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Newswires: Assembling a crisis management toolkit

Craig McGuire - 25 Jul 2005 00:00

Combining the latest technology, old-fashioned contingency plans, and solid ties to newswire vendors will ensure a company's readiness for any crisis.

Bad news travels quickly and widely. A crisis management toolkit is nothing new, nor is it something that can be bought off the shelf. It is more of a concept in the realm of crisis management and disaster recovery.

For PR pros, such a toolkit can describe a wide range of available products. Individually, they have their everyday uses. But, when disaster strikes, they can be banded together to battle the forces of bad publicity.

"I know a little bit about war rooms," says Gail Hoffman, who worked the John Kerry campaign before her recent appointment as VP, strategic initiatives, at US Newswire. "Whether you call it your crisis kit or your war-room tools, it encompasses the products and services that you'll need to deploy at a moment's notice to engage in a PR battle."

Obviously, no toolkit can replace solid contingency planning. But once such plans are in place, the company will effect much more damage control leveraging the latest technology.

"Your plan should include all the tools necessary to help you communicate with all your audiences," says Mark Nowlan, SVP, marketing and communications, for PR Newswire.

A cornerstone of any crisis management toolkit is a company's relationship with its newswire vendor. An established relationship means immediate access to a wide variety of tools when they are needed. When disaster strikes, it is much easier to respond with releases that inform target audiences where to find information.

For instance, the Salvation Army has made a science out of raising money in response to crises or natural disasters.

"Getting timely information to the general public is essential, and faxes and e-mails aren't reliable in this case," says Virginia Knor, director of marketing and PR for the Western Pennsylvania division of The Salvation Army. "It's essential that we inform people about where they can donate and what kind of donations we accept, such as monetary or actual food products."

Next to memberships, the most important component of a crisis management toolkit is contact lists. Under normal circumstances, they're a valuable part of a PR person's arsenal. During an emergency, they can make or break an organization.

"We have clients that provide their media lists to us as a backup," Hoffman says. "If, for

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some reason, they are unable to access their technology, whether they do not have access to their office or phones, their internet is down, or their database compromised, they can call us, dictate a press release, and we can get it out."

If the company doesn't have much of a media list set up, it certainly won't get any easier when the sky starts falling. But the newswire companies all have trained sales pros that will help to devise strategies. For instance, a representative can help build custom circulation lists.

"Certain audiences may require tailored communications," says Paolina Milana, VP of marketing and media relations for Market Wire, which has a service called Custom Wire. "A key use of Custom Wire during a crisis is to already have in place a list of targeted media to whom your company might direct key information," Milana explains.

As companies send out initial releases, they should also reach into their crisis management toolkit for a monitoring engine to find out who is saying what about their company and to whom they are saying it to.

Michael Lissauer, Business Wire's SVP of marketing and business strategy, says that such services are readily available, including BW's NewsTrak Clips.

"After a news release is issued in a crisis," he says, "NewsTrak Clips monitors online versions of ... daily newspapers in the US, the UK, and throughout the world, [as well as] magazines, business publications and trade titles." Also monitored are key wire services and news agencies, along with thousands of news websites and broadcast loggings from the top 100 US markets.

Citizen journalists are now key observers of a corporate crisis, and BW has tacked on options for this very purpose. Optional monitoring includes messages from thousands of Usenet news groups and web forums. The service can also monitor over 3,000 of the most popular blogs, as well as sites associated with news outlets.

No crisis management toolkit would be complete without some sort of online media center, and most major newswires offer such services. In addition, companies such as Wieck Media specialize in such things, and president Tim Roberts recommends a company be prepared by having a dark site up at all times, stacked with company information and background, and ready to fill in at the last minute with the specifics of the crisis at hand. Once the crisis breaks, a dedicated website can be up in a matter of minutes and a blast is then sent out to a contact list directing media to the site. These sites can offer a lot, including streaming media, investor relations data and presentations, SMTs, PSAs, b-roll packages, and live event-casting.

In addition to using newswire and specialist vendors, broadcast media firms can also contribute to these efforts.

Susan Macaluso, associate VP of corporate communications at Medialink, uses the example of a major US corporation that lost a multibillion-dollar class action lawsuit, and was left with a client that needed to respond immediately to Wall Street, stakeholders, the media, and employees.

A VNR was immediately produced and distributed to network, cable and local TV outlets across the US, and Medialink produced a multi-camera press conference that was broadcast via satellite to the media and key stakeholders. An internal broadcast was produced that enabled the CEO to address employees and explain the verdict's impact on the company.

"The simultaneous responses allowed our client to communicate with the press, employees, stockholders, analysts, and the general public effectively and confidently within hours of the verdict," says Macaluso.

But having a plan in place doesn't always mean a company will be able to effectively use them in a crisis situation.

"It is really important to learn how to use these tools and find out how they work in non-crisis situations so that when a crisis occurs you'll be prepared," says Hoffman. "And, make sure you aren't the only one who knows how to use them. Have a backup structure in place or a person who can take charge."

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