

5 “Must Do's” Before a Crisis Burns You

Flames shot into the moonless sky. I arrived at the four-alarm blaze with the street blocked and pumper trucks already shooting from several directions. The site was a raging fire at a busy printing company. The century-old business was housed in a historic building and to keep up with production, it had been running three shifts a day. It was an arsonist's dream—petroleum products, paper, ink, solvents, books, vinyl, skids of printed products sitting by the dock, and a historic building.

As a communications professional, I was called in to manage the fallout with the myriad stakeholders who were discovering by dawn that a printing company, my client's building and business, had burned down. Quickly we had to jump in and take control of the process and manage the interactions in a model way. The goal was to achieve the best possible communications outcome for the long-term viability of the business and the now “in limbo” employees. This business crisis needed a communication process to avoid a PR crisis.

You may be surprised that the list of stakeholders for a crisis is considerably more extensive than for ongoing business communication. The crisis list may include: vendors, clients, owners, employees, employees' families, former and retired employees, your board, the media (in every iteration), the community, your influence leaders, political leadership, other professional service providers (such as accountants or payroll), your industry, local civic associations, and more.

5 Must Do's Before You Prepare Your Crisis Communication Plan:

1. Create your own list of stakeholders to be in contact with during a crisis. Retain offsite access to their current contact information.
2. Develop relationships with your local media (reporters, broadcasters, bloggers, etc.), influence leaders, and politicians before you need to communicate with them in a crisis.
3. Draft a project management outline as to what will need to be done and who will do it. Share it with key leadership and peers. Incorporate helpful insights.
4. Pay attention to other crises in your industry and how they were managed and communicated. Attach notes to your draft as "best practices" or things to avoid.
5. Talk to your internal communication team about their experience in crisis management. If they need training, get it. If you use an outside team, ask them about their expertise and policies.

A communications plan for a crisis is in addition to a general crisis plan, which may include things such as the operational protocols for evacuation or weather related emergencies. Create a crisis communication plan as a parallel task.

And as with most plans, it follows the Boy Scout motto: “Be prepared.”

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Be attentive. Be present. An excellent life is lived while enjoying the journey and being present. Hence the name: Watching Paint Dry.

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