

Crisis management part I: Effective communication

Crisis Response Journal, in conjunction with Kenyon, presents a new series of articles to help crisis management leaders understand their roles and responsibilities and how to integrate them. Here, **Robert Jensen** looks at communication

CRISES MAKE PEOPLE LOSE FAITH in response systems. Effective crisis management systems restore order and faith. How quickly and easily this is achieved is affected by the efficiency with which the crisis management system responds. The co-ordination and integration of systems responding from death to the final disposition of the deceased is the single greatest failure in our collective systems.

Few agencies have practical experience of being involved across all functional areas and the life cycle of the event.

This article deals with the importance of communication. Many experts stress the importance of dealing with the media, but this article explores two other important groups – the families and friends of those affected and an institution's employees.

In today's world, it is difficult to turn to a television, computer or newspaper without being bombarded with tragedy. These tragedies often garner extraordinary local, regional, national and international media coverage because they are extraordinary events which affect the lives of ordinary people.

How companies, government agencies and other institutions deal with these uncommon events is often key to how people view the company, its share value and its 'fitness' to remain in business. In the rush of events that often surround a crisis, many companies, agencies and institutions forget, or underutilise communication.

While there is a long list of important stakeholders with whom a company or agency needs to communicate during normal operations, during an accident, the primary target of communication should be those affected by the tragedy, employees of the company and the media.

In the first days of a crisis, communication with the injured and the families of those injured or deceased is vitally important. This may be done in a variety of ways, but in an airline



The media reaches a large number of people quickly, and is a recognised and credible source of information. Sometimes, however, the media's goal and the goal of the company or agency are different

photo: stock.xchng

accident, for example, a company may set up its own family assistance centre using professionals trained to communicate with people who have experienced stress and trauma. The goal is to keep the families up to date with what is happening with regards to search and recovery, the accident investigation and what steps are being taken to care for the injured and deceased.

OFTEN FORGOTTEN

Families should never learn about anything related to the accident or the care of those affected by reading it in the newspaper, seeing it on TV or hearing about it from a neighbour.

The second group of people comprises those who are, oddly, often forgotten – employees. Employees may be traumatised, might feel some responsibility for the accident or crisis, their fellow employees may have been injured or died, and they may have met some of the victims.

Employees are not only members of a company, they are the day-to-day contact with people outside the company – customers, suppliers, neighbours – and a powerful voice of the company.

Employees should be given regular updates

on what is happening; this can be done in small group meetings, staff meetings and later on (or in the case of multiple remote locations) by email. As with families of those affected, there may be a need for grief counsellors.

The third group is the media, because it reaches a large number of people, it does it quickly, and is a recognised and credible source of information. Sometimes, however, the media's goal and the goal of the company or agency are different.

HONESTY AND ACCURACY

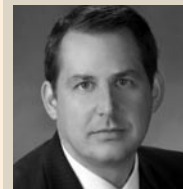
The media wants to tell readers and viewers as much as possible as quickly as possible. A company's goal is quite similar – to tell its stakeholders as much as it can as quickly as it can – but also to ensure that the information is both honest and accurate. Unfortunately, in the first hours of an accident, or sometimes even the first few days of an accident, there may be very little verifiable information about what happened.

However, even during these times, there are things that a company can communicate – its commitment to ensure victims are treated with care and dignity, families with compassion and fairness, and that the company will do whatever is required to understand what went wrong and fix it so that it will never happen again.

The best communication, based on the best and most well executed crisis management plan in the world, will not stop a major crisis from becoming a major story, but the best and most well executed plan will, backed up by communication that is honest, accurate and compassionate, help a company protect its reputation and share value and reinforce its 'fitness' to be in business.

■ *Topics in this series will include crisis communication, family assistance, call centres, identification operations, personal effects operations, repatriation operations, memorials and planning. The final article will encompass how to integrate these systems into a single seamless operation*

AUTHOR



Robert A Jensen
is Chief Executive Officer for Kenyon International Emergency Services, and member of CRJ's Editorial Advisory Panel

CRJ