

Communication plans

Regina Phelps describes the areas that must be addressed to ensure effective communication, both internally and to external stakeholders, in an emergency

WHEN ASKED WHAT AREAS NEED to be improved after any disaster, inevitably companies will often list ‘communication’ as one of the most important areas for improvement. Communication is, of course, a broad topic; however, there is one comment that is probably heard more than any other: “Communication needs to be more timely.”

When surveying our clients, we often find that timeliness of communication is one of the biggest issues. We have developed plans and exercises to help companies develop a more timely response to an event. Our approach is two-fold: develop some simple communication tools, and then exercise them.

Limitations

Corporate communication teams usually have some type of crisis communication plan in place, but often the plan is limited. One aspect of the plan that is often missing is the identification of stakeholders and pre-approved message templates. A valuable tool for any team to develop is what we call a communication matrix, which is simple to create. The matrix should contain the following four elements with each element’s associated information:

■ **Stakeholders:** Identify all of the stakeholders (internal and external) that you will need to

- communicate with after any incident;
- **Owners:** Name the department responsible for that communication relationship;
- **Tools:** Specify what tools will be used to communicate with each stakeholder; and
- **Message:** The point of the initial message.

This simple matrix is so powerful, it helps to speed up communication immediately. This

Consider, before an emergency, all stakeholders which will need to be contacted and how each of them should be reached...

..... is a great task to do as a whiteboard activity. Simply get your communications team into a room with a large whiteboard or flip chart set up with four large columns. Match the columns to the elements above. In the first column, have the team list every possible stakeholder that you are likely to communicate with after an incident. In the second column, note the communication owner. In the third, list what tools are likely to be used to reach each stakeholder, and in the last column, identify what the key point of the first message should be.

It might look something like Table 1.

The second critical planning activity is to develop initial communication templates

for each of the stakeholders. These are pre-written scripts, which contain a basic outline of what information might be needed in an emergency, which could then be quickly modified with current and pertinent information during an incident.

I can hear you asking: “What could we pre-write before an incident?” and: “What should be in each script?” A good starting point is to read your hazard risk assessment and determine what likely events could occur.

Another strategy to take is the one that we most often recommend: Write basic theme messages for two types, or styles, of events:

- **It only happened to you:** The rest of the world is fine. Imagine events like a fire, workplace violence situation, water pipe break etc;
- **It happened to everybody:** The event is widespread or regional and many people are affected. This could include earthquakes, hurricanes, severe winter storms, etc.

Once those templates have been written, get all of the formal approvals now, before an event occurs. Pre-approval may need to include legal counsel, senior management, investor relations – your company may require other approvals. As part of this process, decide in advance who will have the authority to approve the modified messages at time of disaster. Because the basic templates will have been pre-approved, this should be a short list. Then, at time of disaster, modify the template message with the pertinent details of the current event and have the agreed-upon individuals approve the message to go out. This should decrease the time to develop the messages and get them out the door.

Communication exercises are the next step towards ensuring the team can execute the plan and will be covered in the next issue of *CRJ*. **CRJ**

Table 1: A matrix to speed up communication

Stakeholder name	Relationship owner	Communication tool	Message
Employees	Human resources	Employee hotline Company email Facebook/Twitter Notification system Website	Reassurance Concern Action Our plans
Clients	Individual business units	Client email Facebook/Twitter Website	Reassurance Concern Action Our plans
Board of Directors	CEO/Communications team	Email Phone	Facts Our plans
Regulators	Individual business units	Email Phone	Facts Our plans
Investor community	Investor relations	Email Facebook/Twitter Website	Reassurance Facts Our plans
Suppliers	Purchasing	Email Phone	Facts Our plans

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