

Does your reputation precede you?

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How robust would you say your company's reputation is? Are you prepared to handle any adverse news head on? It's not just global manufacturers, governments and A-list footballers who are at risk!

It's true that over recent weeks and months the tabloids have had enough material to dine out on for months. Do you want to be in the situation whereby rumours get out of hand and journalists take it upon themselves to write things about your company that could destroy your reputation or in worst case make you bankrupt?

If you think it's time to review your company communications policy then here are some ideas on what you need to consider. They won't prevent the incident from happening but they might just reduce the impact on your company's reputation.

First of all - analyse the situation

What happened? Why? Where? Who? What? and How? Prepare what you will say to your stakeholders.

Be prepared – time always work against you

Having a clear idea of what you will say to your staff, customers, stakeholders and the media in the event of an incident is top priority. These communications will have been thought through in terms of tone and underlying message and the most suitable individual identified to impart this information. It is important that the message coming from the company spokesperson is seen to be considered, calm and not overly reactive. In other words, they should project an image of a business that is in control and openly communicating with people. You should do media training on a regular basis, sometimes it will only take journalists 5 minutes to be on site and ask you and your colleagues questions.

Who are the nominated spokespeople for your company? Do they know what their role requires and have they received the appropriate training? Are they the best representative for the company or automatically nominated because of their job title?

Contact requirements

The following should be in place to ensure prompt action;

- All staff and important contact-details should be accessible (and up to date) from both within the company records system and remotely. (NB you will need to consider the security of this information and who has access to it).

- Third party services such as the emergency services and doctors should have named contacts listed and a working relationship established with those who you decide to include in your BCM exercises.
- Key stakeholders must be identified and a policy determined on who makes contact with them and under what circumstances (this will vary depending on the nature of the relationship). Contact details should be available both on and off site and a communication strategy agreed.
- Contact details should be established for named members of the media. This will depend on the size of your organisation and the likely interested parties to receive news of a business incident. Remember, it's better to have the media on your side than not!
- Contact details of key suppliers should be accessible so that contact can be made quickly.

The importance of clear communication during an incident

By the time an incident has hit your organisation, it's too late to consider what you should be saying. The messages are likely to be ill conceived, rushed and inaccurate. So, consider the following as part of your communication policy;

- Strategy – agree in advance the order of message delivery, medium, tone and accuracy. This should include pre-prepared media statements (to be used as appropriate).
- Prepare holding statements that may be used by the company to customers, members of the public and other interested parties. (These are not to be confused with media statements).
- Try and instil calm in your messages, not panic.
- Avoid spreading mixed messages, false information and assumptions.
- Establish in advance who is authorised to issue company communications (and who is not!) and what other members of management and staff should do if approached for comment.
- Try to provide basic information as soon as possible rather than withhold all information. Such delays may give a negative message in themselves and this is how rumours will start.
- Maintain the trust of the media by being open and providing accurate information.
- Don't forget your staff! Keep them informed of what's going on at regular intervals and be sympathetic to their reactions. They are your most important resource and deserve to be treated as such.

Ground rules of media management

- Identify the approved (and preferably single) point of media contact within the company and make sure that this is communicated throughout the business.
- Make use of existing "friendly" media contacts to demonstrate a proactive approach to the media.
- Cooperate with the media – it's in your interest!
- Don't delay contacting the media as this may be construed as having something to hide.
- Provide written statements rather than verbal.
- State the facts as they are known at the time. Do not speculate.
- Include actions taken with staff, families.

- If your organisation has skeletons in the cupboard, be prepared should they emerge at a later date! (example; previous legal action taken against the company).
- Ensure that you select the most suitable person in the organisation to act as spokesperson. This should consider position, authority and their performance when under pressure. Make sure that they are given proper training and that they rehearse their role, from time to time.

As you can see, none of these ideas are ground breaking. However, they demonstrate a company's ability to plan for the unexpected and to take control of a situation which could lead to a damaged reputation.

Article by Hilary Estall
Director, Perpetual Solutions Limited
www.pslinfo.co.uk