Crisis Management: Communications Best Practices

It's been said that reputations are won or lost in crises, and the most successful corporate communications plans are built upon this principle. The same principle holds true for tribal energy projects. The approach to outreach and communications—particularly in the midst of an unforeseen crisis—can be a pivotal factor in a project's success or failure.

A crisis can be defined as anything that involves a threat to:

- People
- Issues
- Process
- Project
- Security

When such a hurdle, challenge, or setback or arises, the communications team must have immediate access to the people who have the accurate information needed to develop and disseminate the message key audiences will receive from the tribe. In the face of a crisis, it's never a question of whether or not to respond. The instant the crises hits, the critical question becomes "Are you going to get out in front with your message or wait until someone else tells the story?" As a general rule of crisis communications, the failure to make a decision will be perceived by the public as a negative decision. In order to "get out in front" of a crisis when it hits, the following timeline can serve as a general guideline for the communications team:

- First 12 hours—media are interested in *what* (be prepared to share the basic details of what happened)
- 12–24 hours—media ask *who* (be prepared to share information about the key players and their role in the situation)
- 24–36 hours—media ask *why* (be prepared to explain, justify, and/or accept responsibility as appropriate)
- 36–72 hours—media start evaluating response efforts

In today's world of real-time communications the story is old news after 72 hours. At that point, the communications team's primary focus becomes "closing" the crisis.

The moment a crisis arises, the communications team should bear the following guidelines in mind:

1) *The first priority is to bring the crisis under control.* This is critical in order to get ahead of the media. To meet this need and have an action plan in place, it's important to answer the following questions in advance:

- Who on the team is able to respond?
- Who can *best* respond?

2) *It's important to analyze the situation to judge its newsworthiness.* Not every crisis is newsworthy; however, for those that are, the team members responsible for responding in a crisis must mobilize quickly to:

- Ensure that they clearly understand the issues involved in order to develop key messages
- Determine who on the ground can respond and make sure those who assume that responsibility are communicating consistent messages in a unified voice.

3) *Never hesitate to report on bad news.* If you don't someone else will, and by default it will appear to the public as if you're covering it up.

Crisis Response Kit

It's inevitable that some unexpected wrinkle, hurdle, rumor, threat, or challenge will arise in the course of your project. Having a crisis response plan in place is the key to weathering the storm. Navigating the treacherous waters of crisis communications can feel daunting, but it is always less so if you approach the inevitable proactively and strategically. The following considerations are essential to developing a plan of action.

1) *Who are your messengers?*
   - Centralize information about your project so that the people who need access to key details can have the information at their fingertips to collaborate on formulating a response.
   - Identify in advance who on the team is the designated spokesperson and prep them before they speak to the media or share information via social media.
   - Consider not only who on the team is the best informed but also who can portray the story in the best possible light.
   - If there is more than one spokesperson, it's essential that messages be communicated consistently so that the tribe is speaking about the project in a unified voice.
2) *What are your messages?*
   - When thinking about response, consider what your key audiences are reasonably expecting to hear from you. Look at it from their perspective, not just the tribe's perspective.
   - Always tell the truth, but keep in mind you don't always have to tell everything. With the greatest possible level of transparency as a guiding principle, determine which details are essential to share and share them expediently so your version of the story is the one that gets told.
   - Don't say anything that can be used against you. You don't have to answer every question. It's OK to say "that's being investigated" while the team gathers the information needed to formulate an accurate and well-thought-out response.
   - Regular briefings are not always a good idea. If you don't have something new to say, don't schedule a briefing.

- Follow the news. Did they tell the truth? Were the reports accurate? Reward reporters who are fair and report responsibly. For those who don't, put them on notice: If you don't ask the right questions, we're not giving you the story. Let your media contacts know that thorough, accurate, and balanced reporting pays.
- Track information requests by who and when. This enables you to see and analyze how the crisis escalates (if it does).

Social Media and Crisis Communications

There is no getting around the fact that the rise of social media has resulted in a 24/7 media cycle. For the communications team, this presents a number of challenges, not the least of which is the drastic reduction in response time. What was once a two-hour window has narrowed to about 20 minutes. Compounding this is the reality that it's often a citizen journalist who is breaking the news about your project. Because citizen journalists aren't bound by the same set of standards and ethics as professional journalists, this makes it exponentially difficult to control the message and verify the source of the content. Despite these frustrations, social media is a powerful conduit for information sharing, and it is not going away. From a crisis management perspective, social media is like a megaphone—it can turn whispers of discontent into shouts. *Therefore, every tribe needs to have a social media plan integrated into its crisis communications plan.*

As you develop that plan out of necessity, it's valuable to consider the upside. Social media platforms give people a voice and choice. More than ever before, people from all walks of life are are empowered to both access and share information precisely how and when they want it. Social media can also give you a valuable opportunity to have a heads up. It's never a good idea to step into social media for the first time when a crisis is going on. If you monitor the various social media platforms, you can keep your finger on the pulse of the community and stay on top of what is being said, which allows you to get ahead of the game.

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General Social Media Best Practices

- Develop content that focuses on quality over quantity
- Deliver consistent messaging
- Establish and adhere to a set of social media policies
- Actively monitor and listen to comments from fans/followers
- Establish and adhere to standards and policies for conversing with fans/followers
- Avoid link spam
- Align social media activity with other communications strategies, tools, and tactics
- Provide fresh content by posting and updating frequently
- Stay on top of social media chatter related to your project by subscribing to Google Alerts

Responding to Social Media Crises

Social media crises come in all forms, but typically they fall into one of the following categories:

- Individual generated (someone involved in the project puts their foot in their mouth)
- Failure to deliver on a promise or expectation
- Hijacking of a campaign by project opponents
- Social media fail (someone communicating about the project makes a critical mistake on one or more social media channels)
- Organizational brain freeze (a fear-based knee-jerk reaction that has disastrous results)

Guidance for Responding to a Crisis via Social Media

Because it's important to respond quickly, one tactic for avoiding a crisis is to develop and disseminate a "holding statement." This lets key audiences know you intend to respond while buying your communications team valuable time to thoroughly assess and understand the situation so you can develop thoughtful and accurate messages that are in the best interests of the project and the tribe. When you are ready to and issue a formal statement, it's important to:

- Respond quickly by updating all websites and social media platforms with consistent messages
- Be polite, respectful, and level
- Correct inaccurate information
- Communicate what's being done to address the issue
- Provide offline contact info
- Don't censor criticism on social media channels (don't delete)
- Strive to listen and understand