

Crisis Management - how to turn it to your advantage

 By [Marie Yossava](#)

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Read any tender or brief document and, undoubtedly, the question of crisis management tops the list of corporate communications criteria. Companies place great emphasis on a consultancy's ability to handle crisis management, (which can be illustrated by case studies), as well as their years of experience in this arena. *Marie Yossava* reports...

Why? When a company is in dire straits, they call in the "spin doctors" to conduct damage control. Therefore, companies need to be reassured that they have appointed the best practitioners to handle the situation.

However, crisis management need not feature so high on the list of pre-requisites. If the procurement of a professional communications consultancy is well-researched, then you are already on the right road to ensuring a well-managed public image. Companies are gradually recognising the value of strategic input to be garnered from the communications profession.

If the role of the communications consultancy is proactive, then the emphasis on crisis management falls away to a larger degree from the strategic plan. Pre-empting the media of corporate decisions, mergers and acquisitions, company shakeups - statements about movement in the senior ranks that tend to throw out corporate jitters - reduce media speculation and give the company the upper hand. In other words, they take the high ground and reduce the daily headlines.

Having said that, there is no industry or area of life, which is not susceptible to crisis. All industries have their areas of crisis, and while categorisation of crisis is difficult, they can include acquisitions and expansion, hazardous materials, health care, law, litigation, mergers, product contamination, and so on. No matter how proactive the strategic input from the corporate communications consultancy is, there are the inevitable and unforeseen incidents that cannot be forecast. For example, the mining sector has taken enormous strides to improve occupational, health and safety standards, thereby reducing the numbers of risk fatalities and injuries. However, one still reads headlines of mining disasters.

Careful planning by examining and assessing the potential weaknesses within an organisation's industry can well lessen future crisis. However, humans are not infallible, and there are events in life that are beyond control.

To cite examples from a food manufacturer:

1. The corporate communications strategy can prepare the company, from an internal and external perspective, for a plant closure without major detriment to the remaining business.
2. Product contamination - managing the response to deaths and illnesses caused by contaminated foodstuffs, assisting

the distributor with a campaign to inform the public of the product recall.

In other words, guide the process and communicate the responsibility and action by the food manufacturer to negate damaging statements and claims.

To do this, a series of positioning papers are to be prepared by the communications consultancy in the event of an emergency. These papers should address issues that the company and its communications consultancy have researched, and contain statements that outline the stringent measures and risk prevention taken by the company to ensure against such disasters.

Positioning papers are a great source of reference and enable an organisation to act swiftly and respond to media enquiries, even in the absence of the official company spokesperson. It is common knowledge that "no comment" is often the death of any organisation - it is dismissive, indicates corporate confusion and is the start of a long process to put matters into perspective.

Risk and reputation management is another growth industry with many sectors procuring the services of risk management assessors for their business. While it is a common business practice in the States, more professional communications consultants here in South Africa are working alongside risk management teams to focus on the key areas of potential concern and to prepare tools in the event of a disaster.

The long-term benefit is that this is advantageous to the clients - giving them responsible control of their public image.

ABOUT MARIE YOSSAVA

Marie Yossava, founder and owner of Grapevine Communications, embarked on a PR/communications career more than two decades ago. In the past twenty years she has built a solid media relations consultancy, which focuses exclusively on media relations.

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