

## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: THE REAL DEAL

By Jim Rauh, JR&A Marketing Communications

Chemicals in your warehouse have inadvertently spilled into the storm drain. Public records are missing from the HR department. The CFO was in a boating accident. Your employees are outside protesting corporate policy. The news media gets wind of it.

Welcome to crisis communications.

Be it a statement to the media, an article on the 'net, a message placed in the daily newspaper, some judicious blogging, a feature broadcast report or an address to business leaders or investors, it's the public relations arm of your marketing at work. PR: the communications continuum that tells your outside and inside world what you are, what you're doing, for whom and how effectively you're doing it.

Consider. You interact with people every day. You're selling. You're buying. You're planning, researching, organizing, developing and implementing. How you're perceived is everything. When the communications roof seems to have caved in, your credibility is at stake. Your investors are watching closely. Your customers are wary. Your business is on the line.

If the guy down the hall (let's call him "Snerdley") with no particular authority to do anything but hand out news releases and refer callers to upper management is your company's idea of a public relations person, you're in deep trouble. Faceless external communications went out with typewriters. Your response to the media, to anyone outside the company, must be well thought-out and fast and you'd better be prepared to discuss the crisis, whatever it is, with confidence.

I'm not suggesting anyone put the proverbial spin on anything. Check with legal, keep it matter-of-fact and to the point. Acknowledge whatever the problem is. Present the facts. But don't get drawn into speculation. Is Snerdley capable? Or are you going to stand in front of the cameras? You're first opportunity at getting it right could be your last.

Whether your company is small or large, sophisticated PR (i.e., in tune with PR principles and modern media) and whether your PR/public affairs or marketing skills are studied, do one thing right. Think about what needs to be said before you say it. Then say only what needs saying. Agree on the best, most intelligent response to media queries and stay by the phone. That's half the battle.

When the you-know-what hits the fan, it's like someone just tossed a ticking brown paper box into your midst. How to deal with it, quickly, safely and effectively, is critical.

Old-line public relations still lives in some bigger organizations. Until recently, I thought the practice had died a well-deserved death. But there it was. Sensitive public employee medical files were reported stolen. Files that were taken from a supposedly secure government facility. The key word here is public --- as in public property and public right-to-know.

News media interest in the story was instantaneous and justified. Site access is open turf and right-to-know reigns supreme. How equipped are you to respond intelligently to probing questions? What's your crisis communications plan? This is the time when well-practiced PR and competent crisis management prove their worth.

You might ask yourself what any of this has to do with you and your cam tattle manufacturing operation? Dry cleaning shop? Sign store? insurance agency? Beauty salon? Body and paint

operation? Dry cleaning store? The list goes on ad infinitum. Accidents happen. Imagine the worst-case scenario for your business and follow the PR ball.

In a case where public safety, security and privacy are issues, the news media will come to you and at you from every angle. Knowing what to say, concisely and carefully, is critical. Be it paint fumes, a fire or whatever, you're on the spot. What if there was a major problem at the home office and the media is seeking to localize the story. They call you (the local vendor) for comment. What *will* you do?

If you have legal, check with legal. If you have PR, ask for their suggestions. Sit your team down and develop a response plan --- before you need one.

Who have you on staff who can present information calmly, briefly and with conviction? Maybe you dump the problem on Snerdley. Convinced he's the person you want in front of the cameras or on the phones with the media? Be calm, collect yourself, plan what *needs* to be said. Believe in it, then go say it --- with consistency. Add fresh information when ready. Be timely.

Writing about PR in Success magazine (March, 1994), entrepreneur and former Inc. magazine publisher Wilson Harrell described PR as "a secret weapon that you must use, whatever you're trying to do" and "the most effective and least expensive of all marketing vehicles." PR isn't cheap, but it can be had for a comparatively reasonable price.

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About the Author

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