

Writing Your Crisis Communications Plan

by Gerard Braud

It was August 27, 2005. With Hurricane Katrina at Category 5, I loaded my family in the car and evacuated our home near New Orleans, headed for safety.

As I monitored the local news-talk radio station, I heard New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin say, “Now I’m not ordering a mandatory evacuation today, but I might be back tomorrow and be more forceful.”

I was livid. It was obvious the mayor was following neither an emergency response plan nor a crisis communications plan.

Just two years earlier I was asked for a proposal to write a crisis communications plan for New Orleans. The city’s answer was the same as 99% of the people who ask me for a proposal – they either think the plan will cost too much to write or they say they don’t have the time to write one on their own under my guidance. New Orleans said both. You watched the results play out the news.

Check your calendar – How many years has it been since Hurricane Katrina? How many years has it been since the terrorist attacks of September 11th. More recently, we witnessed the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech in which a gunman was on the loose for two hours without any timely communications or warning. (I have one daughter in high school and one in college – these shootings hit me hard.)

So do you have a crisis communications plan yet? Do you have one that works? Will we perhaps watch your organization’s failures play out on the news because you don’t have a functioning crisis communications plan?

Few things in corporate communications are needed more, yet get less attention than the crisis communications plan. The same is true for schools, hospitals, government agencies and non-profit organizations.

Here are my thoughts on what a crisis communications plan should be, what it should not be, and how to get the time and/or budget you need to write one.

Format

I think one of the hardest things to do is to find a good format for writing the plan. Because most plans are written by consultants, each guards his or her template and plans. Crisis experts make their living off of their plans, so getting free advice and a peek at the “jewels” is a rare event.

Definition

The next difficulty is defining what a crisis plan is. I'm often asked to review crisis plans for companies. Usually I'm greatly disappointed to find out the company invested a lot of time and money creating a complicated policy manual that sits on a shelf and collects dust.

My rule is a crisis plan should not tell you *how* to behave in a crisis, but it should tell you *what* to do in a crisis and *when*. A crisis plan should not be a complicated rulebook that no body reads. Rather it should be a simple fill in the blank system that walks you through each hour of the crisis, telling you what you should say, who you should say it to, and when to say it. It will also direct you as to what communications tools you should use, whether it be a news conference, e-mail, text messaging, a posting to a website, an employee meeting, etc.

Simplicity

My first rule is your crisis plan should be "Idiot proof." That means the plan should be so simple that anyone who can read can execute it. Too many plans are centered around the perfect scenario in which a trained communicator is executing the plan. Such an assumption is flawed because often the crisis happens when the trained communicators are out of the office.

Bench strength is the secret to great athletic teams – it should be the secret to your crisis plan. The more people capable of stepping up to the plate to execute the plan and communicate with it during a crisis, the better off you'll be.

Parts and Pieces

Different consultants will tell you the plan needs 12 parts, or 7 parts, etc. My friends, it's all perspective. I'll tell you that you need four things.

Step One is the vulnerability audit or assessment. This is when you spend time interviewing people within your organization to ask them what might go wrong and why. Your interviews should range from top executives, to managers, to line employees. You should be prepared to ask them a few simple open ended questions, including, "What do you think might go wrong here, that would result in a crisis?" You'll want to consider likely crisis, worst case scenarios and delve into the bizarre possibilities. I used to get great pushback from executives when I asked about the bizarre, until they witnessed terrorists fly airplanes into buildings on Sept. 11, 2001.

When considering the scenarios, you should also consider that a crisis isn't always a fire or explosion, but may be something internal, often referred to as a smoldering crisis. The Institute for Crisis Management in Louisville Kentucky says a smoldering crisis is twice as likely to happen as a sudden crisis.

At a minimum, you should be prepared to invest a minimum of 25 hours conducting interviews and compiling your findings, but be prepared to spend from 50 to 100 hours on this segment of the plan. You'll want to make an extensive list of the scenarios that have been identified, and then rank their probability of occurring. You'll want to deal with the Top 10 most likely to occur first, and then proceed down the list accordingly.

Step Two is creating the template that will become the heart of the plan. This is the part of the plan that coordinates notification of key leaders during a crisis, notification of the media, employees, customers, the community and other key stakeholders specific to your organization.

This heart of the plan should contain a pre-written, pre-approved first critical statement template that will encompass the words you'll communicate to all of your audiences during the first critical hour of any crisis that goes public.

(For a free sample of a first critical statement, write to me at gerard@braudcommunications.com or call me at 985-624-9976. If you send an e-mail, you'll be asked to clear a spam filter. You should put the words "crisis template" in the subject line and include a short note.)

The heart of the plan should also prepare you for news conferences and what you'll say in the subsequent hours of the crisis.

At a minimum, you should be prepared to invest 100 hours in crafting a plan that truly serves your needs. I actually spent more than 500 hours developing the heart of the plan that I use, because I would write it, then tear it down to make it simpler, then tear it down again to make it even simpler.

Step Three requires you to return to the vulnerability assessment you did in Step One. You should go down your list of possible crisis scenarios and literally write out what you anticipate you would say to your critical audiences in the event that each of these events happens.

When completed, these statements will form an appendix in the plan. You should have a fill-in-the-blank portion that allows you to add the who, what, when, where, why and how, followed by a complete script that you or a spokesperson can say verbatim during the crisis. These are usually used in the second hour of the crisis.

I use this format because one of the great frustrations I had, as a reporter for 15 years, was when no one could make a statement to me during a crisis because they were waiting for language to be approved by the legal and executive staff.

My approach is to have everything pre-written and blessed by legal and corporate leaders well in advance of the crisis, so you can communicate quickly and effectively on the day of the crisis. These should include statements for events ranging from weather emergencies to workplace violence to fires and explosions.

As you write each set of key message, you should be prepared to invest 5-10 hours to cover both the writing and approval process for each event. Each event will likely cover 2-3 pages. That means your Top 10 scenarios will take 50 to 100 hours to write and re-write.

Step Four is testing the plan. If you don't test your plan, then *it* may likely be a crisis waiting to happen. A test lets all parties become familiar with what's in the plan and make sure it works as planned. Even the best plans have a flaw here and there that can be exposed and corrected during a drill. Some flaws turn out to be in the personalities of leaders or responders. The drill also lets

you test the quality of your spokespeople. Video tape their performance for evaluation, and be sure to schedule media training if it is needed.

Many organizations have emergency response plans for coordinating police, fire, rescue and EMS during a crisis. Often the security director or risk manager will schedule regular emergency drills. However, many fail to include communications in their drill, resulting in responders and managers being overwhelmed when the media is demanding interviews during an actual crisis, and while employees and their families begin making demands for information.

The drill can be a tabletop or real time drill. It should have live role-players portraying members of the media who show up on-site with cameras, plus an off-site team that works to overload switchboards with phone calls.

You should be prepared to invest a minimum of 25 hours to plan, coordinate and execute the drill.

Budget & Time

Based on the nuggets I've given you, to write a plan yourself will take 200 to 400 work-hours. That scares a lot of people to the degree that the task seems overwhelming, so they never begin. Others do the quick math and determine that to hire an agency or consultant to write such a plan, they'll need to budget \$20,000 on the low end and \$150,000 on the high end.

Budget and time are two of the biggest reasons so many organizations don't have a crisis communications plan. That's why I created a workshop to help people write a crisis communications plan in two days. But even at a greatly reduced price, some managers will still not allocate budget or allot time.

So let's address how to get either the time, or budget you'll need.

If you are going to write the plan yourself, start by setting aside a certain amount of time on certain days of the week. Maybe you can set aside every Wednesday, or afternoons on Tuesdays and Thursdays. What ever it is, load up your calendar with your writing days and stick to your schedule. In 4, 6 or 12 months, you'll have your plan.

If hiring a consultant is your choice and you need to get budget approval, spend some time doing case studies within your industry. Chances are you can find a similar company with a crisis that resulted in huge financial losses because of their failure to properly handle a crisis. Collect several case studies that show losses ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000 or more. Then it is up to you to make the argument that your plan can offer financial protection to your organization. One lawsuit resulting from poor communications far exceeds the price of a crisis plan.

One recent innovation I've added to my services is to conduct a two day crisis communications plan writing retreat in which 3-6 people from your organization come together in isolation for two days to write and substantially complete a crisis communications plan. It takes less time and

cost less money than the other two options. At the time of this writing the cost for the two-day program ranges from \$5,995 to \$7,995.

Elephants

Time and money – those are the biggest obstacles. Your greatest challenge is not to feel defeated or overwhelmed. There's an old adage that says you don't eat the elephant in one bite; you eat it one bite at a time. Take the first bite and get started. Be patient and be realistic that this is an ongoing process. It can be done and it should be done. After all, how long has it been since Hurricane Katrina? How long has it been since the events of Sept. 11th? How long has it been since the last school shooting? Do you really need any more reasons than that?

If you fail to plan, then plan to fail.

Gerard Braud (Jared Bro) *is an international speaker and coach, specializing in media training, crisis communications, employee communications, presentation skills training and video/audio production. Since 1994, he has practiced his craft on four continents. Prior to 1994, he spent 15 years as an award winning journalist, on the front line of breaking news, with affiliate reports seen around the world on CBS, NBC, CNN, PBS, APTV and the BBC.*

To contact Gerard, call 985-624-9976 or send an e-mail to <mailto:gerard@braudcommunications.com>

©2007 Diversified Media

Reprinting and publishing allowed with permission provided contact information and copyright is included.