

Tips for communicating in a crisis

After I read about the Menu Foods pet food recall, I searched the company's website while checking batch codes on cans of dog food.

Interestingly, the first newspaper stories about the recall were how much it was going to cost Menu Foods, an income trust headquartered in Streetsville, about \$40 million. One industry analyst even suggested that the company's misfortune represented a "good buying opportunity for investors."

Where was the company's concern for people's pets? Where was the apology? Where was the "open letter" to customers? Things got so bad that IAMS and Eukanuba, both Procter & Gamble brands, took out full-page ads telling customers that their pet food was not made by Menu Foods.

As a public relations practitioner, I watched with shock and awe as Menu Foods mishandled this PR crisis. Weeks later, I'm still feeding Andie, my newly adopted 2-year-old Dalmatian, people food.

Last month, a one-day seminar on "Mass Communication in an Emergency" organized by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, gave me the chance to do a sanity check on crisis communication.

This day spent with a mix of journalists from the CBC, real "life-and-death" health experts and emergency responders and former CNN anchor Aaron Brown, all reinforced my view that crisis communication is badly handled by organizations. But it's not that hard to get it right.

Here are some tips for Mississauga executives and owner-managers, who may not have a public relations department, or an inexperienced one, to help communicate better in a crisis.

1. Concern, concern, concern. Your customers, employees, suppliers, regulators, and politicians all want to know that you care that there is a problem. You need to go on the record through your words and

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behaviour. Your lawyers may tell you that showing concern is tantamount to accepting liability; liability laws are a discrete and separate issue.

2. A negative story will run, with or without your cooperation. Reporters are driven to get the story. "If you don't return my call, I'm going with the story anyway," said Brown, now the John Rhodes Chair of American Policy and Public Institutions at Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University in Phoenix.

The best thing to do with a negative story, Brown told the audience, is be as helpful as you can, be honest and complete and then the story will go away sooner instead of dragging out for days, or like Menu Foods, for months.

3. A reporter is always on deadline. "In a stack of 50 phone messages, return the reporters' calls first," said Brown. If you

don't return a call, the reporter assumes you've got something to hide. Returning a reporter's phone call three days later is useless, and sometimes, laughable.

4. Relationships with reporters matter, but not as much as the story. Reporters want your cooperation with the story at hand, not invitations to cocktails or free baseball tickets. Equally important, reporters want to know that executives understand how a newspaper gets printed, or a TV story gets on the air. Armed with this knowledge, executives can better meet reporters' needs.

5. Start with the truth. "Sometimes, the best you can say is that you don't know. And that's OK. The truth is a helluva starting point," said Brown. "The best we can do is report what we know now, and what we don't know now."

6. Never lie to the media. "You cannot spin your way out of a story," said Brown. "If you lie to reporters, they will never believe you again."

7. In a crisis, first reports are often wrong. In communicating about a crisis, mistakes happen, but that does not mean business leaders and their PR pros should stop trying. Numbers are a trap, for journalists and PR people alike, because they are so easy to get wrong in the heat of the moment. Be stingy with numbers in a crisis.

"Reporting on 9-11 was the most overwhelming and humbling experience of my life," said Brown. "I knew that there were people who were never coming

home." Brown is proud of the fact that he did not report any numbers that day, when the speculation of anticipated dead fluctuated wildly.

8. Reporters need your comment for balanced coverage. "A reporter's life is essentially ambivalent," said Aaron Brown, commenting on the need to examine both sides of an issue.

Reporters need experts to fill in the story (even when it's not your crisis), and it's a great time for PR people to have them available. "Get your CEO out there," said Brown, adding that reporters want senior executives and subject experts, not low level PR people merely reading prepared statements.

9. Reporters want to get the facts right. No reporter rolls out of bed in the morning saying: "I'm going to intentionally misquote someone today."

"I'm the last line of defense between a mistake and our viewers," said Brown, speaking about TV. In print, every important story is "signed" by the reporter in the byline. If a mistake is made, the reporter is on the record as having said it. And it bugs them. Forever. Honest.

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