RUN! : That's Not The Crisis Communications Plan You Need

By Arthur W. Samansky

For well more than two decades those of us who worked in New York City office buildings were forced to participate in random fire drills.

If we weren't on the phone with a reporter, or doing something else we considered important (in which case most of us ignored the "alarm"), we meandered to the hallway with our colleagues.

There, most of us listened with about the same attention we gave flight attendants on airplanes during the safety speech; were amused by the person pointing to the exits; and chatted with our colleagues about luncheon plans or other less-than-critical matters.

Then came September 11!

Many Don't Take Crisis Communications Planning Seriously

Crisis communications planning, sadly, hasn't been taken any more seriously than those fire drills, in too many cases.

Based upon random conversations and emails with peers, it comes as no surprise a huge number of companies haven't any serious crisis communications plan. Wrote one colleague I touched base with: "...no surprise about the crisis plan thing; it really amazed me too when I learned how unprepared the companies were that I have worked for over the years, my current company (a large telecommunications company) an exception."

Another colleague, upon inquiry, sent me a laminated wallet-sized card he used in his former corporate (a multinational) role: it had five very general steps to follow, supplemented by what he said was a four-page printed version which expanded on the bulletpoints. And another colleague who worked at an energy company sent along his corporate crisis plan which was printed on one side of a piece of paper (including the corporate letterhead).
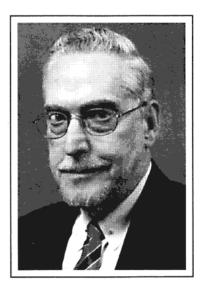
One colleague responding to my inquiry, emailed me: "One of my concerns about big manuals is that despite prodding and good intentions, no one will read them before the incident." And, he quipped: "My advice is, run! And always park on the high-ground."

Failure To Have A Plan Is A Huge Risk

For those who don't alter their thinking in the post-September 11 environment, be advised: you are taking a huge risk regardless of how well you think you and your staff will perform in a crisis, sans plan.

Consider that shuttle astronauts are highly trained, highly educated and highly skilled individuals.

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Nevertheless, before a launch and throughout the flight they regularly go through a variety of checklists. The checklists, and a series of easily accessible, on-board "cue flip cards," cover a range of matters for the flight. Aboard, too, as one National Aeronautics and Space Administration spokesperson said, are "encyclopedic" manuals in case of communications problems with ground control—which has its own massive sets of manuals and experts.

But because astronauts have read the checklists and other material regularly and trained continuously, they know what to do, quickly, in any number of circumstances. They have cue-cards and manuals at hand, and they are backed up by ground control.

Keys To A Successful Plan

The point is a successful crisis communications plan depends upon:
- having in place a sound overall, well-thought-out series of actions developed under non-stress conditions;
- flexibility to integrate new ideas and efforts quickly to meet the specific circumstances;
- regular review of existing plans and constant refinement;
- having in place a trained crisis response team; and,
- having in place a well-thought out crisis procedures manual to which staff may refer quickly at the first opportunity.

This extensive plan should be:
- a matter of rote for every member of the crisis response team;
- regularly tested, quietly, at least on a small scale;
- regularly reviewed, at least quarterly, by the head of communications;
- updated immediately for any changes in personnel or circumstances; and,
- made part of the annual personnel performance review process at all levels.

Details, Details Details

In any crisis there are numerous large and small details to remember and implement. Some are external (outreach to the media, investors, the public, regulators, vendors, etc.) and some are internal (senior officers, business-line heads, other employees, etc.)

Thus, a well-developed manual serves as a means of double-checking, at the first opportunity, that all the steps and procedures have been followed. More than likely, one or more details will have been for-

gotten. (Review even may trigger new approaches for the immediate circumstance.)

And, since all staff have been through the development of the manual and the various crises which might occur, the staff is better able to respond quickly and in a coordinated fashion.

The crisis manual also ensures under non-stress conditions you have assembled in multiple and quickly accessible places all the appropriate information you will need to operate in a crisis, whether

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it's a result of a computer failure which has left your clients without account statements, or you need to evacuate your building because of fire or terrorist action—real or hoax.

In circumstances where I headed corporate communications activities:
- every staffer had a copy of the crisis procedures manual at home (including vacation home);
- there was another copy in the media department in a designated drawer (marked with a red sticker) in a red binder and a designated person responsible for grabbing the book on the way out in an emergency, and,
- I kept one at my desk as well.

In my wallet was a card with telephone numbers of key staffers, selected executives and a variety of other numbers which would enable me to get information I needed and get it distributed, even from curbside.

Still other must-have information—at least enough to get me through the first few hours of a crisis—was in my briefcase, always.

Even "Simple" Crises
Create Important Questions

Take just a simple situation: your building is evacuated early in the morning because of a bomb threat. You get to the office just as the police start setting up barricades. In no particular order: where's your staff; which reporters do you need to call and which ones are still at home (and how do you reach them); does the chairman know yet; what's her mobile phone number; do you need to

let stock market officials know what's going on; what about the analyst community; who exactly has the facts of the threat; where are you going to set up shop for the next few hours or the remainder of the day or longer? And, which of the various places to which you might go are going to be best capable of offering you staff assistance, workstations/computers; duplicate copies of material?

And those are only a handful of random, easy, early-in-the-crisis questions. The list is extensive and grows the longer you need to be out of the home base. They need to be considered and made part of the plan before the crisis.

Let's pile on for the sake of it: your building has become uninhabitable because of a nearby chemical explosion and leak; the phone system was damaged when the chemical plant suffered the explosion; your email system is down as a result and you can't access your computer libraries and files. Now what?

You're lucky today and you've been able to put together a brief statement covering the immediate situation as told to you by the police captain on the scene (he may or may not have all the facts right), but because the standard phone lines and email are out (and you can't get in the building in any event) the press can't reach you or an assistant easily—they may not have your cellphone number at hand.

How are you going to get your statement out: do you know the phone number, off-hand, of your press release distribution service and your representative, including his cellphone number? What about the copydesk in another city in case the local one is out of commission for the same reason you are struggling?

Speed, Accuracy Might Be Impeded By Systems Failures

It comes as no secret, of course, to even the most novice corporate communicator, that a crisis today must be dealt with at incredible speed and total accuracy, and, depending upon the circumstances, aimed at quelling fear.

There simply isn't any room for error. Depending upon the crisis, error, retraction, or a series of corrections may exacerbate public fear in the community or the stock market.

And since September 11, we must now deal with the possibility all, or virtually all, the basic message delivery systems, from mobile phones to websites, which we've grown so accustomed to, will be inoperative for some period of time.

Moreover, in the 1970s, when mandatory fire drills started in New York City, all-news, all-the-time cablecasts were in their infancy; the internet and email didn't exist in the public arena (experiments were just occurring in the late 1960s and early 1970s); and corporate communicators had at least hours to consider options.

Today, "experts" opine on one all-news station or another (and often all of them in series) almost instantly on virtually every issue; chatrooms are ubiquitous; pop-up "news" messages burst onto computer screens; individual investors watch the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite, and listen for results of foreign indices from Europe and Asia, with almost equal interest; institutional investors move massive amounts of assets with a touch of a screen; anthrax travels through the mail and causes death and illness, not to mention closing down government office buildings and disrupting business; all of us are advised of "high alerts" as part of homeland security which raise the bar on "events"; and terrorists have brought horrific destruction to the United States.

That is our new environment.

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Time To "Think" Sharply Reduced

The need for a detailed and extensive plan of action to quell fears of numerous audiences, whether in the community or the stock market, and rectify situations, is as great as knowing how to get out of a building—quickly.

The time to "think" has been reduced to minutes from hours.

Not every crisis can be planned for: who could have imagined September 11? But the more you plan and the more you are prepared, the more likely you will be able to cope, even with the unexpected.

Sure, most of us are never going to be in a crisis of major proportions. But, still, why did your company take out all that insurance? PRQ

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