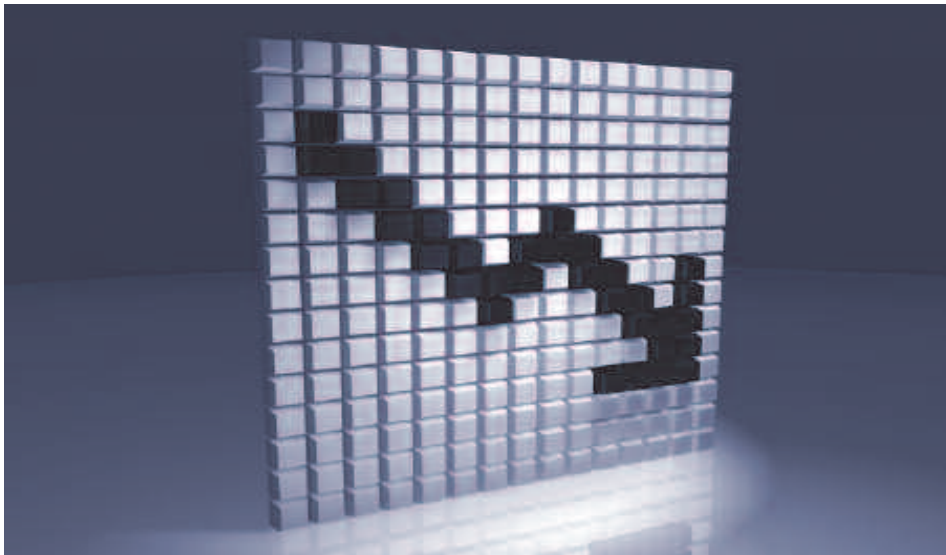


Prepare your company for crisis

By Jason Mudd, APR and Jonathan Bernstein

If you've been paying attention to recent events, you know that a crisis can strike any business at any time. Don't think for a moment that it can't happen to you. Enron didn't expect to make scandalous headlines.



Natural and manmade disasters happen all the time and often without notice. No one knows when or if events like the September 11 terrorist attacks, SARS outbreak, anthrax scare, a tornado or accident may occur. In these times, every business in every community must be prepared. Otherwise, you risk the possibility that the media will drag your company through the ringer and allow the public to judge you by scandalous front-page headlines.

Even if it's not a scandal, there could be devastating results that stop operations for an extended period. No one hopes for or expects such tragedies, but you never know. Preparation is essential. The following steps are great tips for forming a crisis communications plan for your business.

Use these 10 steps to gain the advantage and prepare for the worst.

1. Identify your crisis communications team — a small group of senior executives. Ideally, the company CEO leads with the top public relations executive, and legal counsel serve as chief advisers.

2. Identify spokespersons. They are the only people authorized to speak for the company in times of crisis. Some executives are brilliant at business, but not very effective communicators.

3. Spokesperson training. Well-intentioned executives believe they don't need professional training on speaking to the media. Beware. Aggressive reporting and not knowing how to get "the most important news" across to the interviewer can devastate your company.

4. Establish communications protocols. Establish an emergency communications "tree" and distribute it to all company employees, informing them of what to do and who to call if there's an actual or potential crisis.

5. Identify and know your audiences — internal and external. Remember your employees, the community, media, customers, private investors, SEC requirements and regulatory agencies.

6. Anticipate crises. Be proactive and brainstorm potential crises. Modifying existing methods of operation often can prevent crises. Take time to plan layoffs,

acquisitions and other news to avoid operating in crisis mode.

7. Assess the situation. Reacting without adequate information is a classic "shoot first and ask questions later" scenario. With proper planning, you can follow your own crisis plan.

8. Identify key messages. Keep it simple with no more than three main messages for all audiences and a few messages targeted specifically at key audiences.

9. Decide on communications methods. Brief employees, clients, prospects and investors personally or send e-mails, letters, newsletters or faxed messages. Distribute news releases, send letters or hold briefings and news conferences for the media.

10. Ride out the storm. Some of your audiences will not react the way you want. Take an objective look at the reactions. Decide if making additional communication is worth the effort.

By following these steps, you create a plan that can be used at any time in the event of a crisis. Provide copies to all department heads and managers. Keep copies of this plan available in hard copy and on the computer network. Once your plan is developed, keep it handy for review and schedule practice drills. Having a mock crisis helps you prepare for the real thing. The crisis team should meet twice a year to review and update the plan. The team should also evaluate the plan after each mock crisis.

Jason Mudd, APR, chief executive of AXIA Public Relations and Marketing, is an award-winning public relations practitioner who has authored more than 250 articles. He has appeared internationally as a crisis communications expert on ABC and NBC news affiliates, The Holmes Report and in The Sacramento Bee and The Business Journal, among others. Reach Jason at jmudd@axia.net or (866) 999-AXIA.

