



Spark's Top 10 Rules of Crisis Communication

1. Tell the Truth

We've all seen it: a scandal erupts. Instead of acknowledging mistakes, taking responsibility and supplying information about how and why it won't ever happen again, management hedges. Bits of the story dribble out, day after day, week after week. Hewlett-Packard, Sony, Firestone, politician after politician . . . does it ever work? No. Not telling the truth makes the crisis last longer and leaves a deeper negative impression in the minds of every target audience your marketing and PR professionals have ever identified.

The companies and individuals who come forward and show a good faith effort to bring everything out for scrutiny are the ones who survive with reputation intact and sometimes even enhanced. Remember the Tylenol scare? Their honest response and their fast, openly explained actions to show how it couldn't happen again is now a common textbook example of how to handle a disaster.

2. Know Who You're Really Talking To

Disasters come in all shapes and sizes. Some crises make it to the evening news, but some are much more local. Your disaster might be something that shows up in an industry trade magazine which needs immediate handling. Only those customers who read that trade magazine might ever hear about an erroneous statement some industry analyst made: but those happen to be your big-dollar clients.

When the cameras are rolling, or when the interviewer is poised with pen in hand after hitting you with an “ambush” question, know who it is that really needs to hear your key message: your own stakeholders. Think of the target audience who most needs to get your message. Always remember that the media is just a conduit. Put your messages in language and media outlets that your people will access and believe. And for heaven’s sake, get your story out unfiltered on your own web site, before anybody has a chance to slant it.

3. Defensive is Offensive

There’s nothing people like less than a whiner. It offends our sensibilities when teenagers get defensive – how much more irritated do you think your audience is when a professional tries to lob off responsibility or gets mad when confronted?

When putting a crisis communication plan together, at the very minimum get some media training for your identified spokespeople, and identify who can hold his or her temper and who might blow if the wrong question is asked. Sometimes it can be a surprise.

While media types like Fox News provocateur Bill O’Reilly loves to book guests who will get red in the face and splutter, make sure that none of your spokespeople ever fall into that category. Negative emotions must be handled with maturity and grace. Cry and rage and point fingers at others in private.

4. Be Sympathetic

Something happened. It may be your fault, it may not be. Regardless, the very first thing you must do in a crisis is make sure that your sympathies for those who have suffered loss of any kind are expressed and are genuine. Details can be sorted out, but if people, animals or property is hurt – express your shock and sympathy. It’s a human reaction. Your audience will understand that you, too, are shaken up, and they’ll start to empathize with *you*.

This is the opposite of defensiveness. It allows you to show your humanity in a positive way and starts the communication off on the right note.

5. Pro-Active is Always Better than Reactive

Once something has happened, don't sit around and wait for the next reporter or concerned citizen to call. Put information on your web site. Send out updates via email to relevant media and your internal audiences. If there's nothing new, provide photos or quotes that add dimension to your story. Post an audio clip or video, if possible, of your chief spokespeople relaying key messages.

Repetition of key messages is not a bad thing. In fact, it's necessary.

If you find an article or blog entry that contains erroneous information, contact the relevant person – writer or editor or news producer – immediately to ask for a clarification. Explain your position and perhaps you will get a whole new story out of it. Be polite as you provide accurate, detailed information, and treat the offender as a person who made an honest mistake. You're just there to help the reporter do a better job. Attitude is everything, in dealing with the press.

Whatever you do, don't write a nasty letter to the editor calling the publication a rag or the reporter a lazy slug. This will be kept forever, tacked to the cafeteria post-board, and you'll never get a positive story out of that outlet again.

6. Provide Information - Lots of Information

A disastrous crisis communication story: Menu Foods, which recalled more than 60 million cans of wet pet food in March 2007. They left it to the retailers – victims themselves – to explain the details to the media and customers. TV stations, without video or pictures of the recalled products, ran B-roll footage of pet food, some of which wasn't on the list. Large retailers were faced with customers lugging in bags of safe dry food for refunds and hysterical pet owners sure they'd poisoned their beloved animals, while store employees were armed with nothing more than lists of recalled cans.

There was more information on the Menu Foods web site, but not much.

The pending lawsuits will probably spell the end of Menu Foods. If they ever do struggle back to production, will their wholesale customers take them back?

It's not just the media that wants and needs info. Don't leave your internal community in the dark, watching the news for whatever they can discover.

7. Understand the Investigative Journalist Mindset

Accuracy and Detail – Fast. That's it. That's also one of the hardest things to provide to an investigative reporter, who may be openly suspicious of everything you provide.

It may be counter-intuitive, but a great way to work with an investigative reporter is to give them the other side of the story, too. Let them check it out. They're looking for balance, after all. If you're the source that's giving them accurate, verifiable information, you're going to get a lot more sympathy. A disgruntled employee or client who called the TV station to say how awful you are will have a hard time with credibility if you are open and honest with the reporter, and perhaps even provides the names and phone numbers of other employees who will give a balanced view.

Every few years, the nonprofit world is rocked with another scandal about how donated money is funneled into large salaries or fancy offices. The charity that says, "come on up, look over our books" is not going to be followed around by a camera crew in the parking lot.

8. Don't Try to Change the Rules

Once you've got an interview and the rules are negotiated, don't change your mind. The interview is a gift in a crisis situation. It's an opportunity to tell your story, in your words. If you suddenly decide that you'd rather it was all "off the record" you're going down the Defensive path and the reporter will immediately suspect you're manipulating the facts.

This rule is about credibility. "No comment" means "I know something I'm not going to tell you." To a reporter, this is offensive. This breaks the rule of the relationship that becomes implied when you agree to talk to the media.

In these situations it's always best to have a PR pro on hand who understands the media, their terminology and their deadline needs. The reporter will still want to interview the appropriate source, not the PR person, but all the background negotiation can be handled professionally and cleanly, so there is no miscommunication that makes the situation worse, instead of better.

9. Be Prepared

Don't wait for the phone call from the local TV station's investigative journalist to alert you to a problem. Set aside one day a quarter – or at least two days per year – to go over all the potential crises that might come up on your watch. Think about how you would handle them. What if your CEO suddenly died? What if your product reached the market with some kind of defect? What if a competitor did something awful and tarred your whole industry with a bad brush (think accounting firms after Enron) . . . you get the idea.

Identify spokespeople ahead of time and know their schedules and 24-hour contact information. Get some media training for them: how to create and use key messages, bridge to messages when questions go tangential, deal with “ambush” questions, etc.

Decide how and where you will get messages to your internal audiences in the event of a crisis – your company web site? Campus-wide text messaging? A recorded phone message by your CEO?

You may go through your entire career without facing a crisis situation. But as the boy scouts say: Be Prepared.

10. We're All Human Here

The main thing to remember when a crisis strikes is that we're all human, we all make mistakes, and we all have sympathy for the fact of human error. Now, if your company already has a terrible reputation, it will be hard to get forgiveness when disaster strikes – just ask Exxon, which will probably not be able to put the Exxon Valdez ecological disaster completely in the history books and out of people's minds for a full generation.

But with that caveat, the public is forgiving. True, you may become part of the sensational story du jour and feel as if the media are chewing on your very bones for a few days. But it is survivable. And if you handle it right, a crisis can enhance your reputation and visibility in the future.

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Spark PR Marketing brings crisis communication, media training and strategic planning expertise to the table. If you're facing a crisis or making the effort to be prepared, contact us for confidential, professional expertise.

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