

## **USING PR TO AVOID THE ER: Or, managing an issue to avoid a crisis**

Quick. Name five recent crises involving the media. You probably could reel off more than five – if you include stars and alcohol – pretty quickly. Then add tomatoes, spinach and peppers (a veritable salad of scares) and tainted pet food.

What's a crisis? The guideline is that "it's an issue until the media becomes involved, then it becomes a crisis." So what can be done to ensure that corporate or brand issues are managed and your PR efforts keep you out of the ER? Here are 10 quick tips that will get you started in the right direction:

1. Take a first step to ensure the safety of your organization, its people and reputation. Don't believe it will never happen to your firm. Crises can happen to any organization.
2. A crisis can be sudden and violent or build slowly. It can be as unsettling when arising from a product, a process, violence or an employee issue.
3. Anticipate potential issues. How? Conduct an audit of strengths and weaknesses. Where are you vulnerable? Review all areas, processes, relationships – and involve team members at all levels, not just the managers. This will give you the broadest insight.
4. Plan for the worst case. Review how past issues were handled, and learn from them. What was done right? Where did you go wrong?
5. Develop an action plan incorporating the most likely scenarios in each area. Keep it updated. It doesn't work if it's left in a drawer.
6. Create a crisis preparedness team to be ready – just in case. Appoint a spokesperson. One spokesperson is better than many voices.
7. Deal with issues immediately. Rebut incorrect stories as soon as they occur. And, "no comment" is never a response. Ever.
8. Communicate – internally and externally. If information doesn't flow from the company, it's created by the grapevine.
9. Understand how the media works. If you don't, take the time (and, if needed, a consultant) to learn how.
10. Network. Know your allies and build on those relationships. It adds strength and credibility.

These are just generic first steps, but they are proactive. Sitting still, with your head under the desk is not.

Neither is saying that it's not in the budget. Issues management is cheap compared to crisis management. And, in today's economy, a crisis can be the line item that shuts you down.

If you plan ahead and make honesty and openness the core of your corporate foundation, you are more likely to be able to manage an issue and not need to deal with sirens, ambulances and the potential death of a brand or company.

ER or PR? The answer should be easy.

*Elyse Dasko, president of Dasko Communications, prefers to manage issues than crises.*