Jackson
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& Wagner

on

Issues
Anticipation

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ISSUES ANTICIPATION FOR HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS

A. THREE STEPS TO ANTICIPATING ISSUES

1. **Issues Identification…start by asking**

- What's going on out there?
- Can it happen here?

Identify 5-10 priority issues for your organization to track. Enlist the help of an issues anticipation team to help lighten the load of the PR department. Activities include:

a. Scanning (review a broad range of media, professional associations, watchdog organizations and activist groups). Monitor websites, blogs, newsletters, Twitterfeed, research studies etc. to spot trends and potential triggering events.

b. Networking within the local community to determine local issues

c. Communicating regularly with opinion leaders (these will vary from issue to issue) to gather their feedback and insights

2. **Issues Analysis:**

Categorize your issues. They will most likely fall into one of these 5 categories:

- **Latent:** While it's logically possible the issue could emerge, it's on the back burner now…some innovators are starting to think about it, but nothing is happening currently
- **Emerging**: Not yet a "hot" issue, but it's on its way to becoming one …about 10% of the organization's publics are aware of it and are talking about it
- **Hot**: A current issue that is the subject of extensive public debate
- **Fallout**: An issue born as a result of debate over a hot issue. For example, if a change in insurance coverage was the initial issue, a decreasing base of eligible customers might be one of the fallout issues
- **Association**: An issue that has developed at a similar organization but hasn't impacted you directly. However, it has raised the level of attention on that issue for your stakeholders.

Note that an issue can move from category to category, depending on how the organization deals with it and how the environment in which your organization is operating changes.

3. **Issue Response Strategy:**

Brainstorm to determine <u>realistic strategy options</u> for dealing with the issues you have identified, based on your research and analysis. List long and short-term goals for managing the organization's response to the issue.

Write <u>scenarios</u> of possible futures and include a decision tree (if the organization makes X decision, these are the likely or possible outcomes).

Engage and involve your issues anticipation team in this process, as well as those from your organization that might be most involved in the issues that have been identified.

B. PREPARING FOR ISSUES THAT ESCALATE TO THE CRISIS STAGE

Update your crisis communication plan to include these priority issues. This will involve:

- Key spokesperson training, including some thought to the key messages the organization wants to emphasize and anticipating likely questions related to the identified issue

- Generic statements that could easily be updated when the statement for an actual emergency issue is required right away. These can be blessed in advance by the legal team, saving valuable time when the organization is under the gun to respond.

- Updating contact information for your internal audiences, media contacts and specific opinion leaders to insure timely communication.

Recruit counterparts in different departments to assist with updating the crisis communication plan to create buy-in and stimulate thinking from different points of view.

C. APPLYING CRISIS COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

In this era of 24/7 news reporting and open communication through social media, it is critical that your organization is prepared to provide timely communication to its most important publics – particularly employees (and their families), who usually are most affected physically and emotionally. Whether you are dealing with a hospital shooting, an epidemic or an announcement that could impact employee jobs (e.g. mergers, downsizings etc.), employees need to hear from the organization first.

Some advice that will help you communicate more smoothly and effectively during a crisis:

1. **Keep employees informed as the information becomes available.** Your initial statement will have just the facts known at the time, and as an investigation unfolds, more information will become available. Identify the systems that are most effective for instant communication to employees. Work with supervisors on a system that gives them the information they need prior to getting questions from employees.

2. **Spell out exactly who needs to be notified when** – by name, title, extension, cellphone and email address. If it is a chain communication procedure, make clear who should start the ball rolling. Ideally your internal audience will hear about it before it hits the press.

3. **Decide who is running the crisis and who is running the organization.** Determine who is on the crisis team and how the organization will handle incoming queries from the press, customers, employees etc. In the meantime, someone at a high level in the organization who is not on the crisis team can handle day-to-day operations.

4. **Determine who the most appropriate spokesperson is for this issue in advance.** Make sure everyone in the organization is aware of the spokesperson policy. Write telephone scripts for those answering the phone so everyone in the organization is communicating with what we call "One Clear Voice". Train spokespersons to stick to the key messages and the facts…no speculating! Have an outside agency or PR practitioners inside run training sessions in advance so your spokesperson puts their best foot forward when being interviewed.

5. **Rehearse the plan**. Make sure everyone understands their duties and how to carry them out. Fine-tune the plan as needed, refreshing it when a new issue crops up.

6. **When the crisis is over, make time for a "lessons learned" review**. After the exhaustion that accompanies a crisis, it is human nature to want to put it behind you and move on … but while the details are fresh, discuss it and make note of what needs to be changed and improved for future situations.

For more information about setting up issue anticipation teams, preparing crisis plans or setting up media training for spokespersons contact: Jackson Jackson & Wagner's Robin Schell, Senior Counsel and Partner, at 603/770-3607 or rschell@jjwpr.com.