, who to contact and when.

Practice. It is important to make sure the plan is tested by those persons who would undertake those activities. Test procedures should be documented and recorded in order to fine-tune the plan. No short cuts should be made here.

Drills should be scheduled and conducted on a regular. This allows all staff members to practice their roles and to become more comfortable with their specific responsibilities.

Execute. Contact with the news media during a crisis is a natural outcome of the crisis. As a newsmaker, you are partners with news reporters in "negotiating" the news.

Know what to say (and NOT say) and who should say it. There should be a single spokesperson for your company during a crisis. Choose someone high enough in the organization that he/she can carry the credibility of the company.

You should never lie to the news media, but you don't have to blurt out the truth, either! Never say "No Comment." Even if you have nothing to say,

SAY IT! A reporter needs words to make a story, even if those words are "I can't elaborate on that because it's in litigation," or "I don't have an answer for that. It's not my area of expertise," or "What you really should be asking is..."

Have a statement ready for the moment a crisis breaks. Something like, "We are aware of the situation and are handling it. We'll release more information as it becomes available."

Review. As changes such as new hires or new office equipment occur, it is important to incorporate the changes into the contingency plan. It is even more important to make sure that all staff members are up to date with the changes and are current with new roles.

This **K.E.P.P.E.R** plan gives you the right steps to safeguard your client against disasters and crisis situations. Although you may never be able to predict when a severe situation may occur, you will be able to determine whether and how your client will survive.

John Hanks is President of John Hanks Communications and an expert in crisis communications and media training. He is former Assistant Director of the Clark County Department of Aviation for Communications. In addition to private and group seminars on media training and crisis management, John teaches Crisis Communications at UNLV's Educational Outreach.

Beyond a Crisis: Emergency Management

Seeing your company through its own crisis is one thing. Effectively helping your community during a major disaster is another. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has an established structure for emergency response that has been improved and refined after the experiences of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. FEMA also trains local responders to follow the principles of the National Incident Management System even if no national assistance is required. Larger private entities such as utilities and the Red Cross are a formal part of this system. Smaller companies can and should do their own disaster preparedness.

Public communications in a disaster is governed by what is called the Joint Information System. In a nutshell, the local PIOs will form a Joint Information Center (JIC) as a central clearinghouse for information. The JIC works directly for the Incident Commander and will be located at or near the county Emergency Operations Center. The state, FEMA and/or federal authorities may also form JICs as appropriate. While there is no way to require private companies to participate, coordinating with a JIC can be the best way to make sure you're not going it alone and that everyone is giving the right information to the public.

FEMA has a wealth of online information that will help you prepare your internal crisis plan as well as prepare for a disaster.

[Ready.gov \(for business and home\)](#)
[Emergency Management Guide for Business & Industry](#)
[Protect Your Property or Business from Disaster](#)
[Emergency Management Institute](#)
[Emergency Management Institute Online Training](#)
[EMI Course IS-702 Public Information Systems](#)
[VOAD \(coordination of volunteer organizations\)](#)

July Luncheon Seminar – July 25

BY DIANE GIBES – PRESIDENT-ELECT

Behind the Scenes with Special Events Management

Registration Deadline: July 22

Product launches, grand openings, special announcements—they're all standard fare for anyone in PR. And as any practitioner knows, there's nothing like a crowd to create some buzz. When implemented effectively, special events programming developed as a public relations strategy offers great visuals, personal engagement points and a forum for action.



At our July luncheon seminar, Robyn Hadden, CSEP, will highlight event planning tactics for public relations professionals. Although many event-planning pieces, such as strategic plans, timelines and budgets mirror a PR practitioner's approach, Robyn will bring her insider's arsenal of tips and tricks designed pull off a terrific special event. Her overview will include best practices, checklists and resources needed to help heighten the awareness of an organization and its goals in a fun and meaningful way.

Robyn holds a CSEP, an accreditation for certified special events professionals, and is past president of ISES, the International Special Events Society—Las Vegas Chapter, she has planned, managed and volunteered many special events in the Las Vegas Valley.

Robyn's career began in the entertainment discipline of special events. She was part of the entertainment team who opened EFX! at the MGM Grand in 1995. She was a personal assistant to Michael Crawford, who was famous as the Phantom of the Opera on Broadway. After Mr. Crawford left the show, she was the personal assistant of David Cassidy of Partidge Family fame. Her experience with entertainment in Las Vegas continued while working with David Cassidy to open The Rat Pack Is Back and At the Copa, starring David Cassidy and Sheena Easton.

[Read More and Register](#)