



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING AND PREPARATION: THE KEY TOOL FOR MANAGING AND DEALING WITH RISK AND TAKING CONTROL

IRENE MASLOWSKI, APR

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 controlled. When a crisis is fairly or unfairly portrayed in print or broadcast media, or via uninformed word-of-mouth, it can quickly generate short-term problems and damage. When not properly addressed by a Crisis Communications Management Team (CCMT) headed by an informed and skilled spokesperson, serious long-term damage will result. Once that happens, it is difficult to play 'catch up' with the facts, and the negatives become indelibly ingrained in the minds and hearts of the organization's publics of interest.

Organizations can take heart: crisis damage can be minimized and, in some situations, even offers an opportunity to gain ground – but only when and if properly handled! The model of crisis communications management in the world of strategic public relations was demonstrated during the famed Tylenol tampering scare, a now classic 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 called its reputation into public question. The pharmaceutical giant met its biggest crisis head-on and instantly by implementing a carefully crafted plan that was already in place, developing new strategies to deal with emerging problems as the scenario unfolded. The result: J&J came through in an even stronger position than before the product-tampering incident.

The CCMT implemented a strategy that was simple but extremely effective. A cursory review of the action plan shows that:

- The Team instantly mobilized into action,
- They immediately communicated with all significant publics,
- Management spoke with 'one voice', with no conflicting or withheld information,
- J&J told the truth clearly, coherently and honestly,
- The corporation planned for reputation recovery throughout the crisis.

In today's world, something can go wrong at any time despite the best prevention and avoidance plans and protections. One needs not search very far to see examples: natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, the events of 9/11, the spinach recall, and a betrayal of trust by corporate and political leaders are all current in the public mind. All of these affected our nation, the world, and many, many organizations. For most, it is not a question of *if* a crisis will occur, but rather *when*.

Virtually every organization faces crisis-risk, whether it be a product recall or necessary downsizing of employees, a strike or fire, embezzlement or a chemical spill, a serious accident, *et al.* The degree that an organization plans for and implements its crisis response, including how well it communicates with significant publics, can determine the future of the organization.

Conversely, organizations that have not handled crises well have had a much more difficult time to recover and some never have. The Exxon Valdez case is a prime example of how ineffective and counter-productive crisis communications during a devastating oil-spill crisis severely damaged the organization. Unfortunately (for Exxon), this caused many people to boycott their products, and the negative reaction to Exxon's action persists to some degree today.

Not all crises are significant enough to be judged newsworthy by the media. Coverage of those events does not last for long, nor do they result in negative long-range impacts. However, an organization's significant publics of consumers, donors, investors and employees are even more concerned, and it is they that keep an organization functioning properly. Assuring they are all well informed about the crisis, and what is being done about it and how, is paramount.

Planning before a crisis hits, responding quickly when it does, and demonstrating confidence and leadership during and after, are the critical elements necessary to ensure an organization's survival and healthy future. That combination provides the best method to create and sustain credible rapport with the significant publics that determine an organization's success or failure.



"You have a major fiasco at 10:30, followed by a shocking scandal at 2:15."

TEN TIPS TO HANDLE A CRISIS

- ① Speak with one voice. Assign an official spokesperson to deliver the message to your publics.
- ② Never lie. If you don't have an answer, tell your audience you will get back to them when further information becomes available, but make sure you do.
- ③ Monitor what is being said about your organization by the media and others during the crisis so you can correct any misinformation.
- ④ Never say "off the record" to the press or others. Anything said verbally may be misconstrued and repeated in a manner in which you did not intend.
- ⑤ Maintain a consistent message.
- ⑥ Organize your crisis plan and team *before* a crisis not *during*.
- ⑦ Hold regular briefings for the media and your significant audiences.
- ⑧ Establish a Command Center.
- ⑨ Conduct media training for those who will be official spokesperson(s).
- ⑩ Eliminate the mindset that "It can't or won't happen to us"!

CLIENT NEWS: 2007 HIGHLIGHTS

Maslowski & Associates worked with **Liberty Hall Museum/Kean University** to bring The Moving Wall, a replica of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., to the grounds of Liberty Hall in spring of 2007. The weeklong exhibition brought over 1800 visitors to the site, in spite of pouring rain and cool weather. The event touched many people who had lost a loved one or who served in the conflict by providing a healing experience or an opportunity to say goodbye one last time. Many members of the media were on hand, resulting in several television programs and extensive print coverage. *The Star-Ledger* worked closely with M & A on site for the entire five days, and created an online video shown through NJ.com, which contained several interviews with veterans, school children, and governing officials and others who expressed their experiences and memories.

M & A assisted Weber Shandwick/Fitzgerald & Co. with the opening of **Maggiano's** in Riverside Square in Hackensack, NJ. Maggiano's is the classy chain of Italian Restaurants serving an extraordinary cuisine. Over 500 guests attended the private grand opening party, which included members of the media, governing officials, and other dignitaries.

The M & A team conducted several campaigns for **Bacharach Institute of Rehabilitation** in Pomona, NJ to raise awareness

during National Stroke Month and National Physical Therapy Month. The campaign included on site educational events and community outreach programs that were well attended. Media coverage was substantial and included feature stories in local press including *The Press of Atlantic City*.

Irene Maslowski, principal of M & A, conducted a training workshop at **the National League of Cities** annual conference in Washington DC in March on crisis communications. The program was attended by city managers, mayors and elected officials from throughout the United States with an objective of helping them to recognize the need for crisis communication planning before a disaster occurs; how to create a plan; and how to implement it.

Maslowski & Associates handled the public relations and media outreach for the **New Jersey Wine & Food Classic at Fairleigh Dickinson University** in April. The three-day event featured fine wines from over 50 wineries and 10 restaurants at the Grand Tasting; a day of lectures and seminars on wine; and an evening of private dinners and wine tasting. The event raises scholarship monies for students in the culinary program at the Fairleigh Dickinson campus in Madison.

LISTENING: THE LOST ART

IRENE MASLOWSKI, APR

There are few people who would question the power of technology in today's world, especially when it comes to communications. Certainly, the web has brought the world much closer and suddenly it's not such a big world after all. We receive breaking news in a split second via the Internet without turning on the TV. Cell phones, Blackberries and other personal devices have paralleled American Express's slogan "Don't leave home without it." And it appears that most of us never do (leave home without them, that is).

So with all this technology, it would seem that we're never out of touch with each other, or are we? I think differently. I am the first one to admit that I am an e-mail junkie and my cell phone is never turned off. I find it hard not to check my messages, even on the weekend. I love what the web has done for business and the fact that I can work with clients all over the country and the world. The possibilities of where we can go are endless. I can support the economy by shopping online from stores I could never get to because they are halfway around the world, and I share photos of my family with friends who I don't see regularly. Thus, technology has become a staple in our lives and that's a good thing. Certainly from an informational and safety standpoint, few would argue its value.

What I believe is not a good thing is the loss of the basic intrinsic value of being able to communicate as human beings. Ironically, we have the ability to communicate more, yet it seems as if we are doing it less. What's also ironic is the fact that for most of us, relationships with others are of extreme importance—both on a personal as well as a business level. So many people are searching for that soul mate or dream job or client. Thus, it would appear that we are caught up in a dichotomy of sorts—even though we've been handed tools that would enhance or advocate greater communication. Instead, as a society we have lost the ability to make those relationships come alive by interacting as we were meant to.

I don't have all the answers as to why we're at this juncture. I can only speculate and share my observations and thoughts. I think we've become immune because we don't have as much face-to-face interaction as we once did and, sadly, we're not as courteous to each other as we once were. It's easy to hide behind a laptop and deliver bad news via an e-mail rather than picking up the phone or doing it in person, or not bothering to reply to an e-mail because we don't have an answer to the sender's question at that moment. What ever happened to jotting off a quick response of "I don't have the information yet but will get back to you when I do"? How often have we been in a public setting and cell phones continually ring, even though the speaker asked to have them turned off, or sat in a meeting only to be interrupted by someone who needs to get their point across first?

Technology is a wonderful thing — I'll never advocate stopping that, but I still get the greatest thrill from the connection that comes from more basic communication like thoughtfulness and good manners. Like from someone who takes the time to send me a personal thank you for something I did, or telling me how much he or she enjoyed meeting me. Or, when I'm in conversation and I believe the person I am speaking with truly has an interest in what I have to say. Or, when I get a phone call from a colleague or friend who'd rather hear my voice, or a client who wants to tell me I did a good job.

Let's bring back reliability and credibility back to the way we communicate with each other. The world is a complicated place and much of what happens is out of our control. But how we interact with each other, like so many things, begins with a single action and is within our control. Taking the time to extend a personal touch and use compassion and consideration as we communicate creates warmth, bonding and trust—things technology will never be able to duplicate or replace.

WRITE SIMPLY – LIKE YOU SPEAK

JACK APPLEMAN, CBC

Ever notice that some people who speak so well struggle with writing? Their spoken words are clear and direct—but ask them to put their thoughts on paper and a funny thing happens: Those superb communication skills vanish—leaving their text wordy, stuffy and filled with redundancies!

If you fall into this category and would like to write as well as you speak, try this: Before starting your next document,

imagine that your boss is phoning from the airport and has only one minute to hear what you're about to write. You'd be forced to be concise and immediately state the most important point—which is how you should approach every document. Because though most people who read your writing don't have to board planes in 60 seconds, they're still inpatient.

So get to the point quickly!

WHO WE ARE, HOW WE WORK

Maslowski & Associates Public Relations was formed in 1988 to provide strategic public relations planning and consulting to businesses, non-profits and manufacturers, and to governmental, corporate, and consumer product clients.

We are a team of seasoned associates whose experience stems from the corporate, agency, and non-profit sectors. Members include public relations strategists, account execs, writers, advertising and creative directors, branding specialists, and crisis communication practitioners.

Over the years, we have helped our clients to communicate successfully with their publics and audiences and to gain positive public awareness and engagement. We work aggressively with all media outlets and other sources to secure maximum press exposure and public recognition for our clients, and take a thorough and creative approach to creating a solid and individual public relations plan, beginning with research, planning, strategies, and creation of vehicles and tactics, to evaluation.

Our client work has been broad-based and has allowed us to develop experience within different industries. We believe that this has been instrumental in our success, as we are able to view the world —and approach public relations challenges —from different perspectives.

In addition to working with clients directly, we also assist the in-house public relations departments of corporations, organizations, and larger public relations agencies as well as advertising agencies.

SERVICES OFFERED

- Strategic Public Relations Planning and Consultation
- Media Relations
- Community Relations
- Special Events
- Media Training, Speechwriting, Communications Training

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