

## Crisis Management

Crisis management began back in 1923, in a piece of PR literature titled 'Crystallising Public Opinion' (Edward Bernays). A crisis can be defined as 'any action or failure to act that significantly interferes with an organisation's ongoing functions, the acceptable attainment of its objectives, its viability or survival, or that has a detrimental effect as perceived by the majority of its employees, clients or constituents' (Selbst 1978).

The truth is that all organisations are vulnerable to crisis. However, many companies, and even some marketers, have not grasped the importance of crisis management and are unwilling to prioritise the function in business operations.

When a crisis occurs it can have negative, threatening and often far-reaching effects on an organisation. Failure to control the situation can in turn lead to such dire results as a loss of profits, loss of market share, or even bankruptcy. Such consequences indicate precisely how important the crisis management planning process is.

Crises also have the effect of suddenly placing companies and individuals in the media spotlight and the way this is handled can change public perception for the worse or better, sometimes overnight. However, with forward thinking, planning and effective PR the effects of a crisis can be managed and can sometimes result in a more positive perception of the organisation than previously.

For optimum effectiveness, crisis management needs to be pro-active. Ideally, companies should ensure they forecast potential issues and outline standard operating procedures on how these crises should be dealt with before they occur. These plans must have a strong focus on PR and media relations.

The key to an effective PR campaigns lies with communication, and this is also the most vital tool of crisis management. The most significant element of this communication is between

the organisation and the media, as the media is often the main channel with which to communicate with the general public. It is therefore essential that media relations and PR strategies are pre-prepared and then executed as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

Well thought-out plans that can be adapted to different crises as appropriate are critical. At its most basic level a standard process should include the following elements:

1. Agreement of a 'holding' statement including company positioning to communicate to the public explaining the facts relating to the crisis. This immediate communication is the greatest opportunity to control events.
2. Assignment of a designated spokesperson to make official statements, answer media enquiries and, most importantly, represent the company.
3. Preparation of background information which can be supplied to the media as required.
4. Agreement on the most effective methods of communicating with key audiences such as employees, customers and the media. Ensure processes are in place for regular factual information to be distributed as appropriate and in a timely manner.

In the majority of scenarios such preparation will ensure that crisis management is as efficient, effective, and most importantly, as successful, as it can be.

As all organisations are vulnerable to crisis, all organisations should ensure that they are in a position to manage potentially damaging situations properly. By using effective crisis management and communications planning in this way, some organisations will also find that they have the potential to produce a more positive perception of the organisation than before. However, this will only come from forward planning and most importantly, effective PR and media relations.