

Media Relations and a Crisis Management Plan

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As the coronavirus situation worsens nearly everywhere in the world, business owners should consider their company's public response to the situation, being both proactive and reactive. Many companies are issuing media statements about precautions at their business, as well as notifying customers about precautions being taken.

If your company does not have a written emergency plan and crisis communication plan, today would be an excellent day to implement one. (There is a draft plan at the end of this article).

Every business needs a written plan to deal with such emergencies, and an understanding of the nature of the media is critical as well. Not only does such a plan need to be in place, it must be understood and adhered to by every employee of the company. This is also a good time to review precautions and responses with every company employee.

As the coronavirus situation continues, the news media will be branching out seeking new twists to the stories being told. Lumber, hardware and building materials businesses may be contacted for what their company is doing.

Determine who will speak for the company and make sure that everyone in the company is aware of who that spokesperson is and that no one else is authorized to speak on behalf of the company.

Monitor social media for any mention of your company.

Use the "Crisis Management Plan" at the end of this document to determine who speaks for your business. The best spokesman may not always be the CEO and outside professional public relations or media relations help is also generally acceptable.

Don't let the lawyers totally dictate the company response. Get public and media relations help as well as depending on a well thought out plan. Lawyers, while critical in any sensitive situation, often have a tendency to want to say nothing and deal with issues in the forum they are most comfortable - the courts. The "court of public opinion" is often stronger than the legal system.

Always assume that everything you say is "on the record." Assume that any comment you make and even the manner in which you answer the question may be a part of the story.

Any attempt at humor in a situation like this may backfire horribly. A straightforward, honest and compassionate statement is best. Don't lie and don't exaggerate.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLAN

1. Pick the Emergency Management Team Members
 - CEO or other senior management who can make decisions that stand.
 - The “Communicator” - someone who can talk to the media, is confident and believable in their presentation, and does not get rattled or angry.
 - The “Key Person” - a take charge person who can take immediate and necessary action, and gets things done.
 - The “Investigator” - someone who can assess the situation, get good information and make recommendations to the other team members.
2. Adopt a Company Policy (see next page for draft policy)
3. Communicate the company policy to all employees - and do it at least once a year. Don't forget to brief new employees and include the policy in employee manuals
4. Get all information on where team members can be reached.
 - Home, cell, vacation home, other family telephone numbers
 - Keep the telephone and contact lists on all employees updated
5. Get media and public official lists
 - Have day, cell and night telephone numbers
6. Have a concise company history available.
 - One page, typewritten with firm history
 - List firm successes and accomplishments
 - Have your company website up to date as reporters will often get their first information here.
7. Assume any company skeletons in the closet will surface and have answers available.
8. Make a list of allies
 - Public officials and others who might back the firm
 - Industry organizations and others in the same business
 - Industry publications
9. Anticipate a problem that might occur and consider a precautionary release of information to all who might be affected or interested
 - This might include stockholders and employees
 - Consider involving your trade association or professional society
10. Attempt to build credibility and media contacts in advance of any problem.

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CRISIS & EMERGENCY
COMMUNICATIONS PLAN
[NAME OF BUSINESS]

In an emergency or crisis involving *[name of business]*, our general policy is to provide the news media, government, community leaders, company employees and the public with accurate information at the earliest and all appropriate stages of the situation. The information shall always be based on factual data that has the approval of the **Emergency Management Team**. It is our company policy that:

1. All crisis-related actions, decisions and comments will be coordinated and come through the Emergency Management Team, which is composed of *[list team members and titles]*. Only these individuals are authorized to comment or act on behalf of *[name of business]*. **INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES ARE NOT AUTHORIZED TO COMMENT IN ANY MANNER AND SHOULD AVOID CONTACT WITH MEDIA AND OTHERS.**
2. All employees will assist the Emergency Management team in identifying potential emergency situations, in gathering facts and in resolving emergency situations to a satisfactory conclusion.
3. In the event of an emergency situation, all employees of *[name of business]* shall refrain from any public or private statements or speculation on the emergency's cause or effects. This includes social media. All requests for comments, statements and action shall be referred to the Emergency Management Team.
4. The site of an emergency situation shall be maintained in its original condition until any removal of materials or cleanup is directed by a member of the Emergency Management team.
5. In the event of death or serious injury, only a member of the emergency Management Team is authorized to issue information on the matter. Consideration for the family and friends of the victim shall be a primary consideration.