

## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOR THE SME**

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While many small to medium sized enterprises (SME) are focused on building their businesses and widening their service offerings, few ever consider how they would manage a public relations crisis that could literally put them out of business.

The importance of being crisis management ready from a public relations (PR) perspective is being driven by a number of factors. These include consumers who are not afraid to exercise their legal rights, increasing business legislation in the fields of governance and compliance and an independent media who will cover "bad news."

Based on this, it has become imperative that SME businesses know how to communicate about issues that will impact heavily on their daily operations, potentially generate negative publicity and start rumour mongering both internally and up and down their supply chain.

### **Where does the SME start?**

Effective crisis management can not work without the presence of a simple to implement crisis management plan. The process begins with an exercise that involves a group of senior employees gathered from across the SME representing all different departments. The following questions need to be asked and the answers documented:

- What issues does our company face on a daily basis?
- What events would we consider as a crisis?
- What crises have happened to our company in the past?

### **Who should be on a crisis management team?**

Now that it is known which crises could face the SME, a crisis management team needs to be selected. Typically it includes the MD, and the various heads of the following departments: IT, finance, legal affairs, marketing, HR and customer relations. If an SME does not have all these departments then its crisis management team must comprise of selected senior staff. External consultants and specialists can be included if necessary.

### **The spokesperson**

One member of the crisis management team should act as a consistent spokesperson on behalf of the company. This person must be well versed in all aspects of the company and have full knowledge of its day to day functioning, products, solutions and supply chain.

### **Crisis readiness**

After the crisis management team has been put together with a spokesperson and all potential crises are identified, the crisis management team needs to get itself crisis ready. This is accomplished in four steps:

#### **1. Prepared statements**

Once the different crisis types have been identified, a series of template statements for each must be developed so that if a situation occurs the necessary comments are ready. Allowance must be made for key facts of the crisis to be added in prior to dissemination. Statements to communicate with key clients and suppliers must also be created.

#### **2. Collateral materials**

A detailed collateral file needs to be created. This needs to include a series of company specific documents and photographs of spokespeople that can be made into press packs and sent out to journalists.

#### **3. Roles and responsibilities**

Each person on the crisis team needs to have particular roles and responsibilities that they have to take ownership of for the duration of the crisis. Typically it should be in their area of competency.

#### **4. Contact list**

The whole objective of having a contact list is to be able to get hold of any crisis team member anytime and anywhere. The list must include all home, work, fax, e-mail addresses and mobile numbers. It must be continuously updated.

### **Put together the actual crisis plan**

The crisis plan needs to exist as a complete document in both soft and hard copy. A crisis plan is never deemed as 'final.' It must be continuously updated as situations and the environment in which the organisation operates undergoes particular changes.

### **Media training**

The spokesperson needs to communicate consistently for the duration of the crisis and needs to be intensely media trained. Having the 'gift of the gab' does not mean someone is able to talk to the media, particularly in a crisis. The spokesperson needs to understand how to deliver targeted messages for radio, TV, print and Internet publications as well as dealing with tough questions and difficult reporters.

It is also recommended that the entire crisis management team is also media trained as a contingency should the spokesperson be in a situation where he/she can not be interviewed immediately.

### **Last but not least**

Practice, practice, practice! All crisis teams need to practice regularly for all the incidences that they have identified. Typically a crisis practice exercise should be held twice to three times per year. Being well prepared includes being well drilled and focused.

Remember the old adage, "If you fail to plan then you plan to fail."

### **Further media information:**

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