

CRISIS MANAGEMENT'S 10 CRITICAL COMMANDMENTS

The past few months has seen South African business and government dealing with a vast number of crises, some self-inflicted, many occurring due to uncontrollable factors. These include the recurring power outages, the countrywide labour strike, product recalls from Royal Canin, the eNatis fiasco, the Soweto Monorail debacle and major corporate governance infringements.

“A common thread runs through all these crises – either total lack of preparedness or some form of preparedness that did not ‘go all the way’ and cover all the bases,” says Evan Bloom, MD of the Crisis Communications Consultancy.

Bloom lists the 10 commandments that form the basis of a solid crisis management framework as follows:

1. You shall always have a crisis plan and keep it handy

Responsible management and practitioners of good corporate governance in South Africa ensure that their companies and organisations have a fully fledged PR crisis plan that deals with all eventualities. The plan must be based on a bespoke vulnerability and risk audit and scenario planning, and must integrate into an organisation's supply chain and business continuity plans.

2. You shall tell it all, tell it fast and tell it honestly

There are three cardinal rules in PR crisis communications: as soon as something happens tell it all, tell it fast and tell it honestly. By following these rules you will immediately control the message. Keeping quiet and letting the press, staff or clients break the news will immediately make you lose control. As updated information and facts become available, disseminate these widely. It is advisable in most, but not all, situations to let your staff have access to the facts before it is released to the outside world. Obviously, in certain circumstances specific types of information must not be made available immediately; you must, however, tell the media and wider public why this information cannot be made available.

3. You shall stare the devil down and be brave

When a crisis hits, many company executives practice ostrich management, either burying their heads in the sand or trying to sidestep the issues at hand and hoping the crisis will go away. Reality paints a different picture. The best way to manage a crisis is to meet it head on and do whatever it takes to protect your brand and retain as much public trust as possible. While proactive crisis management can sometimes turn a crisis into an opportunity, the pursuit of the opportunity must not be the overarching objective.

4. You shall love the media and embrace them

During a crisis, the media are mistakenly seen by many as the enemy. They are not! The media must be seen as a conduit to get messaging and information out to all publics, both internal and external to the company or organisation in crisis. Irrespective of the type of news that needs to be communicated, the media must be seen as a critical information destination.

5. You shall communicate widely and consistently

As soon as it becomes apparent that a crisis has occurred or is likely to occur, all the necessary facts must immediately be collected and collated. Once the facts have been digested, information and messaging must be formulated and the company spokesperson should first communicate internally to all staff and then externally to the media, clients, suppliers, shareholders and local communities. In certain circumstances it will be necessary to break the news to internal and external audiences at the same time. Updates must be regularly fed to all audiences and messaging must be consistent. If there is no news at the time of the next update, then this must also be communicated. The reason is simple: when companies and organisations in crisis say nothing, the media and other recipients may start to think that there is a deliberate attempt to stop communication or manipulate it. Above all, the words “no comment” must never ever be uttered. If no information can be made public then the reason why it can not be made public must be communicated.

6. You shall have a crisis management team

A crisis management team forms a critical part of dealing with the issues at hand. They bring expertise and different types of knowledge and problem-solving skills to the situation. Typically, the crisis management team is made up of a cross-section of senior managers from across the

company or organisation. Allowance must be made for external consultants who can form part of the greater crisis team; these include lawyers, engineers, psychologists and ministers of religion. The entire crisis management team and the external consultants must be media and crisis trained. In addition, the crisis management team must have a designated crisis operations centre from which it can manage the crisis.

7. You shall practice and train and you shall like it

One of the key ways to become crisis ready is to hold regular crisis practice exercises. The Crisis Communications Consultancy advises its clients to hold at least two exercises per year. It is only through these drills that weaknesses in the crisis plan can be identified and strengthened. In addition, the exercises hone the skills of the crisis team members so that when an incident happens everyone is focused, knows their roles and what is required of them. Practice exercises are also important because if one team member is ill or unable to get to the crisis team, fellow crisis team members will know exactly what needs to be done to plug any gaps.

8. You shall have a spokesperson and use them consistently

Nothing is more damaging in a crisis situation than constantly changing the spokesperson. The media and the wider public will interpret this as a sign of a deeper crisis occurring behind the scenes. The spokesperson should be chosen based on their seniority, industry and corporate knowledge, media skills and ability to engage the public and engender a feeling of trust and understanding. In most circumstances, the spokesperson will be the CEO or MD of a company as they would have these skills anyway. Depending on the circumstances of the crisis, the spokesperson may have to share centre stage with various third parties who have been called in to help manage the situation, including police, doctors, forensic experts, lawyers and accountants.

9. You shall refuse temptation to speculate and muddy the waters

Company spokespeople are tempted to either speculate as to why something happened or, as a strategy, to make things appear unclear, simply because they want the wider public's and the media's attention to be taken away from them. This is dangerous because when the real facts are exposed the company may face a second crisis – that of trying to explain why it made certain statements before official findings were made public. Spokespeople should simply say what they know, not what they think or what they want the market to know.

10. You shall show emotion and empathy

Crisis management is not just about standing up and communicating and then giving an update an hour or day later. It's also about emotion, showing that you care, that you empathise with the people feeling pain, and that you understand their position. If a spokesperson or company representative appears cold, unemotional and stony faced, it can portray the company and its brands as insincere, uncaring and totally devoid of empathy. Even in the most difficult circumstances, simple gestures and reassuring comments of commitment to sort out the problem or statements of condolences will go a long way to reassure the greater public. By the same token, overdoing the dramatic stuff will make a company look insincere or seem as though it is trying to hide something.

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