



the Samansky Group

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Communications: The Core Of An Emergency Recovery Plan

Ten Basic Questions To Help Build Effective Crisis Communications

Overview

Examples abound showing communications is at the core of those things that go right or wrong in a crisis, man-made or natural.

Crisis communications and the mechanisms through which various plans are implemented across the range of crises facing government or corporations aren't, for the most part, new concepts.

Nevertheless, as learned from real-world examples, low-tech systems sometimes must be employed when the high tech fails, which has been the case in some emergencies in recent years. Cellphones fail for a variety of reasons, as do landlines. Television and radio go dark or silent, unless on battery or backup generator, because the electricity goes out. Computer links crash or become inaccessible. Other hardware and software are equally subject to failure.

For publicly traded companies, the speed and global nature of the markets, and the speed and influence of the news media, add to the importance of "getting it right the first time."

For any organization still dangerously without a robust overall emergency response plan, and a strong crisis communications component, answering these 10 basic questions can help the development of a complete and effective plan. For those with a plan in place, a review of the basic questions may help refine the existing protocols.

Questions

1. **Whom do you have to reach?**
The list may range from employees to those in nearby communities and from regulators to government officials at all levels. The list may even include various audiences abroad.
2. **How will you reach those audiences?**
What specific methods, technology, and backup systems will you employ; where will those systems be; and how will you get to them and activate them quickly in a stressful environment?
3. **Do your audiences know how you will reach them?**
Such understanding is necessary to ensure the audiences take appropriate action when the plan is implemented. For example, are you using a siren alarm system in the community and at the plant site? Do all within hearing know the meaning of the signals? Alternatively, if you plan to use radio announcements, do your audiences know what station to tune into?
4. **What are you going to tell the audiences from the start of the crisis through the conclusion?**
How will you manage updates and stem the development of rumors?
5. **Who will tell the audiences what they have to be told?**
Short term, have spokespeople been properly media trained? Longer term, are they speech trained to carry the messages further and to help in any extended recovery from the crisis?
6. **Have designated spokespeople been assigned responsibility for specific audiences?**
Each audience segment may need tailored messages and contact with personnel knowledgeable in a particular business line or discipline.
7. **Can the spokespeople monitor internal and external developments influencing message decisions?**
Do they have the means to stay constantly in touch with each other to coordinate responses and with appropriate organization officials who can keep them up-to-date with accurate information? Do they have the means to quickly gather information from news reports? Are other sources in place? Accuracy, truth, and timeliness are keys to a successful plan.
8. **How will spokespeople, and others who will be involved, access the crisis communications plan?**
How, too, will they access the broader emergency plan, enabling all its aspects to be seamlessly implemented?
9. **Have backup locations been established from which the spokespeople can get the messages out?**
Are those facilities turnkey workplaces? Such facilities are critical when the usual work site is inaccessible.
10. **Have you tested the plan in tabletop exercises and real-world drills?**
An untested plan is subject to significant failure.

These 10 basic questions are the starting point for a much longer list of questions requiring answers in the development of a crisis communications plan. Those without such a plan are putting the organization at serious risk and potentially endangering employees, and many others.

The Samansky Group, a public affairs consultancy, can help your team answer these questions and develop the longer list of questions and answers needed to build an effective crisis communications plan as part of the overall emergency response plan.

The Samansky Group specializes in crisis communications planning and development; strategic communications planning and implementation; message development; media training; presentation/speech training; and media-friendly website development.

The Samansky Group has written and spoken on Issues related to crisis communications planning and implementation. The following articles are on the firm's website (www.samanskygroup.com):

- **Crisis Policies Must Undergo Regular Real-World Tests**, *PR Week*
- **Preparing For A Crisis: Fill In The Blanks Now**, *Investor Relations Update*
- **Directors' Tips: Crisis Communications**, *New York Nonprofits*
- **Corporate Communications Advisory: Terrorism Alerts Re-Emphasize Need For Organizations To Put Crisis Communications Plans In Place**, *Suffolk Lawyer*
- **Run!: That's Not The Crisis Communications Plan You Need**, *Public Relations Quarterly*