

DAILY COURT REVIEW

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by Marene Gustin

Does your business need a crisis plan?

Toy recalls, contaminated food, scandal in the DA's office and even the recent steroid shocker should be wake-up calls about the importance of having a crisis management plan. When bad things happen you want to be the first to get your message out and control the damage. Governments and big oil companies have plans ready and waiting, but should small business and even public figures have them as well?

"It's extremely important in this day and age of instant global communication," said Peter Roussel, former White House spokesperson and PR consultant. "We used to preach to our PR clients that every company, no matter how small, has to have a plan."

For Tony Shelton, of Shelton & Caudle Communications Training and Crisis Counseling, today's viral communications have changed the way we need to deal with disaster. "Social media," he said, "viral e-mails, YouTube, blogs, everybody is a reporter today. You have to be able to reach these people instantly. Analysis equals paralysis."

Shelton says your plan need not be lengthy, just one or two pages that should be updated regularly. First, determine criteria for what designates a crisis. "A fire in a waste basket isn't a communication crisis," Shelton said. "But a fire that has smoke billowing out the window and the fire department coming is. That's when you need to communicate what is going on to the outside. Does what happened cause unwanted attention from the outside and would it hurt your reputation or the bottom line?" That defines a crisis.

Secondly, you need guidelines for communication. Who is going to talk and just as importantly, who's not going to talk to the media. "Some organizations don't tell the employees they are not authorized to speak in a crisis situation, or tell them what to say when the media calls," Shelton said.

Designate and train specific persons, either CEOs or internal spokespeople and make decisions about what to say and when to say it in advance. And make sure you know who you need to communicate to. Customers, employees and the media will all want to know what happened, and what you are going to do about it.

"Jet Blue almost got it right after they left all those people stranded on the runway," Shelton said. "They came out fast and said the situation was unacceptable and that it would never happen again.

Unfortunately, that's just tempting fate. Sure enough, two weeks later it happened again. Bad news is cumulative and that's very damaging." Even if the public doesn't pay much

attention to the first story, if a second crisis hits they'll have that first incident in the back of their minds.

Another point Shelton stresses is that an apology should not contain the word "if."

"'If I offended anyone' is not an apology."

The recent events surrounding legendary pitcher Roger Clemens point up the need for speed. By delaying his press conference in the wake of the Mitchell Report about steroid abuse in major league baseball he gave bloggers and the mainstream media time to come to their own conclusions. "Roger finally said he did not do it," Shelton said, "but I would have liked him to say it earlier. It's a pretty simple story, he either did it or he didn't."

Google Roger Clemens and you'll find 1,840,000 results including news stories, Web sites and blogs. Reaching all of those writers and readers is important and doing it immediately can help stave off negative public reaction. Companies, and even public figures from celebrities to politicians, have learned the lesson of responding to crisis via their on Web or MySpace sites. News travels fast in this day and age, and bad news travels even faster.

"Just plan ahead," Shelton warns. "You don't have to be a Fortune 500 company to do that."

So what happens when a crisis strikes and you aren't prepared? Art Kent, a former correspondent and vice president of NBC news, says if you don't get your message out to the Associated Press within 30 minutes of a major crisis the reporters will be knocking on your door. "And your neighbors' doors and making phone calls." Which means people you don't even know will be commenting on your crisis when you should be positioned as the leading source of information. Hunkering down and waiting for the attention to blow over is not an option.

Today Kent is the senior director of public affairs for the Houston Symphony. And although there aren't too many crises in classical music, the organization does have a plan, although they haven't had to use it yet.

"I wrote it after Allison," Kent said, referring to the 2001 tropical storm that flooded the arts organization's offices. "That was pretty straight forward, we told the media what happened and thanked the city." But if something worse happens, the symphony is prepared. And you should be, too.