

Crisis Communications Planning and Preparation: *What Every Organization Needs to Know & Why*

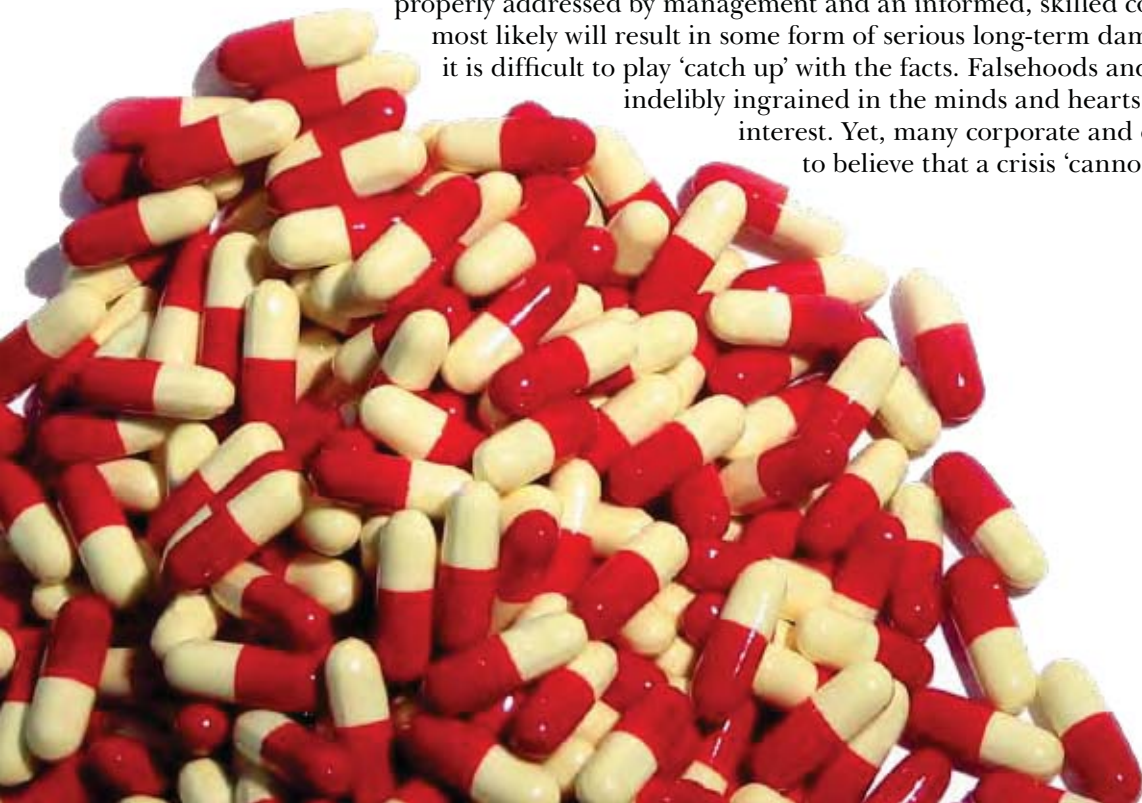
By Irene Maslowski

In today's world, things can go terribly wrong in a heartbeat for an organization or business. One need not think hard to call to mind examples of well-known disasters such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the tragedies surrounding Toyota's automobile recall, the BP oil spill, and revelations of corporate and political betrayals of trust. All of these shocking situations, no doubt, will continue to be in the public's mind as the media continues its coverage of sobering anniversaries and crises updates. While the tragedies, crises and scandals noted above have affected individuals, our nation, and the world, as well as and many companies and organizations, it does not take an event of this scale or magnitude to bring trouble to an organization's doorstep.

For most organizations, it is not a question of "if a crisis will occur," but when. Many readers of this article may be quick to think that a crisis for their organizations is a remote possibility, as they do not have major threats looming such as an oil spill or corporate embezzlement. What is important to understand is that a crisis does not have to be a large-scale scandal that receives worldwide attention for that event to be devastating. A simple, negative employee e-mail if circulated, can wreak havoc quickly by creating an atmosphere of mistrust, initiating a lack of respect for one or more employees and/or management level executives, and disrupting productivity, all of which can affect the overall culture and health of a company or organization.

A crisis is defined as any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of an organization. When a crisis occurs, adverse or negative media coverage is a specter that must be avoided, or, if circumstances have progressed too far, controlled. When a crisis is fairly or unfairly portrayed through uninformed word-of-mouth, in print, by broadcast media, or on the Internet, that crisis quickly can generate short-term problems and damage. When not immediately and properly addressed by management and an informed, skilled company spokesperson, that crisis most likely will result in some form of serious long-term damage. Once damage occurs, it is difficult to play 'catch up' with the facts. Falsehoods and negative fallout can become indelibly ingrained in the minds and hearts of the organization's publics of interest. Yet, many corporate and organizational leaders continue to believe that a crisis 'cannot, or will not happen to us.'

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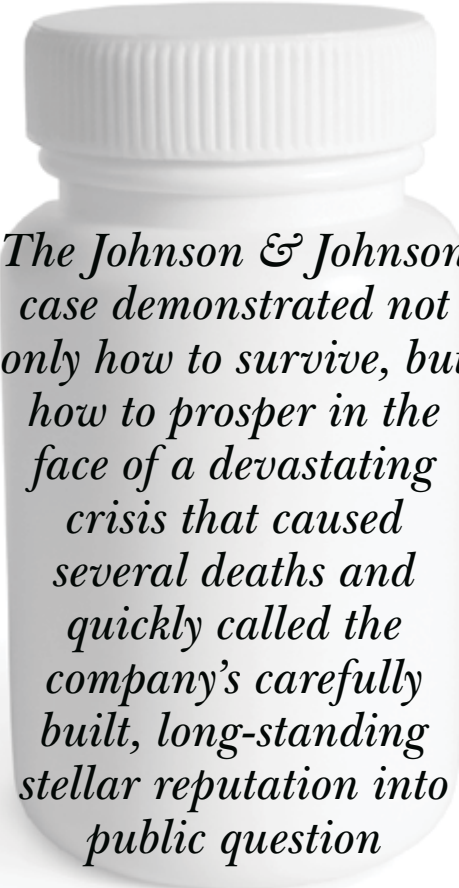
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Despite such beliefs, virtually every organization faces crisis-risk at some time. That risk can be in the form of a product recall, necessary downsizing, a strike, fire, chemical spill, or serious accident, or financial issues such as embezzlement. The degree to which an organization plans for and implements a crisis response, including how well it is prepared and able to communicate with significant publics, can determine its continued viability and future success.

Thinking about negative scenarios is unpleasant and sobering, but organizations can take heart: crisis damage can be minimized and, in some situations, such damage can even offer an opportunity to gain ground—but only when and if the crisis is handled properly. One of the models of crisis communications management in the world of strategic public relations was demonstrated during the infamous Tylenol tampering scare, now considered by many communications professionals to be a case study. The Johnson & Johnson case demonstrated not only how to survive, but how to prosper in the face of a devastating crisis that caused several deaths and quickly called the company's carefully built, long-standing stellar reputation into public question. The pharmaceutical giant instantly met its seemingly overwhelming crisis head-on by 1) implementing a carefully crafted plan already in place, and 2) developing new strategies to deal with emerging problems as the scandal unfolded. The result: J&J and its corporate brand reputation emerged from the Tylenol tampering crises in an even stronger position than it was prior to the crisis.

J & J's success in recovering from a potentially devastating situation was due in large part to the company's implementation of its in-place communications strategy. That strategy was simple, but also extremely effective. A cursory review of the action plan shows that:

- The crisis communications team instantly mobilized into action.
- The team immediately communicated with all significant publics.
- Management spoke with 'one voice,' with no conflicting information.



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- J&J told the truth clearly, coherently and honestly and did not withhold information.
- The corporation was pro-active in planning for reputation recovery during the crisis.

Conversely, organizations that have not handled crises well have had a much more difficult time recovering from an incident. Some never have done so. The 1989 Exxon Valdez oil-spill crisis case is a prime example of how an ineffective crisis communications strategy can be counter-productive and severely damage a well-known company with,

until that moment, a highly reputable worldwide brand. Unfortunately for Exxon, that devastating crisis and the handling of its aftermath caused many people to boycott Exxon products, and the negative response to Exxon's inability to take swift and proper action persists, to some degree, today.

It is true that not all crises are significant enough to be judged newsworthy by the media, and that media coverage of such events does not generally last long or necessarily result in negative long-range impacts. However, an organization's significant publics (consumers, donors, investors, employees) most likely will be as concerned as the media, or perhaps more so, about an occurring crisis because that crisis affects them. Since those significant publics keep an organization functioning properly, insuring that they are well informed about a crisis and what is being done to fix the problem at hand becomes paramount.

Having a good plan in place prior to a crisis, responding quickly when an issue arises, and demonstrating confidence and leadership during and after the event, are the critical elements necessary to ensure an organization's survival and healthy future. That combination of plan, response, confidence and leadership provides the best method to create and sustain credible rapport with the significant publics that determine an organization's success or failure.

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