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Video can come in handy during a crisis

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Even the most thorough contingency planning cannot anticipate every unexpected situation. Having broadcast-quality footage already on hand, however, makes for a much quicker and more effective response when the sky starts falling.

Be it a product recall, executive malfeasance, or an industry-wide calamity, all companies need some type of crisis communications plan in place that anticipates multiple scenarios.

Canned press releases will only go so far. Once the crisis strategy is in place, PR pros can begin packaging video footage and other elements that match response messaging. Next, they should architect the channels for rapidly getting the word out. Keep in mind that these tactics are entirely preemptive.

"Video can succinctly and swiftly instruct on how to discontinue use of a faulty product or introduce a newly appointed business executive of a publicly traded company," says Larry Thomas, COO of Medialink. "However, without a thought-out deployment plan, a video campaign might not be as effective in addressing time-sensitive issues or reaching audiences who will be most affected."

Having broadcast-quality video available is rarely a catch-all solution. But, it can greatly reduce response time, says Doug Simon, president and CEO of D S Simon Productions.

"Anticipate what exposures might be needed, identify what video would be helpful to provide in such a time, and, most importantly, have a plan to have turnaround within hours," he notes. "Include basic footage of processes, testing, and distribution, and have access to the company's entire video library."

Such video footage can allow viewers to more easily visualize processes.

"If the process by which the safety of a product is being guarded or improved is out of sight, it is more difficult for a consumer to come to the conclusion that it is safe," says Bill Zucker, MD and Midwest market leader for Burson-Marsteller and a former TV journalist. "If a company has video available to show that process from start to finish, it can help a consumer see what's really going on."

On-hand video should also include the company's history, b-roll of the product or facilities, graphics of past

financial reports, and pictures of the CEO and bio.

"Keeping background material on hand can help the media tell the company's story in detail and with company-approved b-roll," says JoAnn Mangione, VP at ZComm.

Nick Peters, SVP of marketing and strategy at On the Scene Productions, adds that volunteering background footage early buys time to shoot a new video to address the specific situation. "You won't have had to put TV news off in the meantime, and appear slow, indecisive or paralyzed," he says.

Peters also advises pre-packaging the same video clips as streaming or downloadable assets for the Internet and/or posting to corporate Web sites and online press rooms.

When packaged effectively, having broadcast-quality footage on hand might also lend a competitive edge when breaking news is about a competitor or the industry.

"News stations often use the balanced approach and temper new product news with what others are doing," says Danielle Addair, executive producer at MultiVu. "If a client is not ready with video of their latest products, they will get trumped by another competitor who is. The same goes for a problem with a competitor's product. If you are not poised to run a copy over to stations who ask for your video, they will run whoever does get them a copy first."

If the crisis is competitive, however, a company should use caution before releasing video, because it could lead to a disadvantage.

"If an entire industry is implicated in a crisis, you need to be careful not to be the only company to have released branded video about it," Zucker says. "You will then become the greater focus of broadcast stories."

Technique tips

Do

Develop a response plan first, then incorporate video elements

Plan for not only developing video, but for rapidly disseminating it during crisis

Consider Internet channels to post video

Don't

Release any footage unless you are certain of the situation

Be ambiguous. Use footage that reinforces your messaging

Conceal or mislead. Be straightforward and transparent in response