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Q&A

Crisis Manager

You will be giving a talk to the Post University Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship on Sept. 22. In a previous presentation on crisis communication, you said, "Events that create crises are usually those which most people have trouble taking seriously." You say they have low probability but a high cost. What types of events are these? How can companies prepare for events that have a low probability of happening?

Often these are events that start small, for example, a few customer complaints about a product not working, or rumors that a particular executive is getting a little too "friendly" with subordinates. Companies can prepare by doing a systematic and realistic study of the places in which they are vulnerable and the environment in which their businesses exist. When we do crisis plans, we do an exercise called "Crisis Spotting" in which we encourage clients to list the overall categories of potential crisis risk (personnel-related, product-related, environment related and industry-related, for example). Then we run a brainstorming session where we ask them to envision specific incidents that could occur and place a probability on each of them. The idea is to bring these things out into the open so you can recognize them when they begin to manifest themselves.

One of your Ten Commandments of Crisis Communications states that "the faster the response, the faster the story dissipates." Why is that? Does the media have a short attention span? Or

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does the media gets its back up when it seems to be shut out?

The longer a story lingers (think the cause of Michael Jackson's death) the more opportunity for people to use their imaginations, to conjecture and wonder, "Why aren't they taking this seriously enough to do something about it?" The media's attention span is in direct proportion to the public's. So, long conjecture leads to stories that linger so long that even the messengers tire of it (again, MJ. There is no question that closed doors (physical or verbal) spark everyone's interest and since it's the media's job to find out why those doors are closed, you can definitely expect them to cause reporters and bloggers to wonder why.

Here's an amazing statistic you quote: 40 percent of companies hit by disaster go out of business within five

years. Why is that? Do they totally lose public confidence?

It's because they downplay the impact of the crisis, refuse to monitor its impact on its target audiences, respond defensively when challenged and do nothing proactively to regain the trust of key publics. In short, they don't take control of their own reputation so the marketplace does it for them. If you're not willing to manage your own reputation, chances are you'll be sorry when someone else does it, especially if they are angry about the outcome of a crisis. The problem starts with an arrogant view of your company and its place in the market.

One of your external tools mentions dark pages on the Web site. What are those?

These are pre-built pages to respond to a crisis that are not linked to the main site until needed. For example, airlines have a dark page on every plane they fly, including layout, crew size and capacity. When a particular plane crashes and they know reporters will need this information, they can quickly link them to their main site.

Are companies taking down Web sites at times of crises?

No, but traffic has been known to overload a site and take it down. That's why some companies have created pared down Web sites in the face of crises that load faster and give the basics that someone needs to know. Virginia Tech did that after their tragedy to respond to high traffic and get people information quickly. ■