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Q&A

Ways to jump-start your crisis planning

Q&A talks about crisis communications with Andrea Obston, president of Andrea Obston Marketing Communications LLC in Farmington.

Q: It seems like most crises, like those hitting Penn State and Syracuse, come out of nowhere. How do you prepare for something you can't foresee?

A: The key to successful reputation management in the face of crisis is to have a crisis plan in place before you need it. That plan establishes a clear path to follow and sets up early warning systems to kick in as soon as the whiff of crisis rears its ugly head. The plan should cover items such as the make-up of the crisis team; the warning signals of a crisis; the policies and procedures regarding contact with members of traditional and social media; techniques for monitoring the environment and a detailed list of the crises you can anticipate. In truth, over 60 percent of crises are slow growing, smoldering situations. The warnings are there to spot.

Q: How do you spot a crisis in the making before it hits? What are some of the telltale signs?

A: You need to practice something called "productive paranoia." The idea is put beautifully in the recent book "Great by Choice" by Jim Collins and Morten Hansen. The idea is to prepare compulsively ahead of time for the worst. It's a matter of constantly scanning the horizon for indicators that a crisis is coming and learning how to recognize and deal with them instead of pretending they will just go away. Some of the telltale signs of an impending crisis are: increased negative chatter on social media; negative comments posted at the end of positive news stories; increased traffic to your consumer hotline; a spike in your online traffic; an escalating flow of events; a feeling of loss of control and signs of increased scrutiny.

Q: How do you prepare your company to deal with attention from traditional

ANDREA OBSTON



Position:
President

Company:
Andrea Obston
Marketing
Communications
LLC

media during a crisis?

A: You prepare to deal with attention from traditional media by cultivating an honest, transparent and responsive professional relationship with them in all of your dealings with them. You engage in an ongoing give and take of information that positions you as responsive to their needs and supports your company's reputation. In other words, you develop a relationship of trust that will serve you in good times and bad.

Q: Can you rehearse a response without knowing exactly what the crisis is?

A: There are crises that are foreseeable if you are honest with yourself. When we are creating a crisis plan, a key step is an exercise we call "Crisis Spotting." This is a brainstorming session during which we push people to consider the worst things that could happen. Then, we ask them to rate those developments in terms of their likelihood and impact. Remember, the most damaging crises are those with low probability and high impact because people tend to ignore or trivialize them until it's too late.

Q: How do you prepare yourself to use social media tools during a crisis? More importantly, how much should you monitor social media during a crisis?

A: Social media provides extremely powerful tools to not only "speak" but also to

"listen." If you're going to use social media to communicate during a crisis, you've got to have that program well underway before you need it. That means building a significant base of people following you. Otherwise, when a crisis hits, you'll have no one who's listening. In addition, we like the idea of creating a Social Media Engagement Team ahead of time. These are stakeholders of your company who would be willing to be mobilized during a crisis to deliver your key messages through social media. The Red Cross has an interesting version of this. Their Social Media Cabinet of 30 or so celebrities who already have a built in base of followers, use their Facebook pages and Twitter accounts to mobilize their base when needed. It worked marvelously during the Haitian Earthquake, facilitating a massive fundraising campaign for aid. When it comes to monitoring social media, you need to do it systematically all the time, but especially during a crisis.

Q: If your company is not active with social media, how can you mobilize it during a crisis?

A: Even if your company is not active on social media, we strongly advise you do two things: 1) Claim any Twitter handles that could be used against you in a crisis. These can include: @your name; @yourname+sucks; @hate+yourname. BP didn't do that during the Gulf Coast oil spill and someone claimed the handle @BPGlobalPR for a parody Twitter account. They put up some laughable, but highly irreverent comments, garnering more than 55,000 followers in a week (compared to BP's 7,000); 2) Set up listening devices, such as HootSuite or TweetDeck, that not only track your name, but also topics related to the crisis. In the end, the best way to deal with a crisis is to recognize it early and often. ■

Andrea Obston is the president of Andrea Obston Crisis Management, an affiliate of Andrea Obston Marketing Communications LLC. For more information see www.crisismasters.com or www.aomc.com.