

Lessons learned

Creating a comprehensive crisis and response plan post-Sept. 11

by John Deveney, ABC

The practice of communication has changed since Sept. 11, 2001, and there may be more challenges still ahead. In the wake of last year's terrorist attacks in the U.S., businesses and organizations worldwide grappled with communicating effectively with employees and their families, the media and the public. Corporate leaders awakened to the Internet's core role in business communication and also began refining how the various tools of videoconferencing, teleconferencing, online presentations and satellite media tours can work together to disseminate information during an emergency. In periods of increased public interest and scrutiny, organizations must be prepared to respond. Comprehensive emergency and response plans that outline how your organization will communicate during a crisis can extinguish fires before they ignite. In the past year, a number of lessons have emerged to help you put a flexible, sound communication plan in place to cope with the unexpected.

BUILD TRUST

During unprecedented circumstances such as Sept. 11, as well as more common instances of public protests, corporate distrust or a weakened competitive position, maintaining credibility is difficult—and absolutely necessary. Be sure to:

- Tell internal constituencies first.
- Prepare protocols and establish who will deliver them.
- Train leaders and spokespeople for interviews from every medium, assuring accurate, appropriate coverage driven by your message, not media questions.
- Create a long-term strategy. Don't build or launch strategy around a single day.

ORGANIZE A CRISIS CLEARINGHOUSE

A crisis plan should include systems to receive and respond to inquiries. Make sure you:

- Segment specific resources to manage communication with different stakeholders (media, public, employees). Be sure the messages are consistent.
- Respond as quickly and completely as possible. Do not frustrate audience members with lags or gaps in information that send them to the rumor mill.

- Use web sites and posting areas as clearinghouses for information and resources.
- Update and refresh the information on a regular basis, labeling new information and outlining how and when information will be updated.
- Commit to addressing larger issues and continuing open communication after the crisis. Pundits say organizations that keep communicating are better able to control issues and stories following a crisis.

COORDINATE COLLATERAL

If you use a variety of communication vehicles for different purposes or discrete audiences, make sure they are all coordinated in your response plan as follows:

- Clearly outline which web sites or communiqués will be primary, and establish a chain of command or clearinghouse for information and inquiries.
- Explain how traditional communication vehicles will be used, especially in the event of a technological blackout or breakdown. What should your response team do if phone lines are down, cellular service is interrupted or Internet access is unavailable?
- Consider using hot lines—an effective low-tech, high-touch tool for gathering and disseminating information.
- Be sure to have effective backup for all computer-based processes, e.g. off-site servers.

PLAN DISTRIBUTION METHODS

In the wake of Sept. 11 and the subsequent anthrax mailing scares, U.S. postal distribution was slowed and sen-

sitivity to unexpected packages heightened. To ensure delivery:

- Use semitransparent envelopes to facilitate inspection.
- Set mail-drop dates earlier and think through packaging and unexpected mailings, especially to media.
- Check with your media contacts and update their preferences. Media's preferred method of contact has changed dramatically toward e-mail and fax, according to *PR Newswire*.

COMMUNICATE ONLINE

Online technology enabled the American Red Cross during the Sept. 11 crisis to provide updated resources and facts for media outlets across the globe, coordinate 4,000 volunteers, accept US\$541 million in donations and respond to a media inquiry deluge and rumor monsoon that lasted for weeks.

As part of your organization's response plan, consider developing a web site that can replace your site in response to a crisis. Build a site that can handle heavy traffic and disseminate information efficiently. Minimize navigation and graphics, which can burden and crash the site (just ask cnn.com, which was overwhelmed in September 2001).

ACCOMMODATE

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Many in the U.S. were baffled by the attack on the World Trade Center, while their counterparts in Asia and Europe understood the attack as part of a broader global conflict. Communication practitioners must be the vanguard

of sensitivity for the groups they represent. This means making cultural sensitivity your standard business practice, especially if your company distributes services and products globally or employs immigrants. It's also important when discussing passion-inspiring topics such as terrorism, which are multifaceted and culturally defined, or handling multicultural workforce issues.

STAY CURRENT

Issue scanning can uncover crises in the making and provide intelligence to develop appropriate responses. When instituting your own issues-scanning process, consider these pointers:

- Make use of subscription and free online resources to identify emerging trends and issues.
- Once you are in the midst of a crisis, monitor media web sites, chat rooms and other resources that track and feed a crisis.
- Have resources you can use to identify and gauge key audiences' attitudes, needs and reactions.
- Use electronic news clipping services to harvest relevant online and traditional media coverage daily, and address emerging issues quickly.

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