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Why Companies Should Practice Responding To Tomorrow's Crisis Today

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Photo by: John Nacion/STAR MAX/IPx 2022 4/13/22 Alleged gunman in the New York City subway shooting ... [+] JOHN NACION/STAR MAX/IPX

Three things are true about every crisis, whether it's [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), this week's [mass shooting](#) on a New York City subway car, [Covid](#)—or the *next* new crisis.

- It is impossible to forecast *when* a crisis will strike.
- You cannot predict *what* the crisis will be.
- *Any* crisis will likely be worse for your company or organization if you don't prepare for it *now*.

When, Not If

[Carla Bevins](#) is an assistant teaching professor of business communication at Carnegie Mellon University's [Tepper School of Business](#). She observed that “Many businesses and organizations have given little thought to the types of crises they may face and even less time on deciding how they will plan for and respond to a crisis.

“When a crisis hits, it's too late to put together a crisis management plan. Having a crisis communication framework in place ahead of time will help you when, not if, a crisis strikes.”

Clouded Judgment

Bevins noted that “Stress and pressure can cloud our judgment, and the best time to plan for a crisis is before it happens. Ask employees from all areas of your business to contribute to the conversation around creating an effective crisis management plan.

“This plan will be the path to follow during a crisis, and will decrease panic and snap decisions that you might regret in the future,” she predicted.

A Plan With Some Real Teeth

[Evan McCarthy](#) is the CEO of [SportingSmiles](#), an online dental lab that specializes in custom-designed dental products. He recalled that “In the first year of the pandemic, we discussed the possibility of running out of supplies and sketched out various crisis scenarios.

“This led us to make the correct decision, in hindsight, for reorganizing our warehouse, and by mid last year, we had pallets full of supplies reaching to the ceiling in our 10,000-square-foot space.”

Covid’s Impact

“We stocked up, because every time we ordered supplies, the price kept rising. Our cardboard box supplies had three major increases in 2021, alone. We also renegotiated contracts with suppliers and bought large equipment early, as prices were and are likely to still increase,” McCarthy said.

Operating More Seamlessly

“By putting into practice worst-case scenarios early on during the worldwide Covid pandemic, we were able to operate more seamlessly and with less pricing and supply impact than if we had just carried on with business as usual,” he commented.

Practicing Is Critical

[RJ Bruce](#) is an account director specializing in crisis and issues at Reputation Partners, a national strategic communications firm. He noted that “Regularly practicing before a real crisis hits is critical to the success of a company’s crisis communications team. What a company does in the first few hours of a crisis

can make or break its response, influence the trajectory of the crisis and ultimately negatively (or positively) impact reputation.

Saving Time

“If the crisis communications team has to spend time figuring out who needs to approve messages, which subject matter experts to tap and what the processes are for responding to internal and external stakeholders (including the media), they risk letting others take control of the crisis’ narrative.

Improving Responses

“Undergoing regular practice exercises not only ensures the crisis communications team knows what needs to be done, and the team members’ individual roles and responsibilities, it also helps identify any gaps that may exist in the response plan and gives the company time to address those ahead of a real crisis,” Bruce pointed out.

Worst-Case Scenarios

There are several ways for companies to practice test their responses to different crisis scenarios, ranging from [table-top](#) and [in-person exercises](#) to [computer-based simulations](#).

[Todd Templin](#) is the executive vice president of BoardroomPR where he handles crisis management. He said that companies, “need to game-plan for worst-case scenarios. The last thing you want to do is fly by the seat of your pants because one bad move and your reputation can face long-term harm and you lose public trust forever. Planning doesn't cost anything but it can mean everything.”

Creating Options

Templin said “We recommend creating various options that could be used should the crisis get out of control. Then, if it does, you can plug and play with a little tweaking.

“Nothing should be left off the table, no matter how crazy the idea. Even if the worst-case scenario doesn't come to fruition, what have you lost? You have everything to gain, but nothing to lose,” he counseled.

Advice For Business Leaders

Murphy's Law Happens

Bevins from Carnegie Mellon University said, “When I think about creating a crisis communication plan, I consider all the things that could possibly go wrong. I accept that Murphy’s Law happens.

Tailored Plans

“Then, I create a tailored crisis management plan that includes both operational and communications components. Test the plan and follow the first rule of effective crisis management: communicate, communicate, communicate!

“One of the largest dangers of not having a crisis communication plan in place ahead of time is that someone besides you and your company controls the tone and content of the messages being sent,” she cautioned.

Don't Stay Silent

“It’s essential to respond early and often, correct misinformation, and ensure that stakeholders and the public know what’s going on. Silence or late

responses from the company can tarnish your image and decrease the chances that you'll come through the crisis unscathed," Bevins concluded.

A Stressful Exercise

PR expert [Liz Sweeney](#), the owner of marketing and communication firm Dogwood Solutions, said "While identifying worst-case scenarios can be a stressful exercise, it's massively beneficial for the company.

"The danger of not being prepared? At best, a company could appear inept and lose credibility. However, a truly unprepared company, or a person who mishandles the response, can damage a company beyond repair," she warned.

"The media and the public will create their own versions of the story, and often those early versions are the ones that are most remembered," Sweeney concluded.