



MANAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A CRISIS

BY JASON MUDD, APR

Stuff happens

Natural and man-made disasters happen all the time. And they don't have to be as bad as Hurricane Katrina or an exploding oil rig to do serious damage to your company — serious enough to threaten its survival.

According to the Department of Commerce, 40 percent of all businesses will not survive a crisis. More than 60 percent¹ of businesses confronted by a major di-



Photo by G. Schouten de Jel, courtesy RGBStock.com

aster close within two years. And 70 percent² of small firms that experience a crisis will go out of business within one year.



Photo courtesy RGBStock.com

The difference between companies that survive and those that disappear is often made in the first hours and days following the crisis.

The key to knowing what to do then, is to plan for it now.

1. according to the Association of Records Managers and Administrators

2. according to Data Centre Solutions

Crisis Management

“Sir, Mike Wallace is in the lobby. He wants to know who’s in charge here. What do I say?”

Johnson & Johnson redefined crisis communications management in 1982 by setting the standard for the way public relations practitioners should respond during a crisis.

The situation became known as the “Tylenol Case.” A still-unknown culprit began mixing cyanide into Tylenol capsules and placing them back onto store shelves in the Chicago area. Several people died, including three members of one family. Nationwide panic ensued.

Johnson and Johnson responded immediately by recalling all of the product — 31 million cases — and stopping production. The moves cost the company about \$100 million. They also kicked off the greatest brand resurrection in history.

In the following months Tylenol reinvented itself with tamper-proof packaging — forcing the



Photo by Kriss Szurlatowski, courtesy RGBStock.com

rest of the industry to follow. The standard was soon adopted for all kinds of products, from milk to shampoo.

It seems almost impossible that a brand could survive after such an ordeal, but Johnson & Johnson’s thoughtful and timely responses regained the company’s credibility and are now considered a case study on best practices in effective public relations.

The Crisis Is Here

When a crisis lands on your doorstep, you need to already know what you're going to do to minimize the damage.



Photo courtesy RGBStock.com

What do I do first?

It may seem obvious, but what you don't want to do is sit around sucking your thumb. Take action! Be proactive and immediately reach out to your public audiences. Let the press know you're available. Let your customers and

employees know you care and are concerned. Let investors know you are in control and on top of the situation. For your most important stakeholders, you may need to place personal phone calls or schedule face-to-face briefings.

3 Things You Must Always Say

No matter what the crisis is, there are three things you must always say. They're so important that you should cut off the rest of this page and stick it in your wallet, tape it to your phone and the sun visor in your car, give it to every member of your leadership team and your receptionist, and practice saying them in front of the mirror.

1 . Our focus right now is on the victims. Our thoughts are with them and their families.

Who the victims are will vary with every situation. They might be employees injured on a jobsite, customers hurt by a faulty product, or investors stung by some shady bookkeeping. Whoever they are, you need to let them know you care — and mean it. If you don't care, you can stop reading now because nothing can save you from a well-deserved bad reputation.

2 . We still don't know all the facts, but we're investigating and more information will be forthcoming when it's available.

Now walk back into your office and wipe your brow. You just bought yourself some time, and unless you're the Amazing Kreskin, everything you just said was true. Make sure everything you say from now on is true as well. The world is watching and media hounds can smell a lie a mile away.

3 . I don't know, but I promise to find out and get back to you. If you'll give me your phone number I'll call you back as soon as I know the answer.

It's okay not to know everything. If you release info that turns out to be wrong — the number of victims, how old the equipment was, how much money is missing — you'll look like you don't know what's going on. Get the facts, and if you promise to get back to someone, do it.

6 Things You Must Never Say

*If you want to fill a hole, the first thing you need to do is
STOP DIGGING!*

1. No comment This is the public relations equivalent to “no contest.” Your lawyers may recommend it, but to the public it says, “I’m guilty.” Besides, you can say, “I don’t know,” or “We’re still investigating,” and get better results.

2. It’s the media’s fault Blaming the media only works in politics, and even there it often backfires. You want the media on your side, and blaming them for a crisis they’re reporting on isn’t going to win you any friends in the press. If one of them reports something wrong, and you can prove it, do so. But don’t use the occasion to belittle the reporter or his/her profession.

3. It’s the victims’ fault Diet Pepsi took this tack when victims started finding objects like syringes and crack vials in their cans. Pepsi invited the media into bottling plants and proved there was no way those objects could have been inserted during the bottling process. Until you can do the same, stay away from this defense. One sharp-eyed reporter or whistleblowing employee can cause the whole thing to blow up in your face.

4. A lie Lies are easy to get away with when no one is looking. When the whole world is looking, you’re going to get caught. The media are experts at ferreting out the truth, and disgruntled employees, ex-wives and government inspectors are glad to help them.

5. S/he is not available Communications managers and Public Relations managers can help set strategy, screen the press and advise you, but they cannot be your only spokesperson. Senior management must be available. It doesn’t have to be the CEO, but it must be someone with the title and authority to speak AS the company, not just for the company.

6. Nothing Public relations storms don’t just blow over. Either you lead the conversation or someone else will. Wait too long and you could get “pink slimed” out of business.

Crisis Is Coming

Now is the time to plan for the public relations crisis yet-to-come. Your company's very survival depends on it.



Photo by Sigurd DeCroos, courtesy RGBStock.com

Building a plan

If you're not already facing a crisis, the steps on the following pages will help you form a crisis communications plan for your business. We'll help you identify key executives who should have preassigned roles in a crisis; how

to choose a spokesperson; who your audiences are; steps you can take to anticipate a crisis; and what you'll need to do to ride out the storm. At the end, you'll find printable forms that will help you through the planning process.

The 10-Step Plan

1. Identify Your Crisis

Communications Team

Ideally, this should be a small number of senior executives. The company CEO should lead the team with the top public relations executive and top legal counsel as his chief advisors.

Thinking Points: Your legal crisis is related to, but separate from, your public relations crisis. Be careful not to let your lawyers protect your company all the way to the grave. If you've made a mistake, admit it and take steps to make it right. Apologize. It might hurt you in court, but if you don't win the PR battle, by the time you get into the courtroom, you could be out of business.

2. Identify Spokespersons

They are the only people authorized to speak for the company in a time of crisis.

Thinking Points: You may want to have the CEO or another senior executive speak **AS** the company, and the top public relations executive speak **FOR** the company. The difference may seem subtle, but think of it as the difference between the White House Press Secretary and the President of the United States. You should also only have one or two people fielding phone calls from the media. Decide who those people will be and make sure everyone in the company knows who they are.

3. Spokesperson Training

Aggressive reporters and an untrained spokesperson who doesn't know how to get "the most important news" across to an interviewer can devastate your company.

Thinking Points: Well-intentioned executives often believe they don't need professional training on speaking to the media, but the very traits that have made you and your top executives great leaders — even great public speakers — will work against you when dealing with the press during a crisis. Training for your spokesperson's success is a small cost compared to the cost of failure at a key moment during a public relations crisis.

4. Establish Communications Protocols

Establish an emergency communications “tree” and distribute it to all company employees, informing them of what to do and who to call if there’s an actual or potential crisis.

Thinking Points: Consider establishing a kind of hotline or direct-to-the-top open-door policy for employees who spot a potential crisis. You don’t want news of a pending disaster bogged down with some middle manager who doesn’t realize what’s happening. A good way to do this is with a specific code word — Pink Rhino, for example — that tells everyone to clear a path to you or your top public relations executive. Anyone who blocks the path or abuses the alert system should face repercussions.

5. Identify and Know Your Audiences

Internal and external. Remember your employees, the community, media, customers, private investors, SEC requirements and regulatory agencies.

Thinking Points: Cultivating good relationships with your audiences before a crisis occurs can earn you goodwill when it does. People who know you and your company to be honest and compassionate will find it easier to believe you care and are telling the truth when things aren’t going your way.

6. Anticipate Crises

Be proactive and brainstorm potential crises. Modifying existing methods of operation often can prevent crises. Take time to plan layoffs, acquisitions and other potential bad news to avoid operating in crisis mode.

Thinking Points: Set up Google alerts to notify you when your company is mentioned online. Monitor Twitter and Facebook as well. Handle complaints there quickly, professionally and openly.

7. Plan to Assess the Situation

Reacting without adequate information is a classic “shoot first and ask questions later” scenario. Know how you’re going to get the right info fast.

Thinking Points: Appoint a key executive to be your “eyes and ears,” and the first member of the leadership team on the ground at the site of any crisis. As soon as things go wrong, he or she should be on the phone gathering information and then on a plane to see for him- or herself. Choose someone you can trust to tell you the unvarnished truth, no matter how unpleasant it will be.

8. Identify Key Messages

Keep it simple with no more than three messages for all audiences and a few messages targeted specifically at key audiences.

Thinking Points: Employees, private investors and government regulators are examples of key audiences that may benefit from specifically targeted messages.

9. Plan Communications Methods

Brief employees, clients, prospects and investors personally or send email. Send news releases and hold briefings for the media.

10. Ride Out the Storm

Monitor reactions, tweak messages and be patient. Twitter and Facebook are good ways to communicate and gauge public reaction to your efforts.

Thinking Points: Some audiences will not react the way you want. Be objective and decide if additional communication aimed at them is worth the effort.

Crisis Resolution

Using the forms on the next few pages and following the 10 steps I just outlined, you can develop your own plan that can be used at any time in the event of a crisis.

Provide copies to all department heads and managers, and keep copies of this plan available in hard copy and on your computer network.

Once your plan is developed, keep it handy for review and schedule practice drills. Having a mock crisis will help you prepare for the real thing. Your crisis team should meet twice a year to review and update the plan and evaluate it after each mock crisis.

I wish you the best in your crisis planning. If you decide you'd like the help of a professional when preparing for or facing a public relations crisis, or for any of your PR needs, call me.

Jason Mudd

Jason Mudd, APR, chief executive of AXIA Public Relations and Marketing, is an award-winning public relations practitioner who has authored more than 250 articles. He has appeared internationally as a crisis communications expert on ABC and NBC news affiliates, *The Holmes Report*, *PR Week*, and in *The Sacramento Bee* and *The Business Journal*, among others, and was named a *PR Week* Rising Star of PR.

Reach Jason at jmudd@axiapr.com
or (866) 999-AXIA



Crisis Plan

For: _____
Company Name

Crisis Team

Team Leader

Name: _____
CEO

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Chief Public Relations Executive

Name: _____

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Crisis Plan

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Crisis Team, Continued

Chief Legal Counsel

Name: _____

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Chief Investigator

Name: _____
"Eyes & Ears"

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Crisis Plan

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Crisis Team, Continued

Team Member

Name: _____
Other Key Executive

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Public Relations Firm of Record

Name: _____

Primary Contact: _____

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Responsibilities During Crisis: _____

Crisis Plan

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Spokespersons

Primary

Name: _____
CEO, SVP, COB or other Senior Leader

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Spokesperson Training

☐ Completed _____ Date ☐ Scheduled For _____ Date With _____ Training Firm

Secondary

Name: _____
Chief Public Relations Executive

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Spokesperson Training

☐ Completed _____ Date ☐ Scheduled For _____ Date With _____ Training Firm

Alternative Primary

Name: _____
CEO, SVP, COB or other Senior Leader

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Spokesperson Training

☐ Completed _____ Date ☐ Scheduled For _____ Date With _____ Training Firm

Notes: _____

Crisis Plan

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Media Point of Contact

Primary

Name: _____
Chief Public Relations Executive

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Authorized to Take Media Calls

Name: _____

Phones: _____
office cell home other other

Email: _____

Available Expertise

Financial experts, engineers, legislative counsel/lobbyist, influential community leaders, etc.

Name: _____ Expertise: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Name: _____ Expertise: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Name: _____ Expertise: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Name: _____ Expertise: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Name: _____ Expertise: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

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The Emergency Operations Center

This is where the crisis team will meet and discuss strategy. It should be someplace private with a lockable door. Do not choose a location near the lobby or the media operations center.

Location: _____

The Media Center

Select a place located away from the Emergency Operations Center and the offices of the crisis team members. Ideally, keep it as close to the site of the crisis as safely possible.

Location: _____

Media Escort Policy

**Effective Immediately: All members of the media ☐ do not have to be escorted while on company property.
☐ must be escorted while on company property.**

Do not change your escort policy after a crisis begins. It can lead to mistrust and resentment by members of the media. Treat all media members equally. If you give one access to the crisis site, make the site available to all members of the media. If you decide the media must be escorted, decide now who will be the escorts.

Escorts: _____

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Our Emergency Information Website

This is where we will direct callers for more information about the incident that caused the crisis.

url: www._____

Create this website or web page in advance and keep it inactive (not visible) until a crisis occurs. Include information about the company, its history and the leadership team, including short biographies of the people on the crisis management team. Be prepared to add technical information about systems and procedures related to the crisis and where they broke down.

Prepared Statements

To Employees:

As you may be aware, a What involving Who occurred today at Where at When. We still don't know all the facts, but the incident is under investigation and more information will be forthcoming when it's available.

Our greatest concern right now is focused on The Victims. Our thoughts are with them and their families.

Our Crisis Management Team has been activated and is working to understand what happened and determine what steps we need to take next.

If you have any information about this incident or events that may have contributed to it, please contact us immediately. Specifically, contact Media Point of Contact at Phone & Email.

If you are contacted by a member of the media, direct them to contact Media Point of Contact at Phone & Email. S/he is the only person authorized to speak to the media about this incident. To keep up with news about the incident as we learn it, visit our emergency information website at www._____

To the Public/Media:

A What involving Who occurred today at Where at When. We still don't know all the facts, but the incident is under investigation and more information will be forthcoming when it's available.

Our greatest concern right now is focused on The Victims. Our thoughts are with them and their families.

We will hold a news conference at When, where we'll share whatever we know at that point.

We invite you to visit our emergency information website at www._____ to keep up with news about the incident as it develops.

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Key Audiences

This will automatically include employees, customers, investors and the media, but consider other audiences, such as people who live near the site of the incident, employees' families, vendors, lenders and the government. Determine who the audiences are and the best ways to communicate with them: emails, Facebook, Twitter, news releases, press conferences, phone calls or face-to-face meetings.

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Audience: _____

Communications Method(s): _____

Possible positions include human error, faulty equipment or inadequate supervision. If a vendor provided faulty equipment or the injured person was trespassing, your position might be that the crisis occurred through no fault of your own, but that in the future you will take extra measures to ensure it doesn't happen again.

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Key Messages

Define the three key messages you want to convey to all audiences. Develop other messages for specific audiences as needed. Example of a key message: One of our plant supervisors directed his staff to take shortcuts to save time and boost productivity. We've demoted him and have scheduled extra training for all our employees to ensure they understand safety is our number one priority.

Key Message No. 1 _____

Key Message No. 2 _____

Key Message No. 3 _____

Notes

Never speak "off the record."

If a reporter can hear it, see it or film it, expect it to be on the news. No interview is over if the reporter is still there.

Keep a call log of everyone who contacts your company about the crisis. Include the time, date, name of the contact, their phone number and email address, along with who is responsible for responding and follow-up notes. Ensure someone responds as soon as possible, particularly to members of the media.

Wear makeup on television. If the reporter doesn't offer it, ask for it.

Hold mock interviews to prepare for tough questions.

Don't speculate and beware of questions that ask you to speculate: "What if..."

Always tell the truth. Most people will forgive an honest mistake. But in crisis public relations, liars never prosper.

Remember to eat, sleep and drink plenty of fluids.

You need to be mentally alert and physically healthy to deal with the stress caused by a crisis. If not, you'll be its next casualty.

Don't be afraid to call in the pros. We have the experience and expertise to guide you through the roughest storm.



Crisis Plan

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The AXIA CrisisPoint Apology Model

Confess - State what you did. Own up to it. Be clear and candid. Give enough.

"In 2002, we discovered our product posed a potential safety threat to our customers. We did not resolve this situation and out of fear of production delays, manufacturing costs and reduced profits, we continued to make toys with lead contamination."

Apologize - Say apologize - not just sorry - for whatever it is you did.

"I apologize to our customers and our communities that I did not provide the right leadership and the sense of courage and integrity to protect you and instill your trust."

Rectify - How will you make the current situation better? What are the short-term/reactive measures?

"We will provide complimentary lead testing centers as well as refund or replace all toys known to contain unsafe lead levels. We will pay all fines and create a lead safety board among all toy manufactures. We will also return a portion of our proceeds over the next 24 months to children's hospitals involved in researching and treating lead poison."

Prevention/Reformation - What are the long-term/preemptive steps that will assure this doesn't happen again - ever?

"This will not happen again as we are pledging to operate lead-free and will now have an officer charged with quality assurance and oversight of our compliance to the lead safety manufacturing board."

Seek forgiveness. This is important. Don't forget to ask for forgiveness from your employees, shareholders, customers, community and other stakeholders and those impacted.

"We hope that you will forgive our organization for my mistake."

AXIA does not provide legal guidance. We work closely with legal counsel for the companies we represent and recommend you involve your legal counsel in deciding the best approach for your company when facing a crisis.



What is CrisisPoint?

A crisis can occur anytime, anyplace, anywhere. The way your company handles a crisis can mean the difference between success and failure. Failure can result in serious harm to your company's brand, causing humiliation, loss of sales – and even the downfall of your business. In any crisis situation, you have to be prudent, proactive and know what you are doing to prevent failure.

This is where AXIA CrisisPoint comes in. We will be on your company's side, ready to offer guidance whenever these unfortunate episodes occur. We have years of professional experience handling crisis communication management and understand the importance of quick, truthful responses. As your crisis management counselors, AXIA will convey accurate information to the public and to specific audiences during a crisis situation and show your business how to put communication first and mitigate negative outcomes that can threaten your company's survival.



**AXIA Public Relations
www.axiapr.com
info@axiapr.com
Twitter: axiapr
866-999-AXIA**