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A Casebook Approach

Fourth Edition

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to refuse to reveal details about their personal lives. However, they must also realize that the news media have the right to investigate and reveal. If the person is certain—and certainty is difficult—that information that would be detrimental to his image cannot be discovered, then he may refuse to address it, to reveal it. However, a secret is only secret if only one person knows it. Once two, three, or more are aware, the chances of protecting privacy are lost.

Public persons should know that when they have illicit affairs, their sexual partners are likely to talk to somebody. In fact, sharing that juicy information with their friends is a primary reason for having an affair. They become in demand for conversation. Their stock goes up in the community. Just as TV viewers enjoy watching news about celebrity affairs, they doubly enjoy hearing about their associates and friends who have affairs with famous and/or powerful people.

Last, if the public person can sit it out, the scandal sometimes goes away, especially if the person is careful that a misdeed never recurs.

Chapter Fifteen

The Crisis Communications Plan

Crisis Inventory

Before an organization can develop a crisis management plan or a crisis communications plan, it must determine which crisis or crises the organization is most likely to face. A crisis communications plan's usefulness is directly associated with how specific it is to a particular type of crisis.

The workbook for this text takes the user through a step-by-step process of developing the crisis communications plan. Although there are several items in the plan that are mutual to all types of crises, varying information is needed for each type of crisis for maximum effectiveness. For example, a restaurant chain may decide that food poisoning and fire are its most probable crises. If a food poisoning crisis occurs, the media will want, and the public relations department should have, the following items readily available and in its crisis communications plan: recipes, a list of ingredients stocked, a list of vendors used, kitchen precautions and procedures, names and contact numbers of chefs and all other personnel handling food, and a list of medical experts for consultation and as spokespersons.

If a fire occurs, the public relations department should have, in a specific crisis communications plan, information about its evacuation procedures, its policy on using nonflammable decor items (such as window coverings and tablecloths), the floor plan of the structure, and fire experts for spokespersons.

The following list enumerates common types of crises. There are, of course, numerous others. Companies and organizations are advised to consider the list carefully and add types of crises specific to their operations.

Common Types of Crises

acquisition
age discrimination
alcohol abuse

bankruptcy
boycott
bribery

chemical spill or leak	murder
computer failure	negative legislation
computer hacking	plant closing
contamination	product failure
data loss/theft	protest demonstrations
drug abuse	racial issues
drug trafficking	robbery
earthquake	sexual discrimination
embezzlement	sexual harassment
explosion	strikes
fatality	suicide
fire	takeover
flood	tax problems
hacking	terrorism
hurricane	tornado
kickbacks	toxic waste
kidnapping	transportation accident
lawsuits	transportation failure
layoffs	workplace violence
merger	

Some crises will involve more than one of the types listed, such as workplace violence and fatality, or boycott and sexual discrimination.

Perhaps the involvement of the entire company or of representatives from each department can help determine the crises the company is likely to face. Then each unit's selections could be compared and compiled into a company-wide list. When done properly, this can be an effective proactive employee relations program, a way of creating "we-ness," a way of including all of the employees in the company's decision making. Janitors, executive assistants, blue-collar and white-collar workers, midlevel executives, as well as top executives can have a say. After all, each employee stands to suffer if the company should go under after the most serious of crises. Furthermore, employees in each position classification have unique perspectives on things that can go wrong. Janitors are more aware of heating and cooling equipment, possible gas leaks, and so on. Workers on an automobile assembly line know more about the quality of cars than managers in carpeted offices.

However, if a company-wide crisis identification program is not feasible, a meeting of key employees familiar with all facets of the operation can determine the crises the company is likely to face. Such a meeting should certainly include more than public relations staff members. You do not want the company blaming the public relations staff for the failure to recognize a possible crisis.

Frequently, ascertaining probable crises can point out problems that prevent crises from occurring. This is the primary reason for company-wide involvement. The second best reason is being able to manage a crisis once it occurs.

Every company and organization can experience many types of crises. Two questions must be answered: (a) How likely is this crisis? and (b) how devastating can the crisis be? Crisis communications plans should be developed for all crises believed to be both most probable and most devastating. To do this, the public relations department, with its key executives, must take an inventory. Each possible crisis must be ranked as follows:

- 0—Impossible; that is, the crisis has basically no chance of occurring.
- 1—Nearly impossible.
- 2—Remotely possible.
- 3—Possible.
- 4—Somewhat probable; has happened to similar companies.
- 5—Highly probable; may or may not have previously occurred in the company, but warning signs are evident.

Each crisis also should be ranked according to its potential damage to the company. The rankings in this category are as follows:

- 0—No damage, not a serious consequence.
- 1—Little damage, can be handled without much difficulty, not serious enough for the media's concern.
- 2—Some damage, a slight chance that the media will be involved.
- 3—Considerable damage, but still will not be a major media issue.
- 4—Considerable damage, would definitely be a major media issue.
- 5—Devastating, front-page news, could put company out of business.

For added security, when in doubt, rank a crisis in the next highest category. For instance, Company Z determines that there are five crises it could face: workplace violence, fire, protest demonstrations, negative legislation, and tax problems. Each of these crises might be ranked as shown in Figure 15.1.

Keep in mind that a crisis you determine to be unlikely simply because it has never happened before can happen tomorrow. Both human nature and mother nature are very unpredictable, so natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes) and human failures should be expected to some degree.

After rankings for probability and damage are made, bar graphs should be made to clearly see and consider each crisis and compare it to others. (Bar graphing can be done on various computer programs or by hand.)

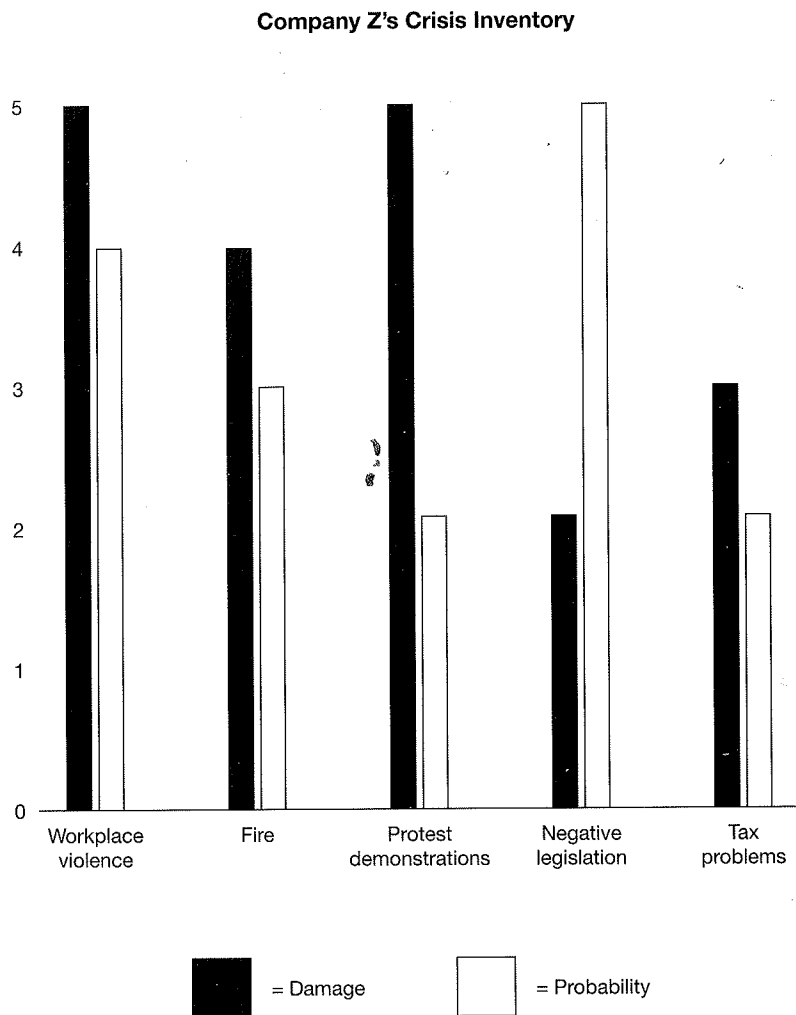


Figure 15.1 A sample bar graph showing how an organization might assess the probability of, and degrees of damage resulting from, various types of crises.

At the base of each graph, write the name of each type of crisis. Plot the height of each bar according to numbers attributed to each crisis in the probability and damage rankings. Choose different colors or shadings for probability bars and damage bars.

When Company Z plots its data on a bar graph, it resembles Figure 15.1. Considering Company Z's graph, we see that the probability and

seriousness of a crisis relating to tax problems is not as crucial as in the other crises. This does not mean that a crisis plan is not important for tax problems; it's just not as important as for other issues, and not a priority.

According to the graph, the possibility of Company Z's suffering a crisis resulting from negative legislation is likely, though not particularly critical. On the other hand, protest demonstrations are critical, although not very likely. Workplace violence and fire seem both likely and critical.

Most organizations plan for crises ranked high in both probability and damage. In this case, Company Z would probably develop crisis management and communications plans for workplace violence first, then for the other crises in descending order of importance: fire, protest demonstrations, negative legislation, and tax problems.

Sometimes organizations make crisis plans for the most devastating crises no matter how probable or improbable they may be. In this case, Company Z would develop plans for workplace violence first, followed by protest demonstrations, then fire. Naturally, a version of Murphy's Law can be expected: That crisis for which you have no plan will likely happen. However, you will find that any plan, and the process of developing that plan, will make you more prepared for crises generally.

Some organizations, having several crises classified with similar rankings in all categories, make general crisis communications plans with detailed information for all types of crises, although sometimes the detailed information is omitted.

Many companies, fearing all possibilities of crises equally, merely adopt a policy of "open and honest response" with the media and all publics, and plan to be in a total reactive mode during a crisis.

The importance of the crisis inventory is to force organizations to think about the possibilities. Sometimes the most ridiculous crisis occurs, something no one in the company could predict. Pepsi probably never dreamed that it would have a crisis about hypodermic syringes in its cans. On the other hand, Foodmaker and Jack-in-the-Box could certainly have anticipated children dying from eating hamburgers, and Exxon could have anticipated a devastating oil spill.

The ranking procedure may introduce ideas for prevention programs. You also may realize that your organization is more vulnerable than you anticipated.

Considering that the toll of stress and emotion during a crisis necessarily affects one's thought processes, a carefully developed crisis communications plan is the best substitute for a fully functioning brain. Even if you remain cool and calm under pressure, others in the company may not. The crisis communications plan alleviates this problem, too.

Developing the Crisis Communications Plan

Once likely crises have been identified, the crisis communications plan can be written. A crisis communications plan can be part of a larger crisis management plan (CMP) or it may be a stand-alone document to help public relations practitioners handle crises more effectively.

The CMP includes information such as evacuation procedures, emergency staffing of various departments of a company, and places to purchase or rent emergency equipment, tools, or vehicles—all the things a company may need in a crisis.

Public relations during a crisis focuses on communications with the company's publics during the crisis—for the most part, the same publics to which normal PR activities are directed.

The CMP is sometimes a large volume of instructions, whereas a crisis communications plan should be a more manageable, easier-to-read document. After a crisis has erupted, employees are likely to look at a large volume and say, "We don't have time to read this now," and then proceed to handle the crisis by "winging" it. The crisis communications plan should be organized in such a way that the practitioners can quickly turn to each section. Some professionals use tabs in a notebook; others use a table of contents. Keeping the crisis communications plan on a computer can be dangerous because many crises prevent access to offices (fire, earthquakes, explosives, etc.).

Many companies (such as Johnson & Johnson after the Tylenol crisis) urge employees to keep copies of the plan in various key spots—the office, at home, near the night stand, or in the car. That way, the odds are good that at least one copy will be readily available should a crisis or disaster occur.

If a crisis inventory determines, for example, that there are three likely crises, the organization should draft a crisis communications plan for each type. A plan for an earthquake must be different from a plan for a product failure. The publics may be different; the media may be different; the message must be different.

The crisis communications plan states purposes, policies, and goals, then assigns employees to various duties. It generally makes communication with publics faster and more effective and should help end the crisis more swiftly than without a plan.

When a crisis communications plan is ineffective, it is usually because the type of crisis was not anticipated or because variables arose that were not anticipated. For example, spokespersons or supplies may not be available. The crisis communications plan sometimes fails because it is outdated. Such plans should be updated regularly.

Even if unanticipated variables do arise, the crisis communications plan should be more effective than having no plan at all. Still, it must be

remembered that a crisis communications plan is not a manual guaranteeing success, with everything done "by the book," but rather a guide that must be flexible.

An effective crisis communications plan should have the following components, arranged in an order that best suits the organization and the particular crisis or disaster:

- cover page
- introduction
- acknowledgments
- rehearsal dates
- purpose and objectives
- list of key publics
- notifying publics
- identifying the crisis communications team
- crisis directory
- identifying the media spokesperson
- list of emergency personnel and local officials
- list of key media
- spokespersons for related organizations
- crisis communications control center
- equipment and supplies
- pregathered information
- key messages
- website
- blogs and social media
- trick questions
- list of prodromes
- list of related Internet URLs
- evaluation form.

Cover Page

The cover page of a crisis communications plan is similar to the cover page of a term paper. There are as many ways of doing one as there are ways of doing crisis communications plans. It should include at least the date when the plan was written as well as revision dates.

Introduction

The head of the company or organization usually writes the introduction (or the PR practitioner ghostwrites it for the CEO with his or her approval). The purpose of this component is to persuade employees to take the crisis communications plan seriously. It stresses the necessity and

importance of the plan and it emphasizes the dire results possible when a plan is not followed.

Acknowledgments

This crisis communications plan component takes the form of an affidavit signed by all crisis personnel as well as by key executives, indicating that they have read the plan and are prepared to put it into effect. The signatures assure management that its personnel have read the plan.

Rehearsal Dates

Dates of rehearsals for all crises are recorded here. The most damaging and most likely crises should be practiced at least annually if not every 6 months. Rehearsal for any type of crisis is helpful even if an eventual crisis turns out to be somewhat different.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose statement details the organization's policies toward its publics. It might say, for example, "In a crisis, an open and honest disclosure with the media shall be stressed." The purpose is an expressed hope for a recovery and return to normalcy, to get out of the media. The objectives are responses to the question, "What do you hope to achieve with this plan?" Objectives should not be overly ambitious in difficulty or number. For example, a company may adopt the following goals:

1. To be seen in the media as a company that cares about its customers and employees.
2. To make certain that all communications are accurate.

List of Key Publics

The key publics list should include all publics, both external and internal, with which the organization must communicate during the crisis. The list varies with organizations, but may include the following as well as others:

- board members
- shareholders
- financial partners
- investors
- community leaders
- customers

- clients
- suppliers
- vendors
- neighbors of physical plant(s)
- competitors
- key management
- employees
- legal representation
- media
- union officials
- retirees
- government officials (city, state, county, federal).

Although all publics need not be notified in every crisis, the list of key publics should be comprehensive. It is easier to eliminate unneeded publics at the time of crisis than it is to think of all the crucial publics during the stress of a crisis.

Publics fall into the following categories:

- Enabling publics—those people with the power and authority to make decisions: the board of directors, shareholders, investors, and key executives. Notifying enabling publics is a priority.
- Functional publics—the people who actually make the organization work: employees, unions, suppliers, vendors, consumers, and volunteers in the case of nonprofit organizations.
- Normative publics—those people who share values with the organization in crises: trade associations, professional organizations, and competitors.
- Diffused publics—those people linked indirectly to the organization in crisis: the media, community groups, and neighbors of the physical plant.

Notifying Publics

To notify publics, a system must be devised for contacting each public, and that system should be described in the crisis communications plan. Social media networks such as Facebook groups can be used if people use computers constantly. For internal publics, many companies use a chain procedure, such as a telephone tree, in which each person is specifically designated to call others. The person who learns about the crisis first notifies the CEO, the head of public relations, and the head of the department that may be involved. The chain should be clear and error-free, even in the event that certain individuals are not reached.

An appropriate means of notification must be decided on for each public. A news release, for example, is appropriate primarily for the news media, not for other publics.

Board members are often reached by telephone or fax. E-mail or other computerized communications are also used. The media can be notified by way of telephone, wire service, fax, press conference, e-mail, or news release. Other methods used for notifying publics include telegrams, personal visits, letters, advertisements, bulletin boards, and meetings (see Figure 15.2).

Identifying the Crisis Communications Team

The crisis communications team members, along with back-ups, should be preselected. The team manager is usually, but not always, the head of public relations. He or she has specific responsibilities: communicating with top management, making decisions, drafting or approving major statements, and notifying the rest of the crisis communications team.

YOUR COMPANY

MESSAGE: There has been an explosion in the plant. There are injured employees. We do not know, at this time, the cause of the explosion or the extent of the injuries of the employees. An investigation is underway.

Methods of Communication

	TELEPHONE	EMAIL	FAX	LETTER BY MESSENGER	LETTER BY MAIL	NEWSLETTER	BULLETIN BOARD	PERSONAL VISIT	NEWS RELEASE	MEETINGS
EMPLOYEES		*J. Naas				*J. Naas	*J. Naas			
EXECUTIVES	*Nelson J.	*Nelson J.						*Nelson J. M. Verima		*Nelson J.
CUSTOMERS					*Damien L.					
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	*Nelson J.				*Damien L.				*Gina A.	
ELECTRONIC MEDIA	*K. Stone		*K. Stone						*Gina A.	
DAILY NEWSPAPERS	*Gina A.								*Gina A.	
WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS			*Gina A.		*Damien L.					
SHARE HOLDERS		*Ann C.				*Ann C.				
COMMUNITY LEADERS			*Karen N.			*Karen N.				

*Staff member responsible for communications and followup

Figure 15.2 A sample chart showing how an organization might plan to communicate with key publics during a crisis. It includes key talking points and ways of communicating. The lists of publics and types of communication can be longer, shorter, or otherwise different depending on the organization's needs.

The assistant crisis manager assumes responsibility when the manager is unavailable (a second back-up may be beneficial, if possible). The control room coordinator sets up the room with necessary furniture, equipment, supplies, and tools. An efficient executive assistant can be appointed for this position.

Other PR personnel have the responsibilities of preparing news releases and statements, contacting the media, and reporting all actions to the crisis communications manager. These people may notify employees or volunteers through letters or by writing telegrams to the mayor and governor, by telephoning union officials and others, and so forth.

Crisis Directory

The company should prepare a crisis directory, listing all members of the crisis team, key managers in the company, and key publics or organizations, along with titles, business and home telephone numbers, cellular phone numbers, fax and e-mail addresses, as well as business, home, and vacation addresses. It is also helpful to list the phone numbers of friends, neighbors, and relatives who are frequently in contact with persons crucial to the crisis recovery.

The crisis team should be large enough to get the job done, but no larger. Having too many people involved makes it difficult to get tasks completed and decisions made. There is no time in a crisis for egos; each person must be a team player. It is also preferable that crisis team members be generally healthy and capable of working under stress. They should be reliable professionals, whether gofers, interns, or assistants.

Identifying the Media Spokesperson

The media spokesperson must be selected carefully. To the public, this person is the company or organization.

Actually, sometimes several persons are spokespersons. This is an arguable point in the public relations profession. Some argue for one spokesperson per crisis, usually the CEO. Others argue for several spokespersons, depending on area of expertise. Clearly, the decision is a matter of what suits the company and type of crisis best.

Even if the CEO is an effective spokesperson, he or she may not be particularly knowledgeable about a technical aspect of the crisis. For example, during an oil spill, the company CEO is not the only important spokesperson; also needed is a person qualified to talk about what will be necessary for the clean-up. Frequently, university professors are called on for their specific knowledge about technical aspects of a crisis and for their credibility.

Another school of thought is that CEOs have no credibility because they have too much to lose. However, if lives are lost or in danger—including the lives of animals—most professionals agree that the company head must be the chief spokesperson.

In all cases, at least one, and preferably two or three, back-up spokespersons should be preselected in case the preferred person is unavailable at the time of the crisis. Crises can occur when people are on vacation, on business trips, or sick with the flu. When the 1989 San Francisco earthquake struck, for example, the first two designated spokespersons for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company were at the World Series game at Candlestick Park. The third spokesperson on the list was called and pressed into service.

An effective crisis spokesperson must have some position in the company. It is usually not the PR head, even if the PR person is normally the company's spokesperson. The spokesperson must also be articulate, powerful enough to make decisions, accessible throughout the crisis, able to talk clearly in concise sound bites, and pleasant to the eye of a camera. Moreover, the spokesperson in a crisis must appear rational, concerned, and empathetic. He or she should be pretrained, rehearsed well in advance of the crisis, and briefed prior to the crisis response. The organization's legal adviser should be consulted before statements are made.

If the public relations department is a small or one-person operation, it may be beneficial to have capable, trustworthy volunteers to perform some tasks. Outside public relations firms that specialize in crisis planning and handling might be used. A nonprofit organization can often get PR firms to help pro bono (done or donated without charge). Many nonprofit organizations have PR practitioners on their boards of directors, anticipating the need for their assistance during a crisis.

At times, one person may be required to perform all communications roles. On the other hand, in large companies several people may perform each role.

List of Emergency Personnel and Local Officials

If the crisis is a disaster or emergency, various emergency personnel need to be contacted. A list should be made of contact numbers for police, fire officials, hospitals, the health department, utilities, and paramedics.

If the crisis affects large numbers of people or is a threat to the safety of people, government officials must be contacted. This list should include contact information for the mayor, governor, city council members, county officials, state legislators, and U.S. senators and representatives.

Sometimes union officials must be notified, and they should therefore be listed, as well as key citizens groups and community organizations.

List of Key Media

After key executives are called, the media are the next most important public to notify about the crisis. A list of media contacts—newspapers, television, radio, wire services—should be completed and listed in order of importance. If particular editors or reporters are important to telling the story to the organization's benefit, a list of their home numbers and emergency numbers will be advantageous.

The media list should contain contact information for morning and afternoon metropolitan dailies, certain weeklies, all TV news stations, the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, all radio news stations, and trade publications.

Spokespersons for Related Organizations

If an organization suffers a severe crisis, there may be spokespersons outside the organization who may be questioned. It may be effective to make a list of who these people might be and how to contact them at any time of day. It also might be effective to meet with them so that they are familiar with your company, with how you will handle a crisis, if it occurs, and with how to reach you.

Sometimes other spokespersons have information you don't have. This information may help you communicate more effectively. So you need to be able to reach them. Because most people have cell phones, this could be a simple task.

In the Metro Transit case in Chapter 13, involving a bus accident and shooting, the news media interviewed the public information officers for the bus company, the police department, the fire department, the hospitals, and spokespersons for county and city officials. The bus company spokesman learned from the news media that a gun was found on one of the victims, and had to scramble to get to the police to find the information. In this case, the spokespersons got together at the site of the accident and determined that they would refer the media's questions to one particular spokesperson. If, instead, the spokespersons had exchanged cell phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or home phone numbers prior to the crisis, they would have been aware of what procedure to follow regarding the media spokesperson.

Crisis Communications Control Center

The location of the crisis communications control center must be determined in case regular office space is unavailable. After disasters and emergencies, offices are often damaged, without power, or inaccessible.

Several possible sites should be listed in the crisis communications plan, as well as the persons instrumental in gaining access to these locations.

Suppose, for example, a local church has offered its conference room. Who gave permission to use the room? Who can unlock the doors of the church and conference room? Does the permission include use of electrical outlets and furniture? Does the site have adequate space for the media to work?

Equipment and Supplies

Determine and list all of the equipment and supplies needed by the crisis team, media, and visiting publics. The list could include, but is not limited to, the following:

- chairs and desks
- bulletin boards
- flip charts and chalkboards
- computers or typewriters (perhaps manual typewriters in case power is a problem)
- computer printers
- telephones and cellular phones
- battery-powered televisions and radios
- maps of the plant or crisis area
- battery-powered flashlights and lamps
- police radios
- walkie-talkies
- company letterhead, pens, and pencils
- telephone directories
- contact lists and media directories
- press kits
- CMPs and crisis communications plans
- street and highway maps
- food and beverages
- copying machine(s)
- first-aid kits
- cameras and film
- extension cords and generator power packs.

Pregathered Information

Prepare and gather various documents that may possibly be needed during a crisis. Keep identical sets of documents in various locales to ensure availability. The types of documents that can be gathered in advance include safety records and procedures, annual reports, photos, company backgrounders, executive biographies, company maps, branch office locations, quality control procedures, product manufacturing procedures,

and company fact sheets (including such data as numbers of employees, products manufactured, and markets served).

Skeletal news releases can be prepared as long as the PR practitioner anticipates the type of crisis and can make a statement on behalf of the company. As shown in Figure 15.3, a news release can be written in advance with blank spaces left for data to be filled in (such as the magnitude of the crisis and relevant dates and names).

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date _____

Contact: _____
(name/phone number)

_____ (name of celebrity) DIES

(SEATTLE) _____ (full name and title) _____ died
today of _____ (cause of death) at _____ (time
of death) _____ at Swedish Hospital Medical Center in Seattle.
He/She was _____ (age).

Further details will be released by _____ (name of person to
make announcement—family member or professional contact) at a news
conference scheduled for _____ (time of news
conference), at Swedish Hospital, Glaser Auditorium, 747 Summit Ave.

#

Figure 15.3 A sample fill-in-the-blanks news release

Key Messages

Under the stress of a crisis, it is easy to forget, or at least fail to state properly, the main points you want to convey to publics or to a specific public. Even when there is no crisis, experienced spokespersons prepare in advance the primary information they want emphasized in what are called key messages or speaking points.

The act of preparing key messages will help you organize your thoughts and will provide consistent information to publics. Each message must be accurate, brief, easy to use in a quote, and memorable. The spokesperson must be easily able to work the key message into responses to questions. Such messages also help reporters—who are looking for great quotes—to do their jobs.

Effective key messages help avoid misquoting, enable the spokesperson to tell his or her side of the story, and give the spokesperson a way to answer trick questions comfortably. Most of all, they establish credibility for the organization in crisis.

Website

Placing news on the organization's website and pre-appointing webmasters to keep updated information on the site will reduce both the number of phone calls from publics and the amount of time put into crisis recovery. The news put on the site should be brief or detailed depending on the nature of the crisis. In the event of an airplane crash, for example, the airline's website would, at first, merely acknowledge the crash. After families of victims are notified, the names of victims would be listed. Regular notices of progress in the investigation would also be posted.

The concern of the company should be expressed and prominently displayed. A statement from the highest executive in the company is expected by the public. The website is an ideal venue for keeping safety rules, security precautions, and health policies posted. Restaurants might keep information posted on training new employees about cooking burgers at the proper temperature, using gloves when handling food, and policies that discourage employees with colds and other infectious diseases from working with food products.

The website is also a bulletin board for informing publics of the organization's community relations projects and other activities that give back to the public. The website can afford your organization the opportunity to be a Model 4, two-way symmetric company (see Chapter 2). It can encourage feedback, comments, and questions from publics and provide publics with responses and explanations. Finally, the website can reveal how the company is making changes as a result of public comment.

Blogs and Social Media

Monitoring blogs and social media channels is crucial. Sometimes the monitoring can be a prodrome (warning sign) and help prevent a crisis. The crisis communications plan should have a list of all blogs and social media networks relevant to the business and relevant to the types of crises. This can be an excellent way of achieving Model 4, two-way symmetrical communications with publics (see Excellence Theory in Chapter 2, "Crisis Communication Theory," pages 20–24).

It is advisable, if social media are used proactively in marketing and public relations campaigning, that they would also be used in the crisis communications plan. Facebook friends and other contacts with whom the organization has built a relationship will spread the news to a wider group of people. For Twitter, prepare key messages in advance when communicators have time to work with the 140 characters. Make this list of key messages separate from the key messages going to the traditional news media but with the same sentiment.

Do not drop traditional news media in order to spend time with social media unless the crisis relates only to online issues and online publics. Crises originating on social media should indeed be battled on social media and sometimes on traditional media. Similarly, crises not related to social media networks might also be fought through social media as well as traditional media.

For example, in 1993, the Pepsi Cola company experienced a crisis brought on by consumers who placed hypodermic syringes in cans and charged they found them there when they purchased them. The fear supposedly was that the syringes would cause HIV/AIDS, but actually the greedy consumers were hoping to get payoffs from Pepsi. Pepsi ended the crisis when it showed on television newscasts the following: (1) surveillance camera b-roll of a grocery store patron placing a syringe in a can; and (2) the canning process that showed how virtually impossible it would be for the syringes to have been placed in the cans at the plant. Today, in addition to television news, the visual pictures could have been shown via YouTube.

An e-blast might be sent to publics who subscribe to the organization's e-mail list. However, e-blasts are being used less than in previous years as communicators employ other methods.

Trick Questions

When a crisis occurs, what questions can you predict the news media will ask a spokesperson? Check Chapter 4 for types of trick questions. Reporters may not ask certain questions intentionally to trick the spokesperson, but the end result—if a question is not answered carefully—can make the spokesperson and his or her organization look bad.

A spokesperson for a restaurant, for example, might be asked the following trick questions:

1. Off the record, didn't you know this might happen?
2. If the fire happened during the lunch hour, how many people might have been killed?
3. Don't you buy your ground beef from the meatpacker who sold bad meat to the other restaurant?
4. As at most popular restaurants, the work here is very fast-paced and stressful, right?

List of Prodromes

Prodromes are the warning signs that a crisis may occur. List these in the crisis communications plan. If any of the prodromes have actually happened, log into the plan what the company did in response and when. This helps the spokesperson answer the media question, "Did you have any warning that this might happen?"

As an example of a prodrome, consider the normally good employee who is unusually tardy and seems stressed out and irritable. Management notices the problem and gets help for the employee. Or take another example, several near-accidents in the organization's parking lot. Management takes notice, determines that the parking lot has confusing directional signs, and has the signs redone.

Heeding prodromes carefully can often prevent a crisis and help show that the organization is concerned with resolving problems. The prodromes section of the crisis communications plan should be regularly updated.

List of Related Internet URLs

List the URLs of organizations and companies that may have information you need during a crisis. Also include brief descriptions of the data available at the URLs. For example, a restaurant might list the URLs for the National Center for Infectious Diseases, the state department of health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Center for Disease Control.

Evaluation Form

Evaluation is a crucial step in preparing an effective crisis communications plan. As assessment, it is helpful in determining what did and did not work. It also helps plan for, prevent, and cope with future crises by pointing out what needs to be revised in the crisis communications plan.

An evaluation form should be developed and placed at the end of the crisis communications plan for later distribution to internal publics for input. An environment where suggestions are made freely will add to the effectiveness of the evaluation and the crisis communications plan.