A response model for the public relations management of a critical incident

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper seeks to propose a simple four-element model for how organisations should manage their public relations when they are faced with a critical incident.
Design/methodology/approach – The article brings together findings from previous research to construct a four-element model. Five short case studies are then used to illustrate how the four elements contribute to the management of a critical incident.
Findings – Organisations need to follow four elements for their public relations when they are facing a critical incident. These four elements are: think of the public and the media; act fast; be straight; and, show concern and compassion.
Practical implications – Those organisations that used the four elements of the public relations process appear to have gained not only from the short-term benefits of managing the incidents but also from a long-term effect on their corporate reputations.
Originality/value – This paper is of value to senior managers and public relations professionals in that it provides a simple four-element model for positively managing public relations in a critical incident.

Keywords Public relations, Critical incident technique, Response time

Paper type General review

Introduction
The organisational response to a critical incident can have a major impact on how the organisation is perceived in both the short and long term. The effective management of public relations during and after an incident can lead to major organisational benefits. This paper proposes a four-element model (see list below) for how organisations should manage their public relations when they are faced with a critical incident.

The paper then uses five short case studies to illustrate how the four elements contribute to the successful management of real incidents. The four-element model is as follows:

(1) Think of the public and the media:
   • understand their concerns; and
   • start from the public’s point-of-view.

(2) Act fast:
   • be the first to talk;
   • control the message;
   • get to the scene; and
   • take action.
Be straight:
- be honest;
- be consistent;
- be clear; and
- use corporate values.

Show concern and compassion:
- show that people and the environment come first;
- be human; and
- be involved.

The four elements of the model
Think of the public and the media
At the moment that an incident takes place the organisation needs to think about this crisis from the point-of-view of the public and the media. The organisation needs to base its communications on the perceptions of the public and not on its own understanding of the event. If the external world thinks there is a problem then there is a problem (Bierck, 2000). The public needs to comprehend the crisis and understand how it might affect them (Coombs, 1999). Implicit communications are very important to the public and the media as they indicate the veracity of the source. Hence, it is important to be well prepared and to be self-confident (Bierck, 2000).

In no circumstances should an organisation respond to an incident by saying it has no comment. This will be interpreted negatively and will hand control of the communications over to the media.

Act fast
The stakeholders involved need to be informed about the incident within a matter of hours (Orgizek and Guillery, 1999). The media needs to be made aware of the situation rapidly and if the organisation does not talk then the information will come from another source (Harrison, 2000). If information is not available immediately then this leaves room for speculative stories by the media (Ashcroft, 1997). It is vital to keep control of the information (Orgizek and Guillery, 1999) and failure to do so gives an impression that the organisation does not know what is happening (Harrison, 2000).

There is a need for extensive communication in the first few days of the crisis (Bierck, 2000) and an organisation often establishes its authority in a crisis by being the first to talk wisely about the situation (Harrison, 2000). If an organisation cannot respond rapidly with genuine information then it will be judged negatively.

The organisation needs to communicate what it is doing about the incident and how well it is caring for people and looking after the environment (Bierck, 2000). The involvement of senior management at an early stage is critical (McHenry, 1996) and the direct involvement of the CEO is often crucial to the successful management of the situation. The Chief Executive’s involvement at press conferences and at the incident scene adds weight and credibility to the communication (Bierck, 2000). The CEO is then seen to take personal responsibility and is perceived to be more likely to tell the truth.

The communications messages need to be agreed and understood by all those involved and the appointment of a single spokesperson helps to maintain a consistent message. It is important to communicate with all stakeholders, including the
organisation’s employees. The tone of the message also needs to be adjusted to fit the incident.

Be straight
The organisation needs to tell the truth (Ashcroft, 1997; Harrison, 2000) and denying can be very damaging (Coombs, 1999). The organisation needs to make its plan for solving the problem public and to make them clearly understood by using clear and simple language (McHenry, 1996). Transparency is essential and there should be clear signs that the organisation takes the matter very seriously and that investigations will be undertaken (Bierck, 2000). In responding to incidents organisations should reflect their own positive values (Ogrizek and Guillery, 1999).

If the organisation knows that it is at fault then it is best to admit it and show concern. It is much worse to deny the truth and for it to emerge at a later date.

Show concern and compassion
Organisations need to be seen to be warm and human not cold and calculating. They need to express sorrow quickly after the incident and to express understanding and sympathy for the victims (Harrison, 2000). The company’s initial behaviour towards the victims sets the tone for all subsequent situations. It is essential to show commitment to victims and to providing assistance (Ogrizek and Guillery, 1999). The organisation should apologise promptly when appropriate (Ashcroft, 1997). Often the organisation needs to resist the efforts of lawyers and insurers in order to express compassion and provide assistance (Black, 1993; Harrison, 2000). Expressing concern does not mean that the organisation accepts responsibility and compassion is always appropriate since it shows that caring is its highest priority (Coombs, 1999). On the contrary denial shows lack of care and is seen to be not compassionate. Organisations should always act ethically in a crisis and show that they care about people, safety and the victims (Bierck, 2000).

Case vignettes
Perrier
Perrier is the manufacturer of a well-known sparkling mineral water. On February 7 1990 management were informed that traces of Benzene had been found in 13 bottles of water in the USA. On February 9 Perrier withdrew all bottles from sale in the USA. Meanwhile traces were also found in France. On February 14 Perrier withdrew all bottles worldwide although experts agreed that there was a negligible health risk.

At first Perrier seemed unprepared for such an incident and different messages were communicated in different markets. However, Perrier rapidly withdrew the product and launched a communications strategy based on safety first. Empty shelf space in retailers was used to explain its safety first approach and to advertise the re-launch of the product. There was little media criticism of Perrier.

Coca-Cola Dasani Water
Coca-Cola is one of the world’s largest soft drinks manufacturers. Dasani is treated bottled tap water, which is well established in the USA as the leading brand. In January 2004 Coca-Cola launched Dasani in the UK. In March several British newspapers mocked Coca-Cola for selling tap water in bottles. On March 19 there were reports that Dasani contained twice the UK legal limit of bromate, a chemical which may cause cancer. The first Coca-Cola press release announced the voluntary withdrawal of
500,000 bottles of Dasani in the UK. The company postponed the launch of Dasani in France and Germany. Subsequent press coverage was highly critical of Coca-Cola’s public relations and the marketing fiasco. The company was perceived to have tried to deceive the public by marketing public water supplies as pure still water akin to water from natural sources.

**TotalFina-Erika**

The inspections of the Erika by Maritime Authorities in several different countries revealed a history of problems from 1996. In November 1999 she passed an inspection by the Italian regulators. On December 11 the Erika was caught in a severe storm and started to take on water. On December 12 the crew was evacuated by helicopter as the ship started to break-up off the French coast. Ten days after the incident the CEO of TotalFina made the first declaration that the company was willing to participate in compensation and coastline cleaning but that whilst the company was concerned it was not guilty as it was chartering the ship. This slow response was seen to be a sign of an uncaring company and the CEO was highly criticised. On December 30 TotalFina issued its first press release which covered its involvement with the authorities, its plans to address the problems and its plans to restore the environment. In its second press release on January 14 2000 the company expressed its concerns and its commitment to improve maritime safety but once again said it was not responsible.

The communications by TotalFina were seen as attempts by the company to avoid responsibility. They were not sufficiently compassionate about damage to the fishing industry and to the coastline. No one from TotalFina visited the coastline and the company mishandled the press. The Sea Accidents Investigation Office found that the Erika broke apart most likely because of a structural weakness. The Erika was an old ship without a double-hull.

After the incident TotalFina continued to make mistakes and were criticised by the press, politicians and environmentalists.

**Shell-Ievoli Sun**

The Ievoli Sun was chartered by Shell and had recently passed an inspection by the Italian Maritime Authority. On October 29, 2000 the Ievoli Sun, carrying 6,000 tons of chemicals – including styrene, was caught in a violent storm in the English Channel. On October 30 her crew was evacuated by helicopter as she had structural damage to her double-hull. Whilst being towed towards the French coast the ship sank near the Island of Alderney. On the same day Shell and Exxon Mobil both issued a press release announcing that they would offer every possible assistance to the authorities. On November 1 the chairman of Shell France headed a team of experts who went to Alderney. The company issued a second press release announcing its continued assistance and a spokesperson acknowledged the dangers to marine life. He also stated that Shell would do all that it could to help and that the company had drawn up contingency plans. The situation was seen to be under control. By the end of June Shell, together with the French and British Authorities, had completed the clean-up operations as suggested by Shell. There was no apparent pollution by dangerous chemicals. The media coverage was reasonably positive and initial concerns had passed as Shell was seen to be taking responsibility and caring about what happened.
Air France and ADP, Terminal 2E
In June 2003 Terminal 2E at Charles de Gaulle Airport was opened as a new hub for Air France international flights. The airport is operated by Aeroports de Paris (ADP). On May 22 2004 police noticed a crack in the wall of the terminal, photographs were taken but no further action was taken. On May 23 more cracks appeared and police began evacuations but 12 minutes later, at 7.57 am, a section of the roof collapsed killing six people. Air France released a press release that afternoon expressing its compassion, offering support to the victim’s families and announcing ADP’s care line telephone number. The Chairman of Air France visited the scene of the accident the same day. ADP issued its own press release expressing compassion for the victims families. On May 24 the President of ADP announced that the whole terminal would be demolished if the other sections appeared to be unsound. He said ADP would take no risk when it came to safety. This counteracted a rumour that Air France and ADP had put pressure on the contractors to complete the building. The architect who designed Terminal 2E flew back from China to assist the investigation.

The President of ADP announced that his two principles were respect for the victims and transparency. ADP organised a remembrance service at the Airport and gave financial compensation before there were any insurance reports. In August the terminal was partially reopened after the structure had been reinforced.

On balance the press coverage was reasonably positive because of the rapid response by the companies and their evident compassion and transparency.

Lessons from the case studies
Thinking of the public and the media
Initially, Perrier was confused, however it quickly understood the concerns of the public and the media. Coca-Cola did not seem to understand public concerns and was perceived to have tried to deceive the public. TotalFina certainly did not start from looking at the incident from the public’s point-of-view. Its lack of response and apparent lack of concern was at odds with the public interest. Shell seems to have well understood the likely concerns and acted accordingly. Similarly, Air France and ADP seemed to be particularly good at thinking about the incident from the point-of-view of the victims.

Act fast
Perrier took time to react and started out with a confused message. However, once it understood then it took firm control of both the action and the message. Coca-Cola never seemed to be in control of the message with the result that it was mocked by the press. TotalFina acted very slowly with the result that the media were in control of the message and the company became a scapegoat criticised by the media, politicians and environmentalists. Shell took very rapid action, it was the first to talk to the media, it was quickly on the scene, it took firm action and was in control of the message. Air France and ADP responded extremely rapidly with appropriate messages delivered from the scene of the accident. They took firm and decisive action.

Be straight
Perrier was honest with the public and after initial confusion it was consistent and clear. Coca-Cola was perceived to be deceiving the public and whilst it took quick action it was nevertheless seen to be unclear and unethical. TotalFina was seen to be trying to get away from any responsibility. Shell was seen to be honest, with consistent
and clear communications about the incident and its plans for tackling the situation. Air France and ADP were seen to be honest, consistent and clear in their communications.

*Show concern and compassion*

Perrier was seen to be concerned about the problem and to have taken firm and decisive action worldwide. Coca-Cola was seen as being concerned about bromate but unconcerned about deceiving consumers about the origin of the water in Dasani. TotalFina was seen as being unconcerned and lacking in compassion about the livelihoods of the fishing communities and damage to the environment. It became a company that many people in France used as a negative symbol of the race for profit, both inhuman and unethical. Shell was seen as both concerned and compassionate, keen to protect the environment with human involvement at the highest levels. Air France and ADP were exemplary in their compassionate approach to the victims and their families. They quickly involved their most senior people in press statements.

**Conclusions**

Those companies that effectively used the four elements of the public relations process appear to have gained not only from the short term benefits of improved management of the incidents involved but also from a long-term effect on their corporate reputations. Perrier, Shell, Air France and ADP all seem to enjoy good reputations whilst Coca-Cola still seems to suffer from the Dasani disaster and TotalFina is still seen rather negatively, especially in France.

**References**


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