

# *Crisis Communications*

## **Introduction**

A crisis at a property can take many forms; it could be a fire, the damage caused by a hurricane, an outbreak of food-borne illness, a labor dispute, a crime committed on the property. Such a crisis, if not handled correctly, can irreparably damage the property's reputation. But when a crisis *is* handled correctly, the damage can be contained or even reversed, with the property's good reputation surviving not only intact, but enhanced.

The nature of a crisis is that it creates an intense scrutiny from the outside – a scrutiny that is often immediate. Therefore, in this age of “fast-breaking news stories,” you must be prepared beforehand so that when a crisis does occur, your property is seen as caring and responsible. Through preparation, you can reduce any negative exposure in the media and shorten the duration of the crisis in the public's mind. This manual provides the framework for a crisis communications plan, one that can be tailored to fit the size, location and type of your property.

## *The Principles of Crisis Communications*

There are certain bedrock principles that should be followed when communicating with the media during and after a crisis:

- **Be prepared.** Have a written, specific plan for how to handle a crisis, should one occur, and ensure that your employees know that plan at all times (the forms at the end of this manual can help you).
- **Use a single spokesperson.** Designate one person, usually the property's general manager or public relations official, to speak to the media.
- **Practice media relations techniques.** Be aware of how media representatives operate and what their needs are when doing their job so that you can better ensure that the message the public receives about your property is accurate, fair and positive.
- **Utilize recovery techniques after the crisis.** Follow up with your employees as to how the crisis communications plan worked and with the media to get the message out that your property has recovered from the crisis and is in operation.

## **Step One: Preparation**

Of the three stages of a crisis – before, during and after – it is the first stage that has the most long-term impact on the property's reputation. Although you can't foresee when a crisis will occur and what its nature will be, you can prepare now for dealing with the media when a crisis does occur.

# *Crisis Communications*

## ***Build Relationships with the Media***

Representatives from the media – whether print, TV or radio – will be easier to work with if you already have an established relationship with them. Try to meet the editor and publisher of your local newspaper and the writers who cover the business community. Knowing the local media representatives before they show up to cover a crisis can work to your advantage during a crisis.

## ***Prepare an Information Kit***

Should a crisis occur, the media will want some background information on your property. Have packets with that information prepared; in the rush of a crisis, you won't have time to prepare any, and you cannot count on remembering everything about the property. These packets, which should be well formatted and in attractive folders, normally contain the following:

### **Information about the property**

- number of guest rooms
- a fact sheet on the corporation or chain (if applicable)
- history of the property
- number of employees
- square footage of the property
- food service facilities (number of seats)
- statistics on, and facilities and attractions of, the local area or city
- banquet and meeting facilities
- special amenities, activities or programs

### **Photographs of the property**

### **Web site address**

### **Several recent copies of the employee newsletter if there is one**

### **The name of the general manager and/or appointed media contact Spokesperson**

## ***Create a Crisis Response Team***

Your next step is to establish a crisis response team. Of course, the number of employees on the team and their responsibilities depend on the size of your property. At a medium or large property, this team includes the general manager, the directors of marketing/sales and food & beverage, and an engineer. This committee becomes the decision-making body during a crisis and is responsible for making sure the following people are instructed beforehand on what to do in the event of a crisis:

## *Crisis Communications*

**General Manager/Manager on Duty** – This person should be prepared to be the single spokesperson in the event of a crisis. (See Step Two for more details).

**Switchboard** – Since the majority of the calls concerning the crisis will go first to the switchboard, those operating it must:

- be instructed not to answer questions from the media or the public about the crisis
- direct all media calls to the single spokesperson
- direct all other calls about the crisis to the command post at once
- log all calls, especially those from the media that will be returned later

**Clerical** – Clerical staff are needed to:

- type facts and statements
- set up the command post (see “Prepare the Property” section)
- assist in escorting reporters to the media center
- perform other office duties to keep information flowing smoothly
- assist in evacuating guests and staff, if necessary

**Other Employees** – The staff who are not involved in the activities above can contribute to the team effort by:

- delivering messages
- attending to the needs and requests of guests
- helping keep guests and others away from areas that are dangerous or declared off-limits

### ***Determine Who Should Be Notified***

Often, the first person a guest or employee notifies when reporting an emergency is the property’s switchboard operator. Therefore, it is essential that anyone who operates the switchboard know the procedure to follow when such a call comes in. Instruct the switchboard operator to immediately notify the appropriate safety agency (fire, police, etc.) and then the general manager or manager on duty and the property’s head of security, if there is one. The general manager or appointed spokesperson, in turn, contacts the appropriate company officials (e.g., corporate headquarters, owner, chain affiliation).

## *Crisis Communications*

Next, instruct the operator to use the property's Emergency Notification Form (found at the end of the manual) to record the following information:

- his or her name and the name of the employee or guest reporting the incident
- the time and date it was reported
- the type of incident
- its exact location
- a description of the incident
- the manager on duty
- the name of the single spokesperson for the media

### ***Prepare the Property***

Designate a primary command post and back-up command post, where the spokesperson and the other members of the crisis response team can meet, receive calls, work with local authorities and attend to ongoing business relating to the property during the crisis. The back-up is needed in case the primary post is inaccessible during the crisis. (The general manager's office or the property's public relations office, if there is one, are logical choices for the primary command post). Each command post should have two phones available: one for receiving calls, one for making calls. Advise the switchboard operator to transfer all calls concerning the crisis to the command post.

A designated media center should be established where reports can gather. This helps to keep the media from wandering around the property and provides an outlet for them to gather facts and make phone calls. It is also the place where the designated spokesperson will deliver any statements and answer all media questions. Make a contingency plan to establish the command post and the media center off property in case the property itself cannot be occupied during the crisis.

### **Step Two: Single Spokesperson**

Fundamental to any successful crisis communications plan is choosing the person who will serve as spokesperson. Depending on the size of the property and the organization behind it, this spokesperson may be the general and/or assistant manager, the public relations official, or a corporate official from headquarters.

It is essential that one person, and one person only, be designated this job. You want to ensure that there is one consistent voice talking to the media. Several spokespeople would create too many voices and, quite possibly, different accounts of what has happened.

## *Crisis Communications*

**Most important of all, make sure that every employee is informed that in the event of a crisis, all questions from the media are referred to the spokesperson.** One way to ensure this referral is to issue a wallet-sized card listing the names and phone numbers of the property's spokesperson and alternative spokesperson.

During a crisis, the single spokesperson is responsible for:

- responding to press inquiries
- collecting information
- preparing and delivering statements to the press
- ensuring that guests and employees are kept informed

If you must designate an alternate spokesperson (e.g., MOD, public relations official) because the primary one is off duty, keep in mind that coverage should be arranged 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This may mean appointing a spokesperson for each shift and taking into account coverage when a spokesperson is on vacation or sick leave. The next step is to decide how the spokesperson (or alternate spokesperson) is to be contacted should a crisis arise while he or she is away from the property. This could be as simple as providing the switchboard operator with a list of phone numbers of whom to contact or providing the spokesperson on duty with a pager. (See end of manual for appropriate forms.)

Next, ensure that the single spokesperson knows and heeds the “Dos” and “Don'ts” of dealing with the media:

### **– DO –**

- ✓ Cooperate fully with all municipal or government entities involved in the crisis (police, fire, health department, etc.).
- ✓ Introduce yourself by name and title.
- ✓ Provide factual information on the who, what, where, why, and how of the situation.
- ✓ Keep detailed notes of information that is disclosed.
- ✓ Speak calmly and deliberately, demonstrating that a professional is in control of the situation.
- ✓ Tell reporters if you don't know the answer to a question and promise to supply them with the information as soon as possible.
- ✓ Refer to technical experts (e.g., fire marshal, engineer) to explain complex systems.

## *Crisis Communications*

- ✓ Review notes with any alternate spokesperson to ensure that you both speak with “one voice.”
- ✓ Give all the media access to the same information.
- ✓ Initiate information updates regularly. Contact reporters who may have been at the property earlier but left to file their reports. Update the property’s Web site. Post any emergency phone numbers available to the general public.
- ✓ Monitor press coverage of the incident and advise a reporter if something inaccurate has been reported. Assign a staff member to monitor news groups, message boards, chat rooms, and other Web sites for possible inaccurate information.
- ✓ Stress the property’s concern for the safety of the guests. Emphasize the property’s safety record, employee training, security devices, etc.; tell what the property is doing to facilitate needs of next of kin and what steps you are taking to prevent another crisis.
- ✓ Keep a file of all newspaper stories about the crisis. Attempt to secure tapes of television stories whenever possible.
- ✓ Consider a follow-up public relations campaign.
- ✓ Establish an employee hotline telephone recording or a special employeeonly section of your Web site.
- ✓ Allow groups of press to tour crisis site with an escort.

## – DON’T –

- ✗ Offer to speak “off the record.” Such agreements are never binding and can lead to disputes.
- ✗ Offer possible causes or other speculation, such as monetary damage to the property.
- ✗ Speak in hotel jargon.
- ✗ Provide lurid descriptions of the situation.
- ✗ Release the names of victims.
- ✗ Answer any questions with a “no comment.” Always explain why you cannot answer (e.g., legal question pending, not enough information).
- ✗ Ask to review a reporter’s notes.
- ✗ Favor some reporters over others.
- ✗ Fail to respond to any negative impressions left by the crisis.

# *Crisis Communications*

## **Step Three: Media Relations**

### *Set Up the Media Center*

Set up a media center and make arrangements to meet and escort reporters there. Your staff should be able to equip this room on short notice. Include several telephones, a podium and public address system, extension cords and an easel or blackboard. Prepare signs in advance directing reporters to the media room. Make sure the media center is staffed with an employee at all times. This person is not to serve as the spokesperson; rather, he or she will assist the media with logistical matters, such as photocopying, errands, deliveries and supplies.

If it appears that the crisis will last for any length of time, provide snacks and beverages for both the command post and the media center.

### *Hold a Press Conference and Prepare a Written Statement*

The most efficient method of informing the media about the crisis is to hold a press conference. All reporters are given the same, accurate information, and none are perceived as receiving special treatment from the spokesperson. Before the press conference, make sure that you have all the facts possible. One valuable tool is a prepared statement, which can be read, ensuring that basic facts are conveyed accurately.

Depending on the nature of the emergency and its duration, you may want to issue statements periodically. Use the designated media room for this and make it clear that all information will be released to the press from this room. If possible, provide the press a timetable (e.g., once every hour). If you establish yourself as the source for credible information, then you also minimize the likelihood of “roving reporters” who will extract information (often erroneous) from guests, employees, etc.

When answering reporters’ questions, speak only to their questions; don’t supply extraneous information. If you don’t understand the question, paraphrase it and then ask the reporter if you have expressed it correctly.

When possible, place the task of communicating on the main official organization involved. For example, have the fire marshal answer reporters’ questions concerning cause and injuries.

Prepare a short statement for the media, making sure that it stresses your property’s concern for any people involved in the crisis and that it refers reporters to the appropriate local authorities for more details.

# *Crisis Communications*

## **Step Four: Recovery**

From the business point of view, the recovery stage is the most important. How quickly you get the message out that you are back in business and how far that message reaches will help keep financial losses to a minimum. At this point, you must do everything possible to maintain the image that you presented during the crisis: that your property is a professional, caring and concerned member of the community.

### *Communicate the Recovery*

In partnership with your local business community and political bodies (e.g., chamber of commerce, local and state associations, convention and visitors bureau, city or county council), create and execute a strategic plan to get the message across that your property is open. Determine which people can influence the success of your recovery and tailor your message to them. Ascertain their concerns and use that information to build a cohesive message that addresses their perceptions positively.

Once you have determined your audiences and formulated your message, decide on your communications tactics. Of course, the type and extent of these tactics will depend on how much money you have to spend on them, so the first step is to develop a realistic budget. Then, within that budget, do what is necessary to carry the positive message to your audiences (e.g., travel agents, potential guests, the media). These tactics may include joint advertising with the local government and other businesses and organizations in key markets, cooperative ad slicks and sales fliers, and a coordinated, cohesive public relations campaign. Specific tactics include:

Photographs depicting your property as fully operational and/or aesthetically enhanced. This is especially effective after crises such as fires, bombings or natural disasters. Make sure that such pictures are accompanied by a caption describing the before and after details.

- ◆ Post recovery information on your Web site.
- ◆ Receptions to thank the authorities, your guests and your employees.
- ◆ Events for travel agents, local business leaders and the press to show your property is open and doing business.
- ◆ A charity fund that ties in with the crisis if possible.
- ◆ Advertising campaigns in key markets, with other properties and local organizations (if the crisis was a natural disaster affecting a large area).

### *Keep in Contact with the Media*

Send out press releases and photographs to keep the media informed of your recovery from the crisis. Remember: focus on the results, not on the crisis. For example, if, as a result of the crisis, you have added a state-of-the-art security system, say so. When doing this, keep in mind that the post-crisis coverage will probably come from the print media.

## *Crisis Communications*

Work within your community to re-establish your property's good name. Hold events for the community: a holiday party for under-privileged children, a press reception, a food drive organized by the employees. Or donate your conference room to a local charity. Such events will show the media that your property is working hard to maintain its role in the corporate community.

The objective of keeping in contact with the media is to communicate consistently, with as wide a reach as possible and by all means available, that you are back in business. Consider using press releases, advertising, direct mail, a newsletter, even a special promotion.

### *Evaluate Your Performance*

Finally, take the time to assess how well you and your employees handled the media during and after the crisis. Interview your regular guests and your contacts in the business community to ascertain how they perceived the crisis from the TV, radio and newspaper coverage. Ask reporters for their feedback also. Talk to your staff about how the plan worked.

Finally, meet with members of your crisis response team to get their feedback on how the team performed; then modify your crisis communications plan. By reviewing the actions you and your staff carried out during the crisis as soon as possible afterwards, you can find out not only what you did wrong, but what you did right. That information will be invaluable the next time your property faces a significant challenge.

### **Summary**

You have just been taken through the process of crisis communications, which, though demanding, is vital to your property's reputation and financial well-being. Although you already face a wide range of responsibilities and tasks in managing your property, you should make the time and find the resources to take the steps outlined in this manual. If a crisis occurs at your property, you will be pleased – even proud – of the foresight and planning that enabled you to protect your assets and future business.