MIR3
INTELLIGENT NOTIFICATION

True Confessions *of a*
NOTIFICATION INSIDER

✦ PART 1 ✦

Secrets, tips and lessons learned

The hidden role of crisis communications in BC/DR

What does crisis communication have to do with business continuity?

When a corporate crisis strikes, communication, whether internal or external, must be immediate and clear. Crisis communication teams and public relation professionals are highly trained in crafting and delivering effective messages at such times, and there's a lot that those in the business continuity (BC) profession can learn from them.

This paper explores the challenge of modern crisis communication, from creating and controlling the message to determining who should deliver it, and how. And while responsibility for communication in the midst of a corporate event might typically reside outside your purview as a BC professional, it's important to understand the principles of sound crisis communication as part of your work. With this information you can then craft a business continuity program and associated plans to integrate best practices for overall communication.

Read on to learn more about effective communication before, during and after a crisis.

Attributes of a crisis or disaster

While each event has its own unique characteristics, there are defining attributes of crises that will help clarify how to best prepare communication strategies.

While not always present, many times crises:

- **Develop from an event as a surprise to an organization** – This could result from a misunderstanding, incorrect assessment of potential risks or from something that had previously not been identified as a potential risk.

- **Embody an escalating flow of events** – What starts out as a perceived minor event, with no correlation to other things, can turn quickly into a cascading event.

- **Cause confusion** – During the first 24 hours, there is often insufficient or inaccurate information to work with while decisions are being made.

- **Draw intense scrutiny** from employees, media, government agencies, customers and the surrounding population of companies and individuals.

- **Have the potential to significantly impact business operations** and/or reputation.

- **Can result in the loss of command and control**, especially during the initial response.

Whatever the cause or whatever the actual crisis, information and communication are critical during any event.

We live in a time of information overload

These days people assume it's their right to know what has transpired and how it impacts them personally. With an array of communications technology at everyone's fingertips, if there is a void in information, whether officially released or delivered by secondary resources (observations, rumors, hearsay, etc.), it will quickly be filled. And as that information is disseminated, it's likely to travel further and faster than ever before, with speeds that escalate almost daily. So when an official source doesn't concisely and quickly release news and direction, people will provide their own, leading to rumors, misrepresentation or news that is out-of-context. None of these are pleasant outcomes, often leading to the one consistent fact about all crisis communication—the first 24 hours of any event will be accompanied by the dissemination of *wrong* information.

Remember: What is communicated in the first 24 hours will set the stage for the ultimate success in properly managing the flow of information during any crisis.

Secrets to effective communication when rumors fly

When a crisis strikes, the most important thing to remember is to communicate early and often. But do it pragmatically, with an approach that has been thought out and planned in great detail.

The wrong way to communicate

- **Wrong messaging** – This can be catastrophic. Be cautious about whom your message is targeted to, what you are trying to communicate and what action you need for each recipient to take.

- **Trying to reach everyone by the same mode** – If you send a message only by email, you can bet that your staff on the road will not get the information at the same time as people in the office. Send your message by every possible means in order to reach everyone at once.

- **Using the same message for all** – Before you sound the alarm, consider carefully who needs to know what. In many cases, too much information can be as damaging as not enough.

- **Poor timing of messages** – If you sound the alarm too early, speculation can run wild. Too late and you lose credibility and trust.

- **Including the wrong people** – Prepare groups ahead of time so that you don't exclude those that should get the message while avoiding those that will find it a distraction.

- **Not providing a response mechanism** – Often your audience can provide you with critical information during a crisis; be sure to allow a way for them to respond to your message.

- **Insufficient or incorrect content** – This can include failing to acknowledge the issue, failing to communicate at the earliest possible moment (if you're explaining, you're losing ground) or sending a message that lacks sincerity.

What's the answer?

Following are steps to help you develop a consistent and complete crisis communication strategy.

The right way to communicate

- **Understand what can go wrong**. Know your vulnerabilities; perform a risk and vulnerability analysis and understand the primary risks that you have as an organization.

- **Develop a crisis communication plan** – Communication should be defined to mitigate the crisis and include lines of authority and ownership, including executive participation as well as those who have responsibility for corporate communication. The plan should list authorities and align to an escalating criticality matrix so that leadership takes ownership of any crisis and transparency is maintained throughout. It should also define roles, responsibilities and protocols for authorization and prompt release of information during any crisis.

  ### When building a communication plan:

  - **Identify one spokesperson** and be sure you have alternates standing by.

  - **Conduct media training** with all potential spokespeople.

  - **Develop key messages** and choose your notification methods before a crisis.

  - **Develop protocols** for releasing the messages.

  - **Identify all stakeholders** and make sure you have current contact information for all.

  - **Communicate with internal stakeholders first.** While this may not always be possible, in most cases sharing information with employees should be a priority.

  - **Monitor what is being said.** Make sure you monitor the usual social media sites for misinformation and address it quickly and clearly.

  - **Prepare your messages before a crisis**. Use the information gathered during your risk assessment to build a series of message templates that you can refer back to. Define up to three key messages for each stakeholder group and have them ready to edit and publish at time of crisis. Remember, the closer you can stay to these pre-approved messages while still providing the necessary information, the better. Try to make specific messages a simple variation of these three themes for each stakeholder group. Craft your messages with careful consideration given to the way the message will be interpreted: Is it sincere? How is the delivery? Do I, as the recipient, understand what's expected of me?

  - **Automate the process**. When possible, use an automated tool like a mass notification system for message delivery. This will provide an audit trail, ensure speedy delivery and minimize the time spent trying to contact individuals one by one. Tools come with costs, so the best return on investment is gained by using the tool in its broadest application,

not for just a few select individuals, and not for a single purpose. The most successful implementations of automated notification are seen with broad use across multiple user profiles. Use your notification tool not only for business continuity crises, but for business operations, day-to-day IT incident management, employee reminders and other internal and external communication.

- **Engage in social media**. Regardless of whether you are ready to accept social media as part of a crisis communication strategy, social media and the information posted can have significant impact on your company if not properly addressed before, during and after any crisis. Whether through Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Yammer or other sites, social media represents tremendous exposure for your company. Establish processes for monitoring and dealing with inappropriate rumors or information ahead of time.

Summary

By applying lessons learned and best practices from the field of crisis communication, business continuity professionals will have even more tools at hand when called upon to manage an event. This in turn will improve communication, enhance disaster management, increase the value of the work you do and ultimately, help keep your business on track.

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