



WHEN THINGS GO VERY, VERY WRONG

BY ROBYN QUINN

**How to manage reputation and
crisis communications in a
split-second world.**



It can take years to build a reputation and only minutes to destroy it. Effective crisis communications management isn't just about putting out fires; it's about taking control of the narrative and maintaining trust when things go wrong.

When a cyberattack crippled London Drugs last spring, the company's swift and transparent response became a model for effective crisis communications. Clint Mahlman, president and COO, explained how decisive actions, honest communication and community support helped the company weather the storm. Talking to CBC's Ian Hanomansing about the incident, Mahlman shared how honest communication and community backing were fundamental: "The outpouring of love from the community ... motivated our people to get through this incredibly difficult time."

The London Drugs approach underscores the importance of prioritizing people and open communication in a crisis. Whether you or a designated spokesperson communicate, there are ways to navigate the storm and emerge stronger together.

BE FAST

- ACT QUICKLY TO CONTROL THE NARRATIVE AND KEEP STAKEHOLDERS INFORMED.
- DON'T WAIT FOR ALL THE FACTS; START WITH WHAT YOU HAVE, THEN UPDATE REGULARLY.

The overwhelming advice from communications professionals on how to respond to a crisis is unanimous: move fast! Along with being truthful and respectful, urgency is the key to protecting your reputation, says Jim Beatty, a Victoria-based media relations consultant and former journalist. "When a crisis happens, don't panic, but you need to move swiftly," says Beatty, who has built a career coaching corporate leaders on how to own the narrative as it unfolds instead of playing catch-up every time a new fact is revealed by someone else.

In public relations, we often advise getting ahead of a developing story because when there is an information vacuum, people tend to fill it with incorrect information. Cynthia Lockrey, a Cowichan Valley-based crisis communications trainer, will be running a crisis comms workshop in February at the B.C. Communications Forum in Victoria. "If you don't own the story, you'll end up chasing it. While you may need to withhold information to protect confidentiality or legal obligations, there's always information you can share," she says. "Don't assume it will all go away; it will linger if it seems like you're hiding something — even if you're just waiting to gather all the facts."

When things happen quickly, an ideal response must be immediate, staying on top of the situation until a resolution is reached. This is a case where "slow and steady" won't win the race.



There is a reverse-engineered version of this advice: trying to deflect attention by burying information in a Friday afternoon media release during the slow news cycle (a favourite tactic in politics). Or consider the Silicon Valley Bank collapse. It attempted to hide catastrophic financial losses in an innocuous media release posted on the company website late on a Wednesday. In both cases the strategies can create much bigger problems than those they sought to avoid. Lessons learned.

BE HUMAN

- SPEAK DIRECTLY AND AVOID CORPORATE JARGON.
- ACKNOWLEDGE THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF THE CRISIS ON CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES.

While speed is critical, it's equally important to understand the emotional impact of the crisis on customers and employees. Human beings have emotional reactions, and your own response must reflect an understanding of their feelings. People want to know what happened, who is responsible and what's next. This may require an upfront apology, bringing together those who can answer questions, or providing a real-time synopsis of the situation with a commitment to share information. Beatty works with his clients to prepare templates for anticipated scenarios so they can focus on the issue instead of trying to wordsmith a response on the fly.

Speak like a human being, use conversational yet respectful language. You've spent years building trust; now is the time to ask for it. Kristina Crowson of Nanaimo-based Array, a marketing agency, agrees, telling her clients, "Transparency and asking for kindness in the case of error goes a long way in today's market landscape."

BE HONEST

- ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT YOU KNOW AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT YOU DON'T.
- EXPLAIN WHEN CERTAIN INFORMATION ISN'T AVAILABLE AND WHY.

Legal and security concerns in a rapidly evolving situation should not be an obstacle to good, clear communications. Work with the lawyers and security personnel before a crisis to manage expectations. The necessity for transparency and sometimes admitting when you don't have an answer is crucial for rebuilding your reputation after the dust settles. Address the possibility of social media channels telling your story — part of the split-second world — by ensuring your narrative offers all pertinent and credible information.

Stakeholder engagement and customer connection are

more important than ever. Lockrey cautions about the risk of information shared through unofficial sources: "Thanks to social media, we often hear about a crisis from non-official sources first. The risk here is that rumours can overtake verified information." Think about your own feelings during a similar time and use that to speak about what really matters. Reinforcing existing trust and connection to recover as quickly as possible is a strong strategy, as demonstrated by London Drugs.

HAVE A PLAN

- DON'T WAIT FOR A CRISIS TO MAKE YOUR PLAN.
- MAKE SURE EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT THE PLAN IS.

To be fair, crisis communications is the step many organizations fail to take. As a PR consultant, I often helped organizations draft practical crisis or reputation management plans. Most had a section mysteriously assigned to a communications consultant with literally one press release template attached! The pandemic taught us all humbling lessons about managing during a crisis.

Pauline Finn, executive director of the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea in Sidney, knew she had to communicate the truth to her team, the board and the community as quickly and in as caring a manner as she could. "Having a plan made a huge difference in how we handled immediate staff and visitor safety," she says. A plan without clear communications simply puts organizations at risk.

So make a plan, designate a response team, confirm policies and ensure everyone understands how they work together. Train a media spokesperson — not necessarily the person managing the actual situation, they'll have their hands full! Prepare a set of response templates and key messages for every anticipated situation. This step also offers the opportunity to practice and engage partners and stakeholders; the value of this experience is twofold: you discover what works and what doesn't, plus the team builds confidence in its ability to manage any situation.

"I continue to be surprised by how many organizations don't have a crisis communications plan or haven't updated their plan since COVID," says Lockrey. "Having just emerged from a pandemic, all organizations now have crisis-communications experience."

Reputational threats and crisis situations are almost inevitable for any organization, but by planning, communicating honestly and responding quickly, your business can emerge stronger.

Consider your crisis-communications plan today, before you need it. □

7 STEPS TO BUILDING A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

1

ASSIGN
a crisis team with clear roles and responsibilities.

2

TRAIN
spokespeople.

3

PREPARE
template responses for anticipated types of crises.

4

CONDUCT
practice drills to ensure everyone knows their roles.

5

INVITE
external partners to participate in order to strengthen relationships.

6

HIRE
a PR consultant to fine tune.

7

UPDATE
the plan, especially when new staff are hired.

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