



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS:

Seven Lessons Learned from Disaster Response Experiences

BY JOSEPH J. DESPLAINES

When an organization experiences a disaster, whether man-made or natural, it can expect to receive hundreds, if not thousands of telephone inquiries. Having responded to eight large-scale, mass-casualty disasters, I have found that the only common thread between these events was the use of the telephone to get information.

Responding to “stakeholders”—people who have some connection with the organization—lies at the heart of effective crisis communications after a large-scale incident. Anguished family members and friends call to learn about loved ones who were involved in the incident, the media calls looking for a story, regulators seek the facts of the crisis, business partners ask about recovery times, etc.

Managing information in the aftermath of a disaster is a challenge and we have compiled seven important “lessons learned” that can mitigate the challenge and assist affected organizations with business recovery, reputation management, and brand protection.

1. Mass casualty means mass media coverage.

According to the National Transportation Safety Board, the term “mass casualty” can mean as few as two casualties or fatalities. If the organization involved has a high profile and local or national name recognition, media interest will happen almost instantly.

Also, the increased use of social media allows victims and eyewitnesses to begin reporting on the event literally minutes after it has occurred. In today’s electronic environment, media reporting happens so quickly that another way of stating the lesson learned might be this: *Treat every disaster, no matter how seemingly minor, as a media event.*

2. A large number of telephone inquiries will occur in the hours and days immediately following a mass casualty crisis, easily reaching hundreds of calls per hour.

As the press begins to report on the crisis event, people who believe they know someone involved will want information. Disaster response experience has demonstrated that the first option exercised by most will be to pick up the phone and call the organization experiencing the disaster. This situation is further complicated since the media often misinterprets facts in the early hours following a disaster, resulting in even more callers. Experience also demonstrates that most organizations do not have the telephonic equipment or personnel to respond to the constant volume of inquiries, not to mention dealing with the emotionally charged nature of the calls. The telephone inquiries usually will begin within an hour of the disaster occurring.

3. In the eyes of the media, public, and elected officials, providing care and assistance to victims and their families is equally as important as determining the cause of the disaster.

Anyone watching media reporting following a disaster, whether it’s a hurricane, mine collapse, a commercial airline crash or a violent criminal act, will notice that interviews are consistently conducted with survivors, survivor families and victim families (for this article let’s call them collectively the “victims”). Far less time is spent reporting on investigators who are methodically looking for the cause of the disaster. This is because the media recognizes that the public identifies with the victims, wants to know how they are being treated, and will often rally to provide financial and other material support. And, when the public becomes engaged in the disaster response, elected officials will quickly follow, often politicizing the event.

Another focus of attention will be how the organization experiencing the disaster provides care and assistance to the victims and their families. Based on the public perception of victim treatment, the organization can quickly become a hero or suffer image and reputation damage.

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4. The public expects the organization to demonstrate support and compassion to survivors, survivor families, and victim families following a crisis, even if the crisis was beyond the organization’s control.

The U.S. Postal Service did not cause the postal workplace shootings. The City of New Orleans and FEMA did not cause Hurricane Katrina. TWA did not cause the crash of flight 800. However, each organization was viewed by the public as responsible for providing both emotional and financial support to the survivors, survivor families and victim families. This support starts with the organization being willing and able to communicate with these groups, assessing their circumstances and offering help.

Without a mechanism to communicate effectively with the victims, the organization becomes open to criticism of being indifferent, uncaring and uninterested in the human suffering, no matter what the cause of the disaster. The public image of an organization can turn negative in a matter of hours and reputation recovery may take years to achieve.

5. Following a disaster, people primarily want information.

If you ask the victims, they will immediately respond that information is their number one concern.

Opinions vary among disaster response professionals regarding the needs of survivors, survivor families, victim families, and other stakeholders following a disaster experience. But if you ask the victims, they will immediately respond that information is their number one concern. Questions like “what happened to my loved one?” and “when will his/her personal effects be returned to me?” or “what hospital was he/she taken to?” are frequently asked. Having the answers, as well as a vehicle for delivering these answers quickly, should be a priority of the organization.

6. An organization that has experienced a disaster can be perceived as responsive and caring if it establishes a means of quickly and effectively answering telephone inquiries.

Just as an organization’s reputation can suffer from being unresponsive, those organizations that have a disaster management plan in place with a robust crisis communication system are often viewed as responsive, caring, and compassionate.

The best practice for crisis communications is the use of a professional crisis phone service. An external crisis phone service is viewed as the preferred option for a variety of sound reasons:

- Few organizations have the infrastructure or skills to handle this task effectively and efficiently in-house
- Using the organization’s employees to answer a crisis phone can create additional victims, as the calls are emotionally charged and overwhelming for an untrained person
- Most organizations cannot afford to equip a crisis call center, then have it sit unused and possibly never activated

Use of an external crisis phone service can provide the organization with the means to respond to telephone inquiries in an effective manner

External crisis phone services usually:

- Specialize in crisis response
- Have the equipment and staff to handle hundreds of calls per hour
- Have system redundancy to prevent service interruptions
- Utilize staff that is credentialed and experienced in crisis response
- Understand the dynamics of post trauma communications
- Do not have the emotional involvement that an organization's employees might have

Use of an external crisis phone service can provide the organization with the means to respond to telephone inquiries in an effective manner, allowing leaders and employees to better focus on business recovery.

7. The use of a crisis phone service can provide a tool for responding to public inquiries. However, not all crisis call services are created equal.

A limited number of companies provide crisis phone services in the United States and each has their respective strengths and limitations. However, some issues exist that consumers should understand and consider. A crisis phone service should:

- Be professionally staffed with credentialed, licensed and experienced crisis counselors. The phone service should not be processing catalog sales in the morning and crisis response calls in the afternoon, using the same staff.
- Have a quality standard for telephone counselors that includes at least a Master's Degree in the Behavioral Sciences (to deal with the emotional nature of the calls); state licensure; professional liability insurance; demonstrated experience in dealing with crisis and trauma; and "refresher training" on an annual basis.
- Have state-of-the-art telecom equipment and systems with redundancy to avoid service interruptions.
- Answer disaster notification calls with a live counselor (an employee – not an answering service) 24/7 for 365 days a year.
- Have the infrastructure and staffing to handle at least 1,000 calls per hour.
- Be willing and able to scale the phone service response to the size of the critical incident and not over or under respond.
- Activate and deactivate only at the direction of the organization being served.

These criteria are derived directly from "real world" disaster response experience. Crisis communications with victims and their family members is an essential part of any good disaster response plan and can make a positive difference for an organization's image, its reputation, and in how it successfully resumes business operations.

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