



Crisis Communications

Introduction

A recurring observation in many case studies of disruptions is that the management of the incident was made more difficult, and that the ultimate outcome was less favourable, because of shortcomings in crisis communications. The following short article provides some introductory guidance about how to ensure that you communicate effectively in a crisis.

Stakeholders

The key to effective crisis communications lies in identifying:

- Who your stakeholders are;
- Who is responsible for communicating with them; and
- What the best way(s) to communicate with them during an incident are.

Clearly the list of stakeholders, and their relative priority, will depend on the precise nature of the incident; but there is still great value in compiling a standard list, together with agreed responsibilities and appropriate communication channels, before any disruption occurs.

Key Messages

In planning for crisis communications, you need to understand what questions people are likely to ask during an incident. Typically, in the early stages, people will simply want to know:

- What happened;
- Why did it happen; and
- What are you doing about it?

Unfortunately, as time progresses, there may also be a growing demand to apportion blame.

It is also important to consider the key messages that the organisation wishes to communicate. First and foremost, any organisation involved in an incident needs to establish itself as a credible source of information: if you do not appear to know what is going on people will simply go elsewhere for their information. You also need to communicate the fact that you care, particularly about the impact of the incident on people and the environment (as applicable). Finally, you want to communicate that you are proactively managing the incident, rather than simply reacting to each turn of events.



Communicating with Traditional Media

Despite the growth of social media (see below), the print and broadcast media remain a vital channel for communicating with multiple stakeholder groups. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the media is only one of a number of ways of communicating with these audiences: you must try not to let the media dictate how you manage the incident. You should therefore:

- Identify and train suitable media spokespersons;
- Communicate proactively with the media during an incident, providing regular updates; and
- Ensure information is distributed efficiently to all relevant media organisations.

It is strongly recommended to prepare templates for various media statements in advance and to ensure that there is a straightforward procedure in place for authorising these during an incident.

Social Media

Over recent years, social media (eg Facebook, Twitter) have become a central part of crisis communications. On the one hand, damaging and/or erroneous material about your organisation can quickly spread by these means so it is important to monitor what is being said about you on the internet. Equally though, social media are a valuable tool for communicating with key stakeholder groups (eg customers), as they allow you to retain control over the message whilst affording much greater reach than direct (eg phone or email) contact.

Call Handling

One of the practical problems that people have experienced in many recent incidents is the inability to handle large numbers of incoming telephone calls from customers and the public. Even a modest increase in call volume - let alone the phenomenal increases often seen in a crisis - can seriously impact on an organisation's ability to deal with calls in a timely fashion. Clearly it is prohibitively costly to have spare call-handling capacity on this scale in-house so one must look to other solutions. One approach is to contract with a third-party call-centre to provide additional capacity in a crisis: various firms now specialise in this type of offering. Alternatively (or in addition), you may wish to consider the use of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology if you do not already have this.

Summary

Crisis communications can be a minefield but the simple steps outlined above will lay the foundations for a much more effective response, should you become embroiled in a newsworthy incident. The key message is that prior planning and preparation is absolutely essential in order to ensure that you can continue to communicate with your stakeholders, both directly and via appropriate media outlets, in the midst of an incident.