Communication Strategies

Write your incident communication plan now

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Introduction

A colleague at Crisis Solutions once said that in most cases managing an incident is essentially the same as managing the media. Some people may not agree, but the truth is that if you do not deal quickly and effectively with the media fallout from an incident then your troubles may have only just begun.

This book should be read in conjunction with BS 25999-1:2006, Business continuity management: Code of practice, which establishes the principles of business continuity management. The standard sets out the requirement for a communication plan and is the starting point for this book.

Most organizations need a plan – even HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC). I should know because a few years ago, I wrote a communication plan for HMRC that involved travelling around the country to several of their offices, looking at disaster recovery sites and interviewing numerous members of staff. A process that anyone writing such a plan will have to undertake.

But this book is not just about communicating with the media – it has a wider remit; for example, on one occasion a client remarked that even if the world’s press were banging on the door, he would want to let his staff know what was going on first, before talking to journalists. So we will also look at internal communications – what to say to your staff. But bear in mind that whatever you say to your staff may up in the media, so consistent messages must be employed.

The media is fond of playing divide and rule so if you say one thing to your staff and another to the press – particularly if they are contradictory – then reporters will pursue you.

Media monitoring

Those working in communications generally take a keen interest in the news. As we will see, media monitoring during an incident is of prime importance – how will you know if you are winning the media war if you do not know what the press are saying about you?
Introduction

During an incident, it is essential that the communications team learn to think like journalists – only then will they be able to anticipate a reporter’s actions and questions.

As a former political reporter, Alistair Campbell, former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s press secretary, had an astute take on managing the media. Campbell instituted The Grid which itemized all upcoming events – both good and bad – putting his press room completely across the news cycle and allowing them to get their retaliation in first. He always maintained a critical story needed a full stop to draw it to a close – that or time – and claimed that only huge stories ran for more than 11 days.

Is this a story?

So what does constitute news? Lord Northcliffe – the press baron – famously said, ‘News is what someone, somewhere is trying to suppress, the rest is just advertising’. To me this still has the ring of truth about it.

People not in the media often assume the news is just ‘what happens’, but as any journalist will tell you, hours are spent in newsrooms with people saying, ‘Is this news? Will anyone care about this story?’. Similarly what is big news one day may be spiked the next. And of course if your organization is undergoing an incident you may be hoping for a larger story to come along to knock you out of the headlines.

In 1997 several other journalists and I were told to prepare to fly to India because it was widely known that Mother Teresa was very ill and would probably die in the next few days. Just prior to leaving, Princess Diana was killed in a car crash in Paris. Mother Teresa did indeed die, but I never went to India as what would under normal circumstances have been a front-page story was virtually ignored as the Princess’s death reverberated around the world. Predicting what will lead the news is a tricky business.

The public mood – ignore it at your peril

One of the main themes in this book is the importance of keeping in touch with the public mood. If your actions do not reflect the thoughts and feelings of your staff, clients, customers or indeed the wider public then your communications strategy is not working.
To give an example, when terrorists attacked London on 7 July 2005 the emergency services took a long time to set up an emergency phone number for those trying to find information about family and friends.

When the number was finally broadcast, switchboards were immediately swamped with calls – people were left hanging on the phone for long periods of time – only to discover later that this was not a freephone line but was costing, in some instances, up to 50p a minute.

**Getting it right**

But I do not want to accentuate only the negative – what about getting it right?

On the same day, Ken Livingstone, then the Mayor of London, issued a statement that I would argue got it spectacularly right. In the opening few paragraphs he praised the emergency services for their work and Londoners for their calm response – all essential details – but then he made what could have been a bland political statement come alive.

Here is part of what he had to say:

> I want to say one thing specifically to the world today. This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at Presidents or Prime Ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old. It was an indiscriminate attempt to slaughter, irrespective of any considerations for age, for class, for religion, or whatever.

> That isn’t an ideology, it isn’t even a perverted faith – it is just an indiscriminate attempt at mass murder and we know what the objective is. They seek to divide Londoners. They seek to turn Londoners against each other. Londoners will not be divided by this cowardly attack. They will stand together in solidarity alongside those who have been injured and those who have been bereaved and that is why I’m proud to be the mayor of that city.

In my view, the Mayor’s choice of words and his tone were entirely appropriate and in touch with the public mood.

Naturally, any communication plan must contain pre-prepared press statements and these will be examined in detail.
Writing your plan

There are many excellent books available on incident or crisis communications – where this book differs is that it is an attempt to outline all that is needed to create a communication plan. It is not a plan in itself and contains far more detail than most plans require. Think of it as a set of building blocks – take what you need, construct the plan that meets your requirements and discard the rest.

A plan must be user-friendly, should be compressed, flexible and easy to use. Huge screeds of text won’t do – you will need headlines, subheadings and checklists because if you do not include these then your plan may go unread and all your hard work will have been for nothing.

The first part of any communication plan will almost certainly contain a checklist of all the things that must be done now, or at least as soon as the plan is invoked. For many with expertise in communications it will be something of an aide-mémoire. Thereafter we will look at what constitutes an incident press room, what roles need to be filled, what potential crises might beset your organization and what you need to put in place to recover quickly.

We will look at press conferences – how to stage them, the role of press officers and the role of those giving the press conference. We will also look at how to conduct interviews – what to say and what to avoid. In large international organizations, it may well be that the plan will need details of overseas offices. You have a plant in Australia and an incident arises there – who speaks to the press, your staff and customers? There is a 12-hour time difference so waiting for Europe to wake up may not be an option.

In effect fact sheets may have to be written that deal with your various offices, plants, and manufacturing sites both locally and overseas.

Case studies

As well as writing plans I also run courses that help organizations update or institute communication plans. The courses are usually made up of communication experts from across Europe and I often feel that I learn as much as I teach – they tend to be very collaborative sessions.

The courses inevitably employ case studies, quite often these are not detailed expositions but rather brief memorable examples used to back up a particular
point. The same is true here, but also included are a couple of full-blown case studies. Every effort has been made to keep examples fresh and modern and not to trot out those that are familiar. Often they are instances of things I witnessed when working as a journalist.

BS 25999

Subclause 8.5.5 of BS 25999 has this to say about communications:

The organization’s media response should be documented in the IMP [incident management plan], including:

a) the incident communications strategy;
b) the organization’s preferred interface with the media;
c) a guideline or template for the drafting of a statement to be provided to the media at the earliest practicable opportunity following the incident;
d) appropriate numbers of trained, competent, spokespeople nominated and authorized to release information to the media;
e) establishment, where practicable, of a suitable venue to support liaison with the media, or other stakeholder groups.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to:

• provide supporting detail in a separate document;
• establish an appropriate number of competent, trained people to answer telephone enquiries from the press;
• prepare background material about the organization and its operations (this information should be pre-agreed for release);
• ensure that all media information is made available without undue delay.

The commentary on 8.5.5 goes on to say:

Pre-prepared information can be especially useful in the early stages of an incident. It enables an organization to provide details about the organization and its business while details of the incident are still being established. An organization may use all applicable means to share information during and after an incident. Such sources may include websites, spokespeople, news sources, and generic company briefing statements.

8.5.6 This subclause deals with stakeholder management:
A process for identifying and prioritizing communications with other key stakeholders should be included. It may be necessary to develop a separate stakeholder management plan to provide criteria for setting priorities and allocating a person to each stakeholder or group of stakeholders.

And, tellingly, the commentary on 8.5.6 makes the point:

Pressure or community action groups who collectively have power or influence over the organization might also need to be considered.

If journalists can cause your organization trouble, then journalists in conjunction with activists and pressure groups can open the door to a whole world of pain.

I have quoted the relevant subclauses of BS 25999 in some detail because although they are brief, circumscribed and to the point, to be able to respond in the manner they suggest means a lot of hard work and attention to detail. The Standard must remain our watchword throughout this book, which will only be judged a success if it enables you and your organization to comply more readily with BS 25999 and thus be well prepared to deal with incidents.

One thing I have noticed over the years, whether during real crises or simulations, is that there is quite often a strong individual communicator – usually the head of communications – who takes control of the situation. A real worry for many organizations is: what if that individual is ill, away on holiday or leaves the company? The beauty of having a communication plan is that if it is correctly researched and written it should work regardless of who is in charge.

Keeping it fresh

Once a plan is written, someone has to take ownership of it.

A call cascade has been described as ‘tool number one’ in an incident media toolkit, but what use is a call cascade if it is not kept up to date? Someone must grasp that responsibility and indeed the responsibility for keeping the whole plan current.

Finally, once it is complete, do not let your plan gather cyberdust on your computer’s hard drive. If you have done a good job then shout it from the rooftops and let people know. And do not just send your colleagues an email attachment of your work. Email attachments have a remarkable ability to go...
unread. Print copies and distribute them, then hold half-day sessions to introduce staff to the plan.

One of the great gripes within the business continuity fraternity is getting senior management buy in. Senior executives do not like the look of crises and usually do not wish to be reminded of them. They can also be a little hesitant when it comes to opening the chequebook to pay for matters related to incident planning.

Well the good news is that writing a communication plan will cost very little aside from the time spent putting it together. If you have been tasked with writing or updating such a plan then read on.
1. Types of incidents

‘When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.’
Ernest Hemingway

Is this serious or are we just having a bad day?

In communications terms you are involved in an incident if the reputation of your organization is threatened – usually as a result of hostile media attention. Many factors can contribute to an incident, but if you or your company are perceived to be to blame for what has occurred then your problems are likely to intensify – we live in a blame culture.

If a terror bomb detonates outside your offices, you cannot be held responsible even if you are the target of the attack – you are not to blame. But if your response to the situation is deemed to be slow or inept, then your reputation could be threatened.

Slow-burn or sudden

Emergencies are often thought of as bolts from the blue – something unforeseen and unexpected. That is not always true. In general it is possible to identify two types of incident: a sudden or abrupt incident and what can be called a slow-burn incident.

The first is the bolt from the blue – perhaps a plane crash or a terror attack. There will be little time to plan for such an event so a communication plan that sets out roles, responsibilities and tasks is essential. It may be difficult to contact staff in such circumstances, so a call-out plan or call cascade will be an indispensable tool.

The second type can be called a slow-burn incident – for example, a major strike or outbreak of disease. It is possible to see these incidents coming, but of course their severity and duration may be unpredictable. It should be possible, however, to tailor a plan to deal with such an event.

Before starting to write a communication plan you will need to carry out a communications risk assessment on behalf of your organization. Specific areas
of your plan will need to reflect where you are most at risk. If you are an airline then your plan will need to contain pre-prepared press releases in the event of a plane crash. Similarly if you are in heavy industry and part of your plant can be dangerous your plan will need to contain details such as the plant’s safety record and your operating procedures together with press release templates.

**Memorable example**

**Lockerbie air crash**

If you are a victim of a terror attack this may cause your company serious problems and you will need to have a business continuity plan all set to go to overcome the emergency. It should not, however, cause you a problem with the media unless the problem is of your own making. If you are seen to be inept, insensitive or out of touch with the public mood, the media and the public may turn against you.

It is always astonishing when leading companies go out of business – they seem to be part of the international business architecture – but where are Pan Am and, more recently, Lehman Brothers? What seemed bulletproof companies are no longer trading.

In the case of Pan Am, the company was the victim of a dreadful terror attack when Flight 103 fell out of the sky onto a Scottish village killing all 259 passengers and 11 crew on 21 December 1988. The plane was half an hour from Heathrow Airport, where it had picked up 49 passengers from a connecting flight from Frankfurt.

The US embassy in Europe had received a warning concerning a possible bomb threat to a Pan Am flight from Frankfurt to the US two weeks before the attack on Flight 103 took place. Although the press initially concentrated on the human loss, they wanted to know very quickly not only which terrorist group was responsible but also how the bomb had got onto the plane in the first place.

Pan Am said little. When the company did make a statement, it claimed there had been no bomb warning, and chief executive officer (CEO) Thomas Plaskett lay low and said nothing. He did not visit the site or attend the victims’ funerals – he was effectively invisible.
Potential risks

Here are examples of potential risks that could affect your organization:

- Terror attack
- Plane crash
- Disease outbreak
- Loss of critical data
- IT crash that involves data loss
- Product recall
- Outsourced products that bear your name prove to be faulty or in some way reflect badly on your organization
- Staff or other company stakeholders die or are injured
- Hostile takeover bid
- Illness caused by your company that affects the general public (release of toxic gases, chemical spill, food poisoning, etc)
- Death of top executive
- Floods/earthquake/other severe weather
- Fire or explosion at your plant/factory/offices, etc.
- Your company is associated with some form of fraud or embezzlement
- Major interruption to your business operation (strikes, illness, loss of power/data)
- A change in the law making some part of your operation illegal or at best out of step with public opinion
- Share price plummeting
- Significant job losses
- Closing of a plant/factory/office
- Senior executive caught lying or at least being ‘economical with the truth’
- Senior member of your company involved in a personal scandal
- Senior executive inadvertently says damaging things about your organization.
Types of incidents

Some of these incidents are entirely unpredictable – some are not. Where is your company most at risk? Talk to your colleagues, find out more and keep a list.

Before we move on, what about the last bullet point: senior executive inadvertently says damaging things about your organization? That sounds familiar.

Memorable example

Doing a Ratner

Many people in the UK will the know the story of jewellery boss Gerald Ratner calling one of his products ‘crap’, which led to the rapid unravelling of his firm and his fortune. Whenever a senior executive says something less than complimentary about their firm (for example, when an executive at Topman said their target market was ‘hooligans’ whose suits would be ‘worn at his first job interview or first court case!’) it is now known as ‘doing a Ratner’ and his story is dutifully wheeled out.

In his autobiography Ratner makes the point, ‘I had worked bloody hard for 30 years, making millions of pounds for shareholders and creating thousands of jobs for a company I loved, and I had suddenly had it taken away from me. Not for doing anything criminal. I hadn’t embezzled. I hadn’t lied. All I had done was say a sherry decanter was crap’. In monetary terms he lost a £650,000 salary, had £500 million wiped off the valuation of his company and as he says, ‘a billion-pound turnover slashed overnight’.

A common fear among those facing the media is that they will say something off the cuff or spontaneous that under normal circumstances they would never dream of saying, or that their words will be twisted by unscrupulous journalists to mean something they never intended.

A common misconception is that Ratner made an unscripted remark, which he was to regret later. In fact he had made the remark about the sherry decanter being crap many times before – his other favourite gag was to say that some of Ratners’ earrings were cheaper than a Marks & Spencer prawn sandwich. His intention was clear – to be funny in a self-deprecating way.
In 1991 he was asked to speak at an Institute of Directors (IoD) annual conference being held at the Royal Albert Hall. Clearly this was a wealthy group of people who had probably never bought any of Ratners’ high street jewellery. He made the jokes, got a laugh and a standing ovation at the end of the speech.

Let us pause and leave Ratner, with the applause ringing in his ears.

This book is not given much to theory, but when talking to the media the experience can be divided into three component parts: the Medium, the Message and the Audience.

The Medium is the method by which it is transmitted (radio, newspaper, television, etc), the Message or messages are the points you want to get across during the interview and, finally, the Audience are those people who hear or read your words. All are important, but the audience stands head and shoulders above the other two.

Let us return to Ratner. As he leaves the Royal Albert Hall a journalist from the Daily Mirror accosts him and asks why he is knowingly selling crap to his customers. The next day the headline in The Sun was ‘Crapners’ and the Daily Mirror went with ‘You 22 carat gold mugs’. Ratner’s great mistake was in thinking he was merely talking to the audience in front of him – in this case members of the IoD. Of course with journalists and camera crews present, his remarks went a lot further than he had anticipated.

The Sun, in particular, went after him even when he had to sell his house, which of course became known as ‘the house that crap built’. Some messages work for some audiences and others do not. The IoD audience laughed and The Sun, on behalf of its readers, took a po-faced attitude that affects Ratner to this day.

When journalists are present always assume that the microphone is on, the camera is turning and the notebook is open, and make sure your messages are in tune with all of your audiences – particularly those not present.