

# Crisis Communications

Don't be afraid of the media — be prepared. Here's how.

A BDN Aerospace Marketing White Paper

*It is inevitable. You've either had a crisis or you're going to have one. Despite a solid business and the best of intentions, something will go wrong sometime. Unless you are prepared and ready to respond, the effect on your company's reputation — and its bottom line — can be disastrous.*

## Uh-oh.

*One of your company's advertisements offends the Muslim community.*

*A whistleblower contacts "60 Minutes" alleging company wrongdoing on government contracts.*

*One of your company's aircraft is involved in an accident, and lives are lost.*

These are three real examples of crises in the aerospace industry. Would you be ready to respond if something like this happened to you?

### What is a crisis?

While your crisis may not involve the loss of lives, it still may make headlines that damage your reputation, disrupt your business and potentially cost you money. Poorly handled crisis communications, even when your company or prod-

ucts are fault free, can result in what some call the "stink of failure" that ultimately settles on your reputation.

Careful, reasoned crisis communications planning is as important as marketing plans, operational budgets or any other element of competent business management.

What constitutes a crisis? Any action or event that has the potential of disrupting your business or casting doubt on your company's ability to competently provide its products or services. Examples include:

- ~ Delays in scheduled delivery
- ~ An industrial accident within your facility
- ~ A lawsuit
- ~ Faulty parts
- ~ Financial difficulties
- ~ Suspected or actual illegal activities of or by an employee
- ~ Storm damage
- ~ Labor unrest

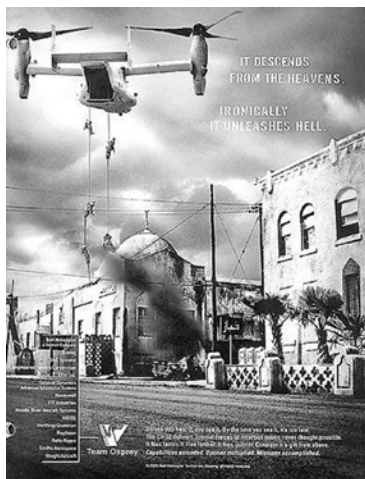
- ~ Problems with a company for which you are a principal supplier
- ~ The release of toxic materials from your facility
- ~ An accident or grounding of an aircraft that contains your supplied components
- ~ A disgruntled employee becomes violent in the workplace
- ~ Inaccurate reporting about your company or products by the news media
- ~ Or any number of other events that you may or may not control.

### Have a plan.

While it is impossible to plan for every emergency, it is critical to have a basic crisis communications plan in place before it is needed (see "The Basics," next page). An accident involving injury or death will create breaking news that demands immediate reaction from the company. In most cases, this type of news will be off the front page in one or two days.

In contrast, an investigation into wrongdoing or a lawsuit against the company will linger in the news as the investigation or trial continues. Regardless of the type of crisis, the basic steps for successful communication during the event

*Team Osprey blamed a clerical error for this ad, which offended many Muslims.*





are similar and benefit greatly from a well-reasoned crisis communications plan.

**Where to start.**

In addition to events beyond your control (weather, terrorist activities, etc.), assemble a list of events that could create a crisis situation for your company. Gain an understanding of how your products or services are used, who uses them, and what might happen if a component you make or service fails, causing an accident, injury or death. Also, learn about the manufacturing processes your company employs, including potentially hazardous chemicals and machinery.

Ensure that you have buy-in from senior management and keep them informed every step of the way.

At the first sign of trouble, immediately assemble all known information, and develop answers to anticipated questions and the messages you want to convey.

**Time matters.**

Have a plan to shortcut the internal approval process in order to distrib-

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*“At the first sign of trouble, immediately assemble all known information...”*

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ute information as quickly as possible and as often as new information is available. There is no benefit in delaying. By releasing information first, accurately, and often, you have more control over what is published or broadcast and you have credibility. The competition between media to be first to publish or broadcast is fierce, particularly in high visibility events typical to aviation.

**Make sure they get accurate information — from you.**

Not all of the information distributed by unauthorized sources will be accurate because very few of those choosing to call their friend at the local paper or those who post a comment on a blog or a video on YouTube have access to the complete story.

That’s why the first hour is so critical.

One widely read blogger wrote: “Our philosophy is that it is better

to get 70 percent of a story up fast and get the basic facts right than to wait another hour or a day to get the remaining 30 percent.... More often than not, putting up partial information is what leads us to the truth.”

**“No comment” means “I’m guilty.”**

It’s never a good idea to respond with “No comment” to any question. That’s the implied equivalent of saying “I’m guilty.” The preferred alternative is, “I cannot comment on that right now because my information is incomplete. However, I will give that information to you when I have it.” Then you must follow up with the answer, or contact the person, and provide a status report on the accumulation of the information.

**Nothing is “off the record.”**

Fully expect to see everything you say in print or broadcast over the airwaves.

One senior executive, answering a question from a reporter about the chances of an explosion in a derailed tank car loaded with his company’s chemicals, responded, “If that thing explodes, we’ll hear it here in Philadelphia.” The train derailed in Oklahoma! His unnecessary and unwise comment made headlines.

**Be clear.**

Avoid industry or technology jargon. One communications manager described a helicopter that crashed as being a “chase” aircraft. A newspaper reported the helicopter had been “playing chase” prior to the accident.

**The Basics**

Your basic plan should include:

Names of members of a senior level crisis team that includes key department heads and the senior communications manager.

Names of those authorized to speak for the company.

Up-to-date 24/7 contact information for crisis team members, emergency service personnel (law enforcement, medical, Haz-Mat, FAA, etc.). Have that list available at home as well as the office.

Up-to-date methods for contacting employees and other stakeholders.

List of resources to handle news media queries, including contact information for key reporters.

Up-to-date company background information.

List of pre-assigned duties for the crisis team.

Location for a crisis command center.

Schedules to rehearse mock crisis situations.



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Chase is a term commonly used in aerospace for an aircraft that is following another aircraft so its occupants can monitor the performance of the other.

**Be human.**

Always show sincere concern for those impacted by the event, especially if there is an injury or death.

Develop a rapport with the news media that reports on your company or industry. Legitimate media are committed to reporting factual information but will do everything it takes to be out first with the full story with or without your input.

**Be proactive.**

Starting today, monitor the media that reports on your company. Distribute stories to senior management and be ready to respond to inaccurate information. Use the digital media to your advantage. If you do nothing else, create an alert on Google that will automatically send you an e-mail with content of what

is being said about your company by the news media and by many of the popular blogs. This minimalist approach is better than nothing if you do not have time to spend regularly searching the Internet.

**Be honest.**

The words you speak must be consistent with the actions you take. Always tell the truth. Any lie you tell will be discovered.

Public relations veteran Mark Ragan says: “If your organization tells a stretcher in the age of links, the chances of a PR meltdown are huge, unprecedented, in fact.” Being honest means reporting the facts about an incident as they are known. It means answering questions without obfuscation. It means providing data that supports your facts. It does not mean disclosure of proprietary information. 📌



*Your crisis communications response will affect your company's reputation and bottom line.*

**BDN ASKS: RESULTS**

**Crisis communications is alive and well in the Aerospace industry, according to a recent survey by BDN Aerospace Marketing.**

More than 9 out of 10 aerospace industry marketing and communications professionals surveyed said they have experienced a professional crisis — such as an incident or accident involving an aircraft they produce or operate — and 87% said they had a plan in place to help them respond. Ninety percent of those respondents with a plan said it was at least somewhat effective.

Only seven percent of respondents said they had not experienced any of the events or circumstances mentioned in the survey.

After “incident or accident” (68% had experienced one or more), the most common crises experienced included: inaccurate media reporting (57%); natural disaster (43%); and workplace injuries (40%).

In addition, 76% of those surveyed said they are knowledgeable about crisis communications — while 7% had no knowledge.

Those surveyed included CEOs and senior management responsible for public relations, marketing and related functions at OEMs, suppliers to OEMs, parts manufacturers, MROs, aircraft operators and FBOs. Their companies ranged in size from 10 to 5,000 employees. 📌