

STANDALONE PR CRISIS PLANS ARE A NO-NO!

While those South African companies that have enterprise-wide crisis communication plans are taking responsible steps to protect themselves against potential emergencies, many are not aware that their crisis communication plans should integrate into a variety of other company policies and strategies.

“Essentially, by integrating a host of important plans, you are plugging any holes that would have allowed significant events or crises to slip through the cracks and only be identified when it is too late,” says Evan Bloom, MD of the Crisis Communications Consultancy.

As corporate governance grows in importance in South Africa, more and more companies are going to be held accountable for not communicating as soon as an issue or crisis is identified.

In light of this, the following plans need to be integrated into an enterprise-wide crisis communications plan:

Customer relationship management (CRM)

CRM is more than a software package to manage a company's interaction with its customer base. It is a holistic strategy that has a core goal of enhancing a customer's relationship with a company, its employees, products, goods, services and brand/s. When a company mismanages its relationships with its customers by not listening to their complaints and queries, not taking the necessary action at the right time, or not delivering on its promises, it automatically puts itself at risk.

All CRM systems must have an information channel or escalation strategy that allows serious customer complaints, issues and queries to reach a member of the crisis management team. This team member will be able to identify an issue or emerging crisis and order the appropriate steps to be taken as per the CRM crisis aspect in the company's crisis management plan. In an ideal world, a customer-centric company would never allow customer issues and complaints to spiral out of control.

Customer service and call centres

As soon as something goes wrong, a member of the public will pick up the phone and call a company to complain. In most cases, they will phone a call centre or send an e-mail, some will even fax to register their complaints. In all cases, what the public want is someone to receive their complaint, listen to it, empathise and tell them what will be done to rectify the situation. Where this all comes apart is when no action occurs or when the customer is not kept updated as to how their complaint is being handled. A link needs to be established to the crisis communications team that will red flag certain types

of complaints and issues. When the flag is raised, the team will have the appropriate training and skills to know when and how to activate the appropriate section in the crisis management plan. This will ensure that issues and complaints are not only given the necessary attention, but are tracked and followed until they are successfully resolved. Problems happen when a solvable issue is not managed correctly and continues to fester until finally, when management get to hear about it, it is already a full blown crisis.

Enterprise risk management (ERM)

Responsible companies will have an ERM framework that is made up of solutions, policies and strategies that help it manage its day-to-day operational risk. What ERM also does is it protects customers, suppliers, staff and the company from potential harm. The ERM plan must have a crisis component that allows the crisis management team to be alerted as soon as key risks pop up onto the company risk radar so that the necessary communications can be rolled out. For example, all companies must protect their databases and should allow only key people access to these critical components of the company. As soon as an unauthorised attempt to access or copy a database is picked up, the company must move to identify the unscrupulous individuals trying their luck and take action. At the same time, the crisis management team must also be informed so that the necessary action can be taken, as per the ERM aspect in the crisis management plan, to communicate immediately, openly and honestly both internally and externally.

Business continuity

Many South African companies have business continuity as one of their key business strategies and requirements. Business continuity refers to the plans, policies, strategies and actions companies need to have in place before a critical event happens to ensure the business can either partially or totally recover to normal operations in as short a time as possible. Some companies have offsite recovery centres where core staff can relocate to in a major incident and the company's IT systems can be accessed to allow as close to normal operations as possible. One of the fundamentals of business continuity is crisis communications. As soon as a significant event that stops the company from operating for a period of time happens, the media, customers, suppliers, partners and shareholders (if the company is public) will need to be communicated with proactively and consistently throughout the event. Companies that have a business continuity plan must integrate it with their general crisis communications plan to ensure that rapid and proactive communication occurs during all eventualities.

Human resource management (HR)

A company's HR department is responsible for everything related to its employees, from the board right the way down to casual labour. The HR department is involved in employee and management counselling, training and development, hiring, layoffs, dismissals, disciplinary processes, medical aid and pensions, dealing with organised labour and integrating into everyday life in the company. With all these critical functions it is easy to see that an HR crisis can potentially rock or destabilise a company. In light of this, crisis management plans must incorporate the eventualities that an HR department

could face. As soon as an event happens that could develop into a crisis or is a crisis, the crisis management team must be automatically notified so that they can take action and start communicating.

So how do you identify what areas of risk require planning and need to be integrated into the enterprise-wide crisis management plan? “A company needs to initiate two important exercises, the first is a vulnerability audit which will help to identify the areas of risk in its various departments and business disciplines,” adds Bloom. “The second is a scenario planning exercise which must be held for all departments to help identify all relevant scenarios that must be prepared for.”

An integrated crisis communications plan will go a long way in helping to protect a company during a crisis.

Further information:

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