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Businesses Can Learn From Crisis Communications Mishaps

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Good policy fosters good public relations, just as flawed policy fosters bad public relations.

New Mexico residents have only to look at recent crises at the Albuquerque Police Department, Waste Isolation Pilot Plant and state Human Services Department for proof of how an organization can exacerbate its situation with poor communication and vague, inconsistent messaging.

Business owners can learn from these examples how — and how not — to handle crisis communications. First they need to understand why high-profile accidents or events develop into stories with “legs” that carry them forward for weeks or longer.



The “News Bottle”

The life span of a crisis depends on how quickly the afflicted organization shares facts with core audiences. This dissemination of information can be seen as a “news bottle.”

When a crisis erupts and facts are few, the bottle fills with accusation as people assign blame for what happened. Absent experts, anyone can claim expertise, especially on unfiltered social media sites.

The goal of crisis communications is to fill the news bottle with facts ASAP. Eventually, accusations give way to speculation about what caused the crisis. Many organizations stall in this phase because their attorneys worry about legal liability. News reporters get more aggressive as they follow multiple leads.

The Human Services Department is stuck in this phase. Department attorneys say HSD’s legal case would be jeopardized if documents are released showing why HSD pulled Medicaid contracts from 15 New Mexico nonprofit service providers.

The Albuquerque Police Department has been stuck here since 2012, when the Department of Justice began investigating officer-involved shootings. A recent DOJ report substantiated many accusations and pointed a way forward for the department.

WIPP – a repository for low-level radioactive material – spent weeks in the accusation phase because it could not access the physical site of an underground fire and radiation leak.

As these organizations learned, filling the news bottle with facts replaces speculation and accusation with clues that lead toward closure and resolution.

Four Audiences

In the process of filling the news bottle with facts, an organization needs to be sure to communicate with the right audiences – victims, employees and vendors, customers and the media.

A victim is anyone who claims harm. Victims of the Albuquerque Police Department crisis, for example, include the mentally ill and families and friends of people shot and/or killed by police. The compassion shown the victims influences the speed and success of weathering the crisis.

A business can enlist employees, customers and vendors as emissaries during a crisis by being honest with them. It can do likewise with customers and vendors, who are naturally curious when a crisis affects a business relationship. A business website or social media site is one way to silence the rumor mill – but only if the company is regularly engaged in that space. Digital media helps to centralize the flow of information and ensures a consistent message.

Transparency with the media is essential, as reporters will find independent ways to tell a story if starved for facts. Savvy organizations see news gatherers as partners in disseminating accurate information to the public and target audiences.

All crises end. Whether or not the organization survives depends on how it communicates.

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