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Numbers Tell Truth About BP Tragedy

By Andrea Obston

The numbers are astounding: 35,000-60,000 barrels of oil per day spewing into the Gulf of Mexico; \$14 billion in projected civil penalties for BP; 20,000 Louisiana jobs idled due to a ban on off-shore drilling. But the number that staggers me the most is 45.

BP waited 45 days to utter a word about its disaster in the Gulf. Forty-five days before anyone associated with that company gave us any indication that there was anyone behind the curtain that is Oz (sorry, I mean BP).

As a crisis communication consultant, I much prefer the number 60. Within 60 minutes (less if possible) a company needs to rise up in defense of its own reputation. If they don't, someone else will. On Twitter; on Facebook; heck, on CNN and Fox News.

Don't believe me? How about the 120,000 followers of a "fake" Twitter account called @BPGlobalPR? Soon after the spill came to light, an anonymous Tweetster named Terry set up this account, dishing out sarcastic and hilarious commentary on the tragedy. BP apparently put pressure on Twitter to make the account holder comply with its terms of service and the account is now clearly labeled as parody. The account holder's new bio offers this disclaimer to prove that it's no relation to the real BP: "We are not associated with Beyond Petroleum, the company that has been destroying the Gulf of Mexico for 51 days." Incidentally, BP's official Twitter account has 8,000 followers.

What is clear and clearly horrifying is that BP had no crisis communications plan in place (kindly hold your comments about whether they had an operations' plan). Or they just plain forgot to pull in off the shelf. But, before you skewer them for this oversight, step back and look at the facts: it's estimated that only 19 percent of companies had an adequate crisis plan in place in 2005 — four years after 9/11.

Let's hope Katrina, Tiger and Toyota have scared more companies straight in the past five years. But don't count on it.

In the dozen years I've been doing crisis communications, 99 percent of the calls come from people in the midst of crisis. They want help living to fight another day. But creating strategies in the midst of a disaster is a lot more challenging than executing a plan that was thought-out without the pressure of dealing with a crisis.

If you wait until you're knee-deep in a crisis to plan your next move, you can be sure the flow of events will carry you along into

some pretty bad choices.

Don't wait for that well to blow; that c-suite officer to run off with the treasury; that key member's peccadilloes to make it to the front page to do a formal crisis communications plan. Do it now, while there's none of "it" hitting the fan.

Decide who will be on your crisis team and how you'll get to them 24 hours a day. Pinpoint the key publics who will care about what happens to your company. Discover where they get their information — traditional media, social media, company gossip, backyard barbecues? Decide how you will orchestrate two-way conversations into and out of your company during the crisis.

Put systems in place that will allow you to mobilize your community ambassadors to tell your side of the story. Establish ways to recognize a crisis and decide which hot buttons will call the plan into action. And, most importantly, arrange for systems that will

allow you to monitor the environment before, during and after the crisis. They will help you develop the necessary steps to regain trust and your reputation.

If there's one big lesson that every business owner should take from the BP disaster it's that a company needs to be ready to tell its own story before someone else does it for them. Bless Tony Hayward for wonderful phrases like "The Gulf spill is a tragedy that never should have happened," and "BP has taken full responsibility for cleaning up the spill in the Gulf." It shows strength of character I admire. Unfortunately it came 45 days too late. And, like their cleanup, it feels like they are shoveling oil against the tide. ■

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