



Communicating in a crisis

David Beck

As communications people we have probably all had experience of crisis situations and of course it is platitudinous to point out that no two crises are the same. However we can learn some generic lessons from our collective experience of living through a wide variety of crisis situations.

Here are my five golden rules for handling a crisis.

1. **Be quick.**
The first things you need are facts and you need them really fast. What has happened? Who was involved? What is the impact? How long has it been going on? There are a lot of questions that will be coming your way and you need to have answers or rumour and speculation will fill the void.
2. **Plan ahead.**
So you need to have planned ahead. Do you have access to all the people who may be able to help you get to the facts? You need a clear chain of command that is flexible enough to account for the circumstances; when the crisis hits you may not have your full team at your disposal. Not all crises come out of the blue, so assess your risks, don't put off writing up that crisis plan and make sure you have people on hand who are media trained, and who know these five golden rules!
3. **Listen**
Our keenness to help and the need for speed make it more difficult than ever to listen. It will quite often be a journalist who is the first to tell you of an impending crisis, listen carefully to what you are told. What does he or she already know that you do not? Listen to your own people too, information is often the key that will get you out of your crisis situation and the knowledge of your own staff is vital.
4. **Stick to the facts**
If you don't know, own up and work hard to find out what the answer is, but never, ever speculate. If you guess and guess wrong you are in so much more trouble than if you had waited until you had established the facts that it is never worth the risk. Work out what you do know, fashion those facts into a simple clear set of messages and stick to them. Review them regularly, hourly at first, to check they are still up to date but never get drawn beyond what you decided to say.
5. **Hope for the best, but plan for the worst**
When a crisis looms it is your responsibility to assume the worst, which means clearing the decks and getting some extra help. The volume and sources of information and speculation, both offline and online, will explode and you will need people to tell you what is being said. Experts with an outsiders' perspective on your situation can prevent you from making mistakes. Plan for the long haul, you may need extra hands you can trust to take over whilst others rest.

No matter how outlandish or bizarre the circumstances of your own crisis there are always people who have seen the like, felt the same sense of panic and lived to tell the tale. At Bell Pottinger we don't claim to have seen it all before but we will have relevant experience and we will use it to help you come through unscathed.

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