GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

How audiences perceive messages in a crisis

If your organization is hit by a crisis event, your stakeholders will immediately form a perception about the content of your messages in these ways:

* *Speed of communication.* First impressions are lasting impressions. Research indicates that the first message received on a subject sets the stage for comparison of all future messages on that subject. The speed with which you issue your first communication can indicate how prepared your organization was to respond to the crisis, that there is a response in hand and the appropriate action is being taken. If people are not aware you are responding to the crisis event then as far as they are concerned, you are not responding. Your stakeholders will lose confidence, and your management will always be attempting to catch up to the perceptions. If social media is an integral part of your initial communication effort, your speedy communication response is much more likely to satisfy the recipients.
* *Factual content of the message.*Your audience will be listening for the facts, so you should get the facts right, repeat them consistently and ensure all credible sources share the same facts. Preparation can help to maximize the amount of information that can be assembled and passed on.
* *Trust and credibility.* It is vital to establish trust and credibility with your key audiences. There are four basic elements to establishing trust and credibility through crisis communication. People will realize if these elements are faked. All written and verbal messages during a crisis should contain these elements:
  + *Empathy and caring.* Research shows that being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for the message to be accepted by the receiver. Therefore, empathy and caring should be expressed immediately. Spokespersons should acknowledge fear, pain, suffering and uncertainty if they are genuine emotions.
  + *Competence and expertise.* Obviously education, position title and organizational roles are quick ways to indicate expertise. Previous experience and demonstrated abilities in the current situation enhance the perception of competence. Another important way is to have established a relationship with part or all of the audience before the crisis. If that isn’t possible, nominate a third party who has the confidence of the audience, and who will express their confidence in your spokesperson and/or organization.
  + *Honesty and openness.* Convey all the relevant information. If your spokesperson is prevented from passing on certain information then it helps to explain why, eg “We are still verifying the names”, “The police have the role of providing this information” and “We don’t have that information at this stage.” The amount of professional jargon and euphemisms should be minimized; their use implies insecurity, arrogance and lack of honesty.
  + *Commitment and dedication.*If possible, you should state upfront what the objective is in the crisis and should commit to reaching that objective. Dedication is shown by sharing in the discomforts and the sacrifices being experienced in the crisis. Dedication means management is present at the scene until the situation has been resolved. It means staying in touch with the audience after the media have lost interest. (Remember the worst US environmental disaster in 2010 when BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded, killing 11 workers – and then BP’s CEO said he wanted his life back – because all this was taking so much of his own time?) Resolution and follow-up should be a commitment from the start and maintained until the end.

The worst mistake you can make in crisis communication is to allow management to be seen as cold, heartless and calculating. People will accept mistakes if management can admit to being less than perfect. A heartless company is not forgiven.

Guidelines for effective crisis communication

Communication in a crisis should follow these principles:

* *Be open, accessible and willing to respond*as much as possible to those clamoring for information.
* *Be truthful.*Honesty is the best policy both from an ethical point of view as well as from a practical standpoint. People quickly find out about partial truths or cover ups – and they will hate you for it. They hate the cover up more than the original crisis event.
* *Be compassionate, empathetic, courteous and considerate.* It’s not easy to do this under pressure when silly questions are asked or repeated, but this patient approach is necessary.
* *Don’t over-reassure.* The objective is not to soothe, but to convey accurate, calm concern. In fact, it is better to over-estimate the problem and then be able to say that the situation is better than first thought.
* *Acknowledge uncertainty.*Tell only what you know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience’s distress: “It must be frustrating to hear that we don’t have the answer to that question right now…”
* *Emphasize that a process is in place to learn from the situation.* Describe the process so people will be confident you will use the knowledge to prevent or minimize the chances of a similar crisis happening again.
* *Give anticipatory guidance.* If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect: “Experts won’t know the full extent of the data leak for another 24 hours at the earliest.”
* *Be regretful, not defensive.* Say, “We are sorry…”, or “We feel terrible that…” when acknowledging problems or failures. It is preferable not to use ‘regret,’ which sounds legalistic.
* *Acknowledge people’s fears.* Don’t tell people they shouldn’t be afraid. They are afraid and have a right to their fears.
* *Express wishes.* Say, “I wish we knew more,” or “I wish our answers were more definitive.”
* *Be willing to address the ‘what if’ questions.* These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want expert answers. If you are not prepared to answer the ‘what if’ questions, someone else will, and you will lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the discussion.

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