

Crisis calls – what will your response be?

When it is Reputation 911 time, make sure you know what to do. Idea Engineer's Mandy de Waal maintains that preparing, planning and strategising for a crisis before it happens can mean a life saving difference to your brand or company when disaster strikes.

 By [Mandy de Waal](#) 4 Oct 2002

It takes a crisis to really test the mettle of any company. When things go badly wrong, companies reveal what they're made of, with heartening or disturbing results. There is no middle ground in a disaster. When the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan, a no comment, lack of response or even the inability to take a stand will bite into your brand with far-reaching consequences. The worst possible scenario is something that every company dreads, but which so few plan for.

The first step in solid crisis management is doing just that. Constructing a well thought through strategy for handling the worst of times. At best the strategy will help you to avoid the crisis, at worst it will offer solid guidelines on how to respond, manage and act when things start getting urgent and messy.

Here are a few guidelines for putting together just such a strategy:

- Create a crisis team. These are the people who protect your company's image and who will have the skills you need to manage a calamity well. They typically will be your CEO, marketing portfolio owner and the person who handles your reputation management. If you have external marketing and/or PR agencies, make sure you add them to your crisis team. You will also need to have representatives who are at the nerve points of your internal and external communications. People who are credible and communicate with your staff, investors, customers, suppliers and other key stakeholders on a regular basis. You will also need your company's legal advisor at hand to dispense legal advice. Then construct a communications hierarchy to ensure the right people get informed of the crisis first.
- Establish a network and your neighbourhood watch. A crisis can break out during anyone's beat. Ensure that your crisis team, top management and workforce are well versed at identifying a crisis and know whom to call first when the crisis breaks. The first point of call should be your crisis team leader who will communicate to the crisis team and beyond, and will get on action shoes to start dealing with issues that arise.
- Brainstorm scenarios. You're the best at knowing your business and will likely think of most of the possible crisis situations. List them all down and then you will be able to use them in your strategy.
- Create appropriate messaging and response strategies for each of your invented crisis scenarios. The message is what you'll say and the tone you'll use for communicating. If nothing else make sure that the messaging reflects the human face of your company.
- List appropriate action steps for each potential crisis. Then get your crisis team together and think through the implications and outcomes of each action and debate what would be the best likely action.
- Ensure you have all the relevant resources at your fingertips. When the bad news breaks you need to ensure you have the right media lists, supplier contact details, access to networked computers and

even a television to watch your story unfolding on the eight o'clock news. You don't need a crisis communications centre, but just a place for your crisis team to work unhindered with all the support they need. Keep your crisis communications strategy and crisis team contacts readily at hand. Don't forget lots of caffeine on tap and a couple of chocolates in the desktop drawer.

- Document your contact list, policies, strategies, potential crisis, messages and suggested actions. Make sure each member of your crisis team has a copy of this documentation.
- Practice. Your crisis team leader should stage a crisis that only he or she knows is not real. Test the response times and outcome and see whether you are adequately prepared.
- Get professional help. There are a number of marketing and communications strategists who are the best in the field when it comes to handling a crisis. They already have the resources, experience and most of all credibility to handle emergencies that can shake your company and market standing. If you haven't already got a specialist that can offer you the counsel you need, invest in the best.

Then when the crisis strikes:

- Stay calm and focused, but prepare yourself to take decisive action.
- First get the facts, all the facts, the real facts and nothing but the facts. Make sure you know exactly what went down, what happened to whom, how and why. You can't expect to respond appropriately if you don't have all the facts at hand.
- Prioritise. Take action and focus. A crisis is normally a time for urgent and decisive decision taking. Set everything aside to ensure the right people are taking the best decisions and taking action to contain the crisis and get it under control.
- Turn up and face the crisis. When a horror story hits the headlines many company's first instinct is to dive for cover or run to the hills. That's the worst thing you can do. It's a tough watch to face the crisis and take the emotion on the chin, but it's the only thing you can do if you want to be seen as a company that cares for its constituents.
- Keep open lines with the media and be truthful, frank and factual. The media will get the story, eventually. By opening a stream of communication with competent spokespeople who are well briefed in the situation you will do much to control media damage.
- Communicate all the time. Even if you don't have all the facts at hand yet you can at least issue a holding statement acknowledging that you are aware of the disaster and will respond with a statement soon. Be sympathetic and human and acknowledge any human suffering sensitively.
- Tone is everything in a crisis. Ensure that when you do communicate, even if it is while you are issuing a holding statement, that you do so in a tone that is appropriate for your company and for the crisis you are facing. Be human, kind, sympathetic and caring.
- In matters where your company may be liable for damages, get legal advice if you need it, but don't become a lawyer. There are ways of expressing concern without damaging your legal defence. There is nothing worse than legalese in the face of a human tragedy or crisis that involves human suffering.

- Stay the distance. A crisis can last a long time with crisis hours that run into days and even weeks. Make sure that your team can stay the distance and handle the event effectively from beginning to end.

When it is all over, learn from how things went down. What could you have done better? Update your strategy accordingly. Finally don't forget to sign off. Say your thank yous, respond to all the letters and close the door on a situation that hopefully won't happen again ... soon.

ABOUT MANDY DE WAAL

Mandy de Waal is a founding director of **IdeaEngineers**, a brand development and reputation management company. De Waal has led counsel on world class brands, winning global & local awards for her communications work in the field of technology. These include the Text 100 Chairman's Award and the Financial Mail PRISM award. An expert in communications strategy, consumerism and technology marketing, de Waal is regularly published in local business and marketing media. She is the Johannesburg Editor of Media Toolbox and sits on the editorial advisory board of The Journal for Convergence. De Waal is a regular contributor to local business and marketing publications.
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