

The Five Most Common Mistakes in Crisis Planning and How to Avoid Them – And Some Personal Examples Too

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Mistake 1: Developing a crisis plan for a worst-case scenario and not being prepared for the more-likely-to- happen situations.

- Ex: Snow storm in Buffalo, NY, on Oct. 12-13, 2006, and how we handled it.
- Ex: Anthrax scare on New Year's Eve at Rochester General Hospital.
 - Dr. Shmigel interview w/Fox News and how he was informed
 - How we handled afterward = Another fun, short-staffed holiday.

Mistake 2: Not having the appropriate safety nets in place to identify and address a situation before it escalates into a crisis.

- Ex: Pepper Spray at Excellus BCBS Headquarters:
 - March 10, 2004 - an employee in Customer Service did not heed Mom's advice "don't touch stuff that doesn't belong to you" and set off a personal pepper spray container on a key chain since it "looked like a flashlight."
 - Employees SHOULD have called building facility staff and/or Security, but instead called 911 - which brought ambulance, fire department, police, and radio and TV crews who were listening to their scanners.
 - 42 people with symptoms, 7 taken to hospital, 5 more treated on scene, 30 went back to work when air cleaning units did what they were designed to do.

- We issued internal e-mail and external press release with the details later that day (hindsight: employee memo should have been sent a bit quicker, even with most basic 'no harm to most of building - safe to keep working' memo).
- We (HR) sent a reminder to staff that call to internal resources a good choice next time.

Mistake 3: Assuming that the company spokesperson can respond on key in a crisis situation without media training.

- Ex: We have trained communications staff in all of our media markets, so that we can be both media responsive and corporately strategic.
- Ex: We do media training at least every two years with key leaders and other content experts to develop a 'deep bench' of talented interviewees.
- Ex: Reinforce the 'one voice' policy that we have and why.
 - Rule: "don't say anything to anyone that you wouldn't want your Mother, and 250,000 other people, to read on page 1 of your local paper. That's what CorpComm is for – to field questions and assist in with best answer on behalf of the corporation.
- Ex: **Sago Mine** situation.
 - Don't go with CEO first - can't go any higher if you oops. You may still choose to go with your 'Top Dawg' as Joe Trahan says, but you should have some well-trained 'Deputy Dawgs' to spell them and share the load/burden.
 - Get facts or clarifications out immediately.
 - Know the news cycle and key deadlines.

Mistake 4: Not providing employees with the information they may need to respond to inquiries both in and out of the workplace.

- Ex: We e-mail press releases and necessary speaking points to employees prior to most media communications – we don't expect our employees to answer media

questions, but they should be able to effectively answer their neighbors while at Wegmans if asked.

Mistake 5: Developing a crisis plan and putting it on a shelf without testing its feasibility.

- Ex: We've taken our somewhat static Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) for each business unit and have now run tabletop exercises with the added pandemic flu scenario tossed in. Our pandemic flu steering committee meets monthly, and that interaction was the key to successfully handling weather-related business closures in the fall and winter of 2006-07.

Source for Five Mistakes: Public Relations Tactics, Fallin, Sherri, 2/2005

Other items to consider:

Crisis Management Guidelines

- 1) Communicate accurately and openly about the crisis, and maintain openness with stakeholders.
- 2) Communicate quickly to maintain a proactive response to the crisis.
- 3) Maintain flexibility consistent with the relative levels of uncertainty and ambiguity.
- 4) Closely monitor reactions in the media and from various stakeholder groups.
- 5) Maintain consistency of message with a credible designated spokesperson, usually the CEO.
- 6) Use a crisis management team to coordinate and assess the crisis response.
- 7) Engage in crisis planning to create and maintain a crisis response capability.
- 8) Work to establish positive stakeholder relations and corporate image prior to the crisis.

(Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer in Heath, 2001, p 163)