## **gk** strategy

# why you should prioritise crisis communications planning

insight • strategy • impact

32-34 Great Peter Street, London, SW1P 2DB

gkstrategy.com

In 2010 a psychologist, Dr Alex Lickerman, wrote in Psychology Today that reputation is "an animal designed by committee: you give birth to it but the way it develops depends on the actions of others". The idea is that your actions can guide your reputation, but what really matters is how others perceive them. He reflected that building a good reputation requires effort, patience, and time. It is much harder to build this than to destroy it. What is true for individuals is also true for brands. In the corporate world, it was Warren Buffett, the much admired CEO of Berkshire Hathaway and rich list billionaire, who said, "It takes 20 years to build a good reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it". This is a powerful throwaway comment, but why should businesses and organisations take this seriously?



travels faster than ever before."

why reputation should be taken seriously

Evidence from the Reputation Institute is compelling. Since 2006, the RepTrack 10 – a compiled list of 10 global companies with the strongest reputations - outperformed the S&P 500 by a factor of 2.5. The Ipsos Global Reputation Centre conducted research and found that 87% of consumers around the world say they take the reputation of the company into account when making a purchasing decision.

When you view it through this lens, the stakes couldn't be higher. Reputational issues and crises can take hold in any way. We are all operating in a truly global, interconnected marketplace where news travels faster than ever before. So when a business is considering a decision or set of actions, they need to understand that this has potentially unconstrained reach and impact.



This has also framed GK's thinking around the handling of issues and crises; how organisations pull through when the chips are down. Years of experience tells us that managing a crisis successfully rests on much more than short term interventions, but on long-term relationships, internal good will and a culture that supports quick and impactful decisions and communications. This piece reviews what drives the successful handling of issues and crises and sets out 9 key steps communications teams should go through when planning for and devising their crisis communications plans.

# what drives the successful handling of issues or crises?

Today, leaders must recognise the need to communicate quickly, and correctly, to protect their brand. Recent crises have highlighted the changing face of crises away from physical crises such as oil spills towards systemic issues with boardroom misbehaviour and governance issues. Poor preparedness of some organisations has also become clear. Business leaders hiding away rather than publicly defending their brand is something we see too often. In each case, old-fashioned thinking has cost them. Typically, the manifestation of this has been to wait too long to say anything and then to say nothing at all. This is the wrong approach.

Being prepared is crucial, but crises demand that leaders act decisively, which they are often scared by, and publicly, which means being accountable. Both are good tests of their ability to lead, but an easy obstacle to trip on. A key driver of inaction on the part of leaders is fear. Fear of being challenged on live radio or TV, fear of being grilled in a Parliamentary select committee, or quite simply, fear of public failure. The impact of getting it wrong can be a crashing share price, incurring the wrath of their board, or their own personal reputation nosediving. Many leaders will relate to this but tackling the root causes of issues and getting comfortable with being publically accountable will always be important. Media training is a good place to start on this journey.

Crises are also a good test of a leadership team and its ability to mobilise the workforce around them. Too often the need for internal communications is overlooked as external demands for comment build up, but a boughtin workforce is much more likely to advocate positively for and stay loyal to their organisation. A



crisis is much more than the initial hit; the recovery is reliant on staff coming together around the new way forward.

How a business functions from the moment it is alerted to an issue is vitally important. The first hour is critical in getting the response right. Good leaders ask questions to grapple with the facts so they can make better decisions. What's happened? What caused the issue? Who is responsible? Who has expertise to solve this problem? What are the implications for the public, staff, and the organisation? Who's asking what questions? The list goes on...This process is made significantly easier by having clear roles and responsibilities within the senior team, a structure that allows you to be agile, and clear internal channels for gathering information or feedback from staff.

insight • strategy • impact



Those who handle crises successfully understand the need to communicate quickly, and then consistently, with short, digestible information. In essence the earlier you can establish what has happened and manage the expectations of key audiences through well timed communications, the more likely you are to regain control of public and stakeholder opinion.

Among those who do it best, particularly those with a strong workforce and leadership culture and ESG (environmental, social & governance) credentials, are able to lean on long-standing relationships with stakeholder supporters and public goodwill. There is no case better than a crisis for explaining the rationale for building a positive brand reputation and relationships; they will be your strongest assets.

#### insight • strategy • impact

# 10 steps: how communications leaders can kick-start their crisis preparedness

## 1. Map your reputational risks and understand your strengths

Before considering the development of a crisis communications plan, you should seek to understand what the key risks and drivers of risk are across your organisation.

Key questions to ask yourself:

- Are you regulated?
- Do you interact with the public?
- Do you work with or serve vulnerable people?
- Are society's expectations of your sector changing?
- Are you staffed correctly to serve your customer's needs?
- Do you provide good customer service?

#### 2. Do a gap analysis of stakeholders, influencers and decision makers, and then map them (industry, stakeholder, media, political, regulatory etc...)

A key part of any crisis response will be working with stakeholders and the media to re-establish trust and communicate any changes that have been made.

Key questions you need to answer:

- Who do you know?
- Do they understand what you do?
- If you are on an industrial site, are you in close contact with your neighbours regarding safety protocols?
- Where are the gaps?

### 3. Make sure you have corporate and issues specific messaging

A key element of being effective in your response to a crisis is how you communicate your message, what that message is, and whether it compares favourably to how people and stakeholders understand you. Do you have broad and issue or risk specific messaging or briefings ready? If you don't, you should

#### 4. Review optimal channels for all communications - internal and external

A good message is pointless without ways of it reaching its intended audience. Audiences vary in nature, as do the channels that they receive information through. How will you engage your external audiences such as customers, industry, regulators, and political stakeholders? How will you engage with your internal audiences such as staff or senior management? Email, instant messaging platforms, social media and media distribution platforms, among others, all have an important role to play.

#### 5. Press office readiness

Press relations is a vital part of crisis handling. An effective press office team will give a senior leadership team breathing space by handling media requests and providing calm, strategic advice. They should be equipped to receive and manage media enquiries, understand when something needs to be escalated and be able to create well-written communications that achieve short, medium and long term objectives. Aside from needing staff or agencies to manage this, the infrastructure is relatively simple. A direct media enquiries telephone number and email address published online is a sensible first step.

#### 6. Spokesperson readiness

It can often feel as though the media are acting like vultures, relentless in tracking down their prey. It is their job to find the truth. Going on air early with good information and messages can go a long way in preventing crises from escalating. At a minimum, senior leaders should be media trained and able to represent their organisations.

## 7. Appoint a dedicated issues and crises team with clear roles and responsibilities assigned

Handling a crisis is so much more than the threat of a CEO being put in front of a camera and dealing with endless media enquiries. These are important elements that need to be managed, but ultimately the core issue needs to be investigated, understood and responded to. A crisis plan should assign key roles to senior leaders in the business, from operational investigations to the handling of key audience groups. They should be accountable for reporting progress against key tasks in their remit.

#### 8. Create a clear process for assessing risk

When an incident takes place there should be a tangible way of assessing its severity. By working through a tested procedure, you should be able to glean what level of response is required, the areas of an organisation that are most impacted, and which audiences should be prioritised for communications.

#### authored by Ned Lamb

#### 9. Create a clear messaging prompts grid

With a clear understanding of what has happened, its severity and the impacted audiences, your crisis communications team should develop messages that provide helpful information, manage expectations, and allow your organisation space to deliver its next steps in business continuity. It can be helpful in this process to have messaging prompts, or a series of questions, to guide your team's thinking. This can be particularly helpful during crises when teams are either panicked or lacking time.

#### 10. Agreeing a crisis handling process internally

With the key elements set up, it will be important to provide clear guidance on how the handling of a crisis should work, practically. A simple process to follow which allows for the management of a situation, communications to be distributed, and feedback to flow in and out of the organisation is key. I've come up with a basic flow of handling to guide communications teams:

	event takes place
020	crisis communications team activated
030	risk assessment
04 🙆	audience prioritisation and channel choice
95 😰	messaging development and agreement
06 ↔	messaging distribution and ongoing
97 <mark>(</mark>	stakeholder management
	ongoing risk management

gk



In conclusion, when dealing with a crisis, leadership and culture come first. Afterall, good leaders who promote a positive workforce culture are more likely to make better decisions and be looked upon favourably by key audiences during crises. However, this kind of culture needs to be set up before a crisis happens - businesses must have a "not if, but when" attitude towards preparing for a crisis. Having a plan is key. All good organisations have business continuity plans, and crisis communications plans are a vital part of this.

Therefore, your business must think both long and short term - crisis plans have to be robust and function smoothly but cannot operate successfully in isolation. Successful crisis handling is made immeasurably more possible if an organisation understands and plans for its key risks, and also has good relationships with its stakeholders that it can lean on during major issues.

#### About GK

expectations of and deliver value to their most important stakeholder audiences.

frequent communication. Leadership teams must know their exposure to risk, have a clear purpose and message Leaders must act decisively to ensure their handling of the issue doesn't become the story.

We are a comprehensive, relentless and discreet partne with the skills and expertise to audit, mitigate and manage

We develop tailored communications plans, prepare messaging and content, train your spokespeople and representatives, liaise directly with the media, support your engagement with stakeholders and act as a partner to ensure your message lands with impact

To find out more, get in touch info@gkstrategy.com



#### authored by Ned Lamb

gk

# **gk** strategy

insight • strategy • impact

ground floor, 32-34 great peter st, westminster, london sw1p 2db

020 7340 1150

info@gkstrategy.com

tweet us email us

gkstrategy.com

april 2019