Keeping Your Cool in a Crisis

Top Five Communications Tips

By: Cindy Moen

A top executive just quit and went to a competitor. Your company accidentally handed over a different client's data. Someone was able to hack your network and obtain client information. These situations are all crises, no matter the level of severity or the number of people they affect. Now is not the time to cross your fingers and hope the problem goes away on its own. By being proactive, you can ensure that the damage that might have happened from a crisis will be contained.
What should you do instead of crawling under your desk and hiding?

1. **Prepare your message.**

   Write a statement that explains what has happened, who has been affected and how the issue has been resolved. Be sincere and offer apologies that the incident took place. Take responsibility and explain steps being taken to preclude future occurrences. Your written statement will be used to communicate to stakeholders and the media.

2. **Designate a message sender and a spokesperson.**

   Who will employees and clients want to hear from in order to feel reassured? It will likely be the most senior executive at your organization. Initial communications should come from that executive. A spokesperson should be accessible and able to handle questions from clients and press. That individual should be able to decide when it is appropriate to forward questions on to senior executives.

3. **Distribute the message as quickly as possible.**

   After writing your statement, decide on who needs to receive the message, in what format and in what order. Does the crisis only impact employees? Employees and clients? Stockholders? Who is involved will determine the format of initial communications. For employees, an email, company-wide voice mail or staff meeting may be the fastest and most effective form of communication. For clients, a phone call or email should suffice. Stockholders and the market at large will require a different plan.

   As a rule, employees should be notified first during a crisis. A message to employees should include the instruction that any questions from clients or press be directed to the company's spokesperson. If client data is involved, it may be necessary to notify the client first before bringing the information to staff. Nobody – employees or clients – wants to find out news of a crisis in the media first before hearing about it from their employer or trusted vendor.

4. **Plan for media scrutiny.**

   Is this crisis going to garner media attention? If so, issue a press release as soon as possible and be prepared before you speak to any journalists. Be as forthright as possible without over-divulging information. Know your statement and understand what you can and cannot say about the incident. Anticipate questions and avoid the use of "no comment" when answering.

5. **Continue to communicate.**

   Offer a way for employees, clients and the media to get updates on the situation. Social

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media outlets like LinkedIn and Twitter are fast becoming the preferred method of receiving company updates.

The dust has settled from your first crisis, so how did you do? If you feel it turned out as good as possible given the situation, congratulations! If things could have gone better, prepare for the next crisis by seeking training and planning help now.

About the Author
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