

Turney's Tips:

Performing public relations during a crisis

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Underlying assumptions:

Public relations practitioners play a crucial role in crises, the same role they have every day: maintaining and improving their organization's relationships by effectively communicating with its target audiences.

Public relations practitioners are not normally responsible for resolving the underlying problem(s) that created a crisis situation. They cannot independently determine their organization's actions.

A public relations unit's goal during a crisis is to get the organization through the situation with as little damage to its reputation, credibility, and key relationships as possible. In some cases, — e.g., Tylenol — effective crisis communication can actually enhance an organization's reputation.

Although crises demand immediate responses, public relations practitioners need to maintain a long-term perspective that aims to enhance long-lasting relationships with important publics. Sometimes this requires unpleasant or painful, short-term actions.

A crisis communication plan facilitates rapid responses:

- Plan for and be prepared to deal with the worst possible situation. If a lesser problem arises, you can easily scale-back to handle it, but trying to cope with something worse than anticipated is difficult.
- Determine who will do what and where each person should report if a crisis occurs. For explanations of possible roles and locations, see *Six Steps to Preparing a Rudimentary Crisis Communication Plan*. Identify one or more back-up people for every position in case the first choice isn't available, and plan for at least the following positions:
 - *liaison with crisis managers* who are working to resolve the crisis;
 - *official spokesperson*
 - *on-the scene monitor*
 - *e-mail and call-screeners* to handle and route incoming crisis-related messages;
 - *media facilitators*
 - *employee liaison* to keep employees informed.
- Distribute copies of the plan so it is instantly accessible to everyone named in it. Those occupying key positions should have copies of the plan, relevant fact sheets, contact lists, and a kit of necessary supplies so they can begin to operate from home or a remote location as quickly as possible.
- Periodically review and update the plan. Be sure updates are distributed to all designated players and that outdated versions are collected and destroyed.
- Plan so that critical support services aren't inadvertently cut off. E.g., don't let incoming phone calls go unanswered because the switchboard closes at 5 p.m. and no one asked the operators to work overtime, or don't let all the building's lights and heat shut down because they're on a timer.

Working tips to RATCHET down a crisis when it hits:

R ecognize	Recognize and fully admit the critical situation your organization is facing. Don't deny what's happening, and don't expect it to disappear if you ignore it.
A ssess	Assess the situation as thoroughly as time and resources permit while you decide and plan what needs to be said to whom and in what ways.
T arget	Target your organization's most important audiences and develop specific messages that directly addresses the crisis' likely impact on each of them.
C ommunicate	Communicate. Convey your messages to each target audience and listen carefully to their reactions. Repeat and/or revise these messages as needed.
H eed	Heed direct audience responses and any other feedback. What your publics want to hear from you is more important than what you want to say.
E valuate	Evaluate your evolving status. Do your key publics currently share your view of the crisis? Is it still a crisis, or have you reached your crisis management goals?
T ransition	Transition back to a non-crisis communication mode, if appropriate. Otherwise, return to the " <i>Recognizing</i> " step and repeat the RATCHET cycle.

- ▶ Keep yourself and all of your organization's employees focused on the organization's mission and on the needs of its key publics so critical audiences don't get overlooked in the excitement.
- ▶ Promptly inform employees and other internal audiences about what's happening and keep them as up to date as possible to minimize and counteract inaccurate rumors.
- ▶ Respond quickly and forcefully, but don't be so eager to communicate that you do so without thinking. Remember Wyatt Earp's advice on gunfights: "Take your time quickly and aim carefully."
- ▶ Be as candid and open as possible. Don't needlessly withhold information, and don't minimize or underestimate the seriousness of the situation. Above all, don't lie!
- ▶ Monitor as many media as possible while the crisis is in progress and afterward. If erroneous information is reported, try to correct it as quickly as possible
- ▶ Don't expect a dispassionate recital of facts to counter anger, fear, or other intense personal perceptions. Facts are often overshadowed by emotion and perception. Respond to emotion with emotion and to logic with logic; don't try to fight an emotional argument with logic.
- ▶ Get the crisis resolved and out of the public eye as quickly as possible. Studies have shown that the longer an individual or an organization is perceived as being "in crisis" the more negative media coverage and public opinion becomes.

For additional information:

Six Steps to Preparing a Rudimentary Crisis Communication Plan on the Web as a section of **Online Readings in Public Relations** by Michael Turney:
<www.nku.edu/~turney/prclass/tips/crisis_planning.pdf>.