



Economic Development Council of Mason County

**2008
THIRD
QUARTER**

ANSWERING THE CALL DURING A CRISIS

When a crisis hits your business - whether it's in the very visible form of a fire or the not so visible form of an unmerited lawsuit - who will stand in front of the TV cameras to explain the situation? Will it be the delivery guy who happens to be standing there? Or will you have a strategic approach and a trained executive to deliver your side of the story?

Just as you have an evacuation plan for your building during a fire, you need to have a plan for communications during any kind of emergency. If you doubt that, just look at ExxonMobil after the Valdez incident. A crisis communications plan is about risk management. And it's an absolute requirement for business in today's instant communications world.

It is a fact of life that at some point a company will be called upon to respond to public or press inquiries regarding anything from financial irregularities, legal, health or environmental matters or explain system or mechanical process failure.

And these questions typically get lumped in with sensitive or proprietary company or client information that makes communication both more difficult and more important. When the crisis happens - and it will happen - what do you say when the telephone starts ringing? Who do you need to communicate with first? Who will be your "point person" for that communication? Is that person media trained?

If you can't answer these questions without thinking, you need a crisis communications plan.

So what does an effective crisis communications plan look like? Here's a basic ten-step process that you can begin to execute with your business today to prepare your own crisis communications plan:

1. Identify your incident response team. These are the people who will be on the

front lines of decision making in the event of a crisis. Typically it involves senior management, marketing/communications leaders and process experts. Make sure everyone on the team has the others' contact information.

2. Gather this group and discuss all of the nightmare scenarios you can imagine. If your business is a part of an industry that faces scrutiny from specialized interest groups, include incidents that may inflame existing detractors. Draw up these scenarios and map out a plan for how you would manage the communication for the crisis. What should you say, to whom and how?

3. Identify a strategy that applies to all situations for both your immediate and ongoing response to internal and external inquiries. Who will be responsible for generating communications? Who will approve the communication? How will you disseminate it?

4. Develop a media relations plan. Inform all employees that any and all media inquiries need to be directed to the identified crisis point person. Decide if a press conference might be necessary in any situation and if so, where you might hold it.

5. Maintain an updated list of communications guidelines for your spokesperson to have on-hand for handling media inquiries. Think also of conducting a media training session for your incident management team.

6. Develop a crisis check list. Identify all of the actions you need to take in case of an emergency and write them up for easy access.

7. Practice your key message development for crisis situations and develop a worksheet to draw from in case of emergency. What you say first is what

will be remembered. You won't be given much time to get your message out when a crisis hits - typically a response needs to be out within the first 30 minutes.

8. Prepare an agenda for the first meeting you will have with your incident response team immediately following a crisis. Include a situation report, response status, communication status, short-term response requirements, short-term communications process and next meeting time. Also, identify the "war room" where this first meeting will take place.

9. Identify all of your audiences (employees, customers, neighboring businesses, media, families, investors, community-at-large, law enforcement, etc.). Provide a worksheet that will help you develop a method of communication for each of these unique audiences.

10. Develop a media log sheet that includes what the call was about, who called, who took the call, what time and what follow-up action was taken.

When you have walked through this ten-step process - and it can be done within a week from start to finish - gather all the materials you generate and keep them at easy reach (both online and in hard copy) for your incident response team. This is your crisis communications plan.

You may want to have an external expert help manage this process for you, lead the meetings that generate your crisis plan or develop some media training sessions for your team. Whether you choose to turn to an outside professional for help or whether you choose to develop your crisis communications plan internally, it is critical that you start to create your plan sooner rather than later. Once you have your plan in place, hope you'll never need to use it. But if you do, you will be glad to have it.

The Boy Scouts were right. Be prepared.

Written by Heidi Happonen with Happonen Communications

MASON COUNTY PROFILE 2008

EMPLOYMENT

Labor Force

Washington State	3,482,930
Mason County	25,750

Unemployment Rate

Washington State	5.8%
Mason County	7.8%

HOUSING: median household income

2002

Washington State	\$ 49,958
Mason County	\$ 43,063

2007

Washington State	\$ 58,462
Mason County	\$ 49,293

UPCOMING EVENTS IN 2008

EDC Monthly Luncheon

October 10, 2008
City of Shelton's Civic Center
Shelton, WA - RSVP

EDC Monthly Luncheon

November 14, 2008
Xinh's Clam and Oyster House
Shelton, WA - RSVP

EDC Monthly Luncheon

December 12, 2008
City of Shelton's Civic Center
Shelton, WA - RSVP