

## **PR CRISIS? 5 STEPS TO HELP NAVIGATE THE STORM**

*The following blog article, produced by Business News Daily, reviews key points for effective crisis communications.*

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Public relations disasters come in all shapes and sizes. It can be a series of bad customer reviews, a scathing write-up by a media outlet, a cybersecurity breach or even a legal run-in. But big or small, a negative incident can have a powerful impact on a company's reputation.

The way your business chooses to respond to situations like these becomes paramount in repairing or worsening the potential damage to your public image. Business News Daily asked three public relations experts about what to do — and not to do — if your company finds itself in a PR crisis.

### **APPOINT A RESPONSE TEAM**

If you're in the middle of a controversy, you need to make sure that the right people are speaking to the media and the public on behalf of your company. Brian Kearney, associate digital PR specialist at Blue Fountain Media, said that your first move should be to decide which people will be on your PR crisis response team. This could be the CEO, the head of communications or another senior executive, but you must identify the most important and well-informed individuals to serve as the liaisons, Kearney said.

### **DEVISE A STRATEGY AND BRIEF YOUR TEAM**

Protocol is essential to the proper management of your crisis communications efforts. Sabina Gault, CEO of Konnect Public Relations, said your response team members should understand their responsibilities and know whether to take a proactive or reactive approach in their media coverage of the incident.

"Whatever the strategy is, the company must relay protocol to any and all persons who could be approached to speak on their behalf," Gault told Business News Daily. "This means informing all employees, stakeholders, board members, etc., of who is to be speaking with media and how they are to direct any inquiries. This will save the company from having to explain comments from any unofficial company representatives later on down the line."

Kearney also recommended implementing approval procedures and appointing a person or group to review any crisis-related statements that go out to the press or stakeholders.

### **CRAFT YOUR MESSAGE**

Once you and your team have gathered all the facts about the incident, you should agree on the way you will frame your response. Without placing any external blame, think about the most honest and transparent way to address your role and what your company has done or will do about it.

"If you made the mistake, own up to it and be clear about next steps and how you plan to move on," said Morgan Mathis, an account director at Highwire PR.

"Note the scope of the emergency, what was done to prevent it, how it is being remedied and what is being done to ensure it does not happen again," Gault added.

### **IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS THE AFFECTED PARTIES**

Getting your message to the right people is almost as important as the message itself. Determine who needs to be informed of the situation — employees, shareholders, business partners, customers, the media, etc. — and which communication channels are the most appropriate to deliver the news, Kearney said.

Gault noted that the audience will depend on the context of the situation, but regardless of who's receiving your message, you should make sure it is sent out in a timely manner.

Media outlets are quick to pick up stories once they break, so Kearney advised your company to draft press releases and statements, and have them ready to go before any reporters approach you.

### **MONITOR THE SITUATION**

Your job doesn't end when the press release goes out. For a short time after the incident, you will need to keep an eye on inbound and outbound communications about the situation to address any follow-up questions or concerns. Mathis and Gault emphasized the importance of keeping in tune with community reactions and reaching out where appropriate.

"It's necessary to exercise extreme caution and care when dealing with customers and partners," Mathis said.

### **WHAT NOT TO DO**

When you're creating and executing your media-response strategy, our expert sources warned against any of the following tactics.

**Lashing out.** Even if the opposing party has said something completely false about your company, it is never a good idea to respond in a negative way or blame the complainant for the situation, Mathis said.

"It's important to make sure you have the full scope of the situation before you make any big decisions about your communication strategy," she said. "You need to think strategically and put any emotions on the back burner."

Kearney agreed, adding that aggression, defensiveness and bullying the public or the media will only make matters worse for you.

**Offering "no comment."** Spokespeople often fall back on this phrase when confronted with a difficult or controversial media question. It is certainly a step above lying or making something up just to give an answer (which our sources agreed is never the right choice). But it's easy to see how "no comment" can be misconstrued as trying to cover up or avoid an issue. Ultimately, Kearney said, this classic PR response does more harm than good.

"You need to be ready for any PR crisis that comes your way, at any time," he said.

If you truly can't give a good answer with the information you presently have, say so, and assure the person or outlet asking that you will issue a statement when you have more details.

**Waiting too long (or not waiting long enough) to respond.** Handling a PR crisis is all about timing. You don't want to give a premature response before you have all the facts, Gault said: Having to backtrack or contradict previous statements later on could further damage your reputation.

Delaying your response time won't do you any favors, either. Kearney recommended stating your side of the story as soon as you have enough information to offer a factual and transparent response.

"Do not wait it out," Kearney said. "If you don't take part in the conversation, you have no opportunity to shape, influence and educate the public on what's being said."

**Dwelling on the situation.** Mathis reminded business owners that the news cycle is short, and the situation will almost certainly blow over. A period of "bad" press is often just a small hiccup on your path to success — you shouldn't let it completely distract you from running your business. People can forgive and forget your mistake, but they won't forget how you conducted yourself in the process, she said.

"Always remember to use good taste, no matter how bad [the outlook] seems," Mathis said. "It's important to handle the situation the right way."