Crisis communication and the role of the PR specialist

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Abstract: Crisis communication represents one of the most difficult parts of the activity of a public relations specialist, meanwhile establishing the talent and efficiency of his/her diligence. The success or failure of a crisis communication strategy may determine the public image and market position of an institution. This is the reason why crisis communication must be conducted according to clear and specific principles and must have certain characteristics that a PR specialist definitely has to master. Also, understanding how public opinion works and its mechanism is essential to managing a crisis communication strategy, as an effective management of public opinion and public demands/expectations is a key element in getting public understanding and support.

Key words: communication, crisis, public relations, image, strategy, public opinion

Crisis management will rarely involve large numbers of people. For the most part, the public will judge the response to the emergency or crisis of an organization based almost exclusively on news disseminated by the media. This way, the public's perception about the response or the actions of an organization will be determined to the most extent by how it communicates.

Crisis communication is part of the crisis management process and includes actions of strategic management of the message, of the time and of the channels necessary to communicate effectively with the media, employees, customers, consumers and decision makers. Communication in a crisis situation should focus on facilitating defusing the crisis using efficient and rapid communication methods.

For this, understanding the public perception on the risk is essential. How the risk is perceived often differs from the objectively measured risk. Therefore, the PR specialist must, first of all, find out how the public perceives the risk and take it into account when he communicates anything. Thus, the communication effort should be directed towards understanding the risk, and the press should be involved in this process, so that when the problems arise, they are better understood and the story is as objective as possible.

Given these issues, a public relations specialist must determine exactly the relevant target audiences. Usually, the audience is represented by present and former employees and their families, suppliers; close community, staff in case of emergency, small business groups and associations; people with special needs governmental structures at all levels; leaders of opinion - commentators, editors, influential community leaders, the media.

The public relations specialists should always start the communication effort with risk issues with their own employees. They can often be the fiercest critics and they will have a vital role in the credibility of the effort to communicate with the outside audience.

1 Burnett, John J., A Strategic Approach To Managing Crises, vol. 24, nr. 4, 1998
2 Coombs, Timothy W., Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planing, Managing and responding, Sage, Londra, 1999
The employees can also discover the problems early, acting as warning signals. They can be the best ambassadors of the organization if they are well informed when trying to help during the communication effort.

Community relations are even more important when the risk issues are specific to a particular job. Therefore, the community which is in the vicinity or is potentially affected by processes that occur at the workplace will normally have the most important role in determining the success of the communication program in the event of risk, in the construction of the messages.

From this specific perspective, the most efficient messages are born out of a process that includes harmonizing the goals with the needs of the target audience, the public key information, such as partners, clients, suppliers, representatives of local and central power, politicians, and also anticipation and solving the needs of the journalists.

An effective communication must consider:

- **Preparing channels** through which the public can express their opinions: telephone hotlines, communication through computer networks, fax on demand system, public meetings;
- **Ensuring the visibility** in the process. Silence and invisibility are signs of lack of will, of incompetence and fear, which put the fact that that crisis is under control under the question mark. According to the U.S. Bureau of Advertising Survey[^3], people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see and 50% of what they see again.
- **Managing the message**. Keeping the message clear, honest and consistent. If the message is false, prematurely or not based on the facts and information that are publicly available, then it should not be distributed;
- **Managing the perception** that reflects the power, the truth and the transparency. The media and the public reacts mainly based on their perceptions of competence, truth, openness, transparency, etc. If these values are not communicated, the opposite perception may occur. If a negative perception is established from the beginning of a response to a crisis, then later it is very difficult to remove it;
- **Immediate correction** of false reports in the media, and that are oriented the wrong way;
- **Making internal communications before making public statements**;
- **Keeping in touch with the families of the victims**. If they will get all the news from media, then the confidence in the abilities and honor of the company will decrease.
- **Immediate communication of all the news, good or bad, as soon as they can be confirmed**; and if it is bad news it must reach immediately all the media channels at once. Don't display too much bad news in public, they will be published as a priority;
- **Informing**, with priority, the crisis management team on the reactions of the audience, so they could operate informed.

To conduct an effective crisis communication, the public relations specialist himself/herself should establish a clear set of responsibilities. He/ She:

- must ensure that the quality of communication itself it's not becoming a problem;
- manages the communication process in a rather proactive than reactive way;
- keeps a firm hold on those who speak for the organization. Whenever possible, limits the communication to only one person;

uses the public role of the Executive Director or Director of the Agency to maximize the benefits of the communication; those must be maintained within the set message. It is of no need to create news by accident. He/She must acknowledge rigorously all key officials before any notice and compiles all the uncomfortable questions to ensure the consistency of messages;

demonstrates that he/she cares about people by understanding the public's fear, not denying it.

When all these features are met, the spokesperson or public relations specialist is required to transform the communication strategy into a priority in order to:

- anticipate and guide the process of communication, not just to react;
- be visible;
- be organized and coherent;
- respond promptly to the requests of the press.

However, the communication specialist should not rely only on the press. The media plays an important role in crisis, but is not the only player, and for success are vital the clear and direct channels of communication with all the relevant organizations, agents, shareholders, communities.

The communicator should also discover or at least play an important role in revealing the real problem, which can often be hidden or diffused, and generally, the approach of a false problem is likely to increase the already existing problem/crisis.

One of the most important tasks of the spokesperson/public relations specialist in the event of a crisis, however, is to convince the rest of the organization of the importance of media, which can help or destroy the communication effort or the overcoming of the crisis. This is because:

- journalists are often the first to find out;
- journalists report early and constant;
- they can forward the message;
- they can prevent the public;
- they quickly decide during the crisis who is credible and who is not;
- if they are avoided, the journalists will find other sources of information, without requiring the organization's official point of view.

None of the spokesperson's or of the public relations specialist's communication effort will work, however, in the event of a crisis, if there isn't an effective plan for communication in crisis situations, which must meet a number of distinct features, which require:

- to define the response strategies that can be implemented when crises occur;
- to provide communication resources and responsibilities;
- to allow reaching the target audience with key messages;
- to allow the communication managers to launch public information and media relations campaigns immediately or during the crisis.

Besides meeting all the above requirements, the communication plan in a crisis must complete several clearly defined steps, without which it would be either incomplete or inconsistent, and the both situations may become critical in terms of communication process coordinated and conducted by public relations specialists.

The first step is to identify potential crisis, step consisting in identifying and considering issues and events that may generate a crisis.

Audience analysis is, in turn, a very important step, which establishes the target audience of the organization during the crisis, and according to this public the features of the
entire message of crisis will be outlined. The analysis will highlight target audiences, their place and role, establishing a hierarchy based on relevance and importance.

Establishing the communication team during a crisis is an essential step, as it must bring together specialists from all fields of the organization and all its major structures.

But the team will definitely be coordinated by the spokesperson that may be the named before the crisis or can be named only for specific crisis situations. He/ She must be a good public relations specialist, and also a very good knower of the organization's activities.

Besides preparing a variety of means appropriate to respond to crisis situations, it is necessary to establish the broadcast channels of the crisis messages. Depending on the target audiences, these channels are: direct channels (briefings, public meetings, phone calls, etc.) and indirect channels (letters, e-mails and so on).

A crucial step is to establish a proactive plan of release for media, creating the possibilities of rapid response by identifying the link persons and the contact information for difficult situations, to establish in principle, the time periods and steps in the initial defusing of the crisis.

Establishing partners in managing the crisis also has an important role in the communication process, the partners are not just those who have to support the organization, but also those who will act as opinion leaders and disseminators of information and those that the public relations specialist must properly manage and coordinate.

Establishing the basic activities of the communication strategy (a task that overwhelmingly falls on the shoulders of the public relations specialist / spokesperson) includes:

1) during the first moments from the production of the crisis:
   - choosing the appropriate plan;
   - gathering information about events;
   - defining the nature of the crisis;
   - confirm initial facts in an initial press release;
   - preparing materials for the press.

2) implementing the communication plan:
   - gathering and getting the crisis management team into action;
   - informing the media through subsequent press releases, documentaries, press releases etc.
   - announcing the actions the organization wants to take in order to solve the problem. The obvious mustn't be hidden. The press can find out and the credibility of the organization may be lost;
   - keeping track of the news reports, and how the information provided was used and understood;
   - content analysis at regular intervals of news released in the press, to understand the trend of information in media;
   - establishing the credible messages and sending them through the media.

The crisis communication is not over when the crisis is overcome or over. It naturally continues by monitoring public and media reaction, by content analysis of all news releases, of comments and questions online, by identifying the trends / directions of the comments and questions from personalities and opinion leaders, by an active listening of the community opinions and by understanding of the issues facing as a result of the crisis.
Once the crisis is over, the organization should broadcast a final statement which concludes over what happened and the steps that will be taken in order to restore the normal state of facts; completing an internal communications program to share the learned lessons and the conclusions reached during the crisis; hearings and letters for those who were affected by the crisis.

Once the crisis has ended and media attention decreased in intensity, it is necessary to analyze the communication during the crisis, this meaning:
- the analysis of the messages that were issued;
- a thorough analysis of the public opinions and attitudes;
- employees' reactions and their suggestions for improving the communication;
- the reaction / conclusions from the partner organizations and other partners.

As one can see, each of these steps has as an essential, determining part for the spokesman or the public relations and communication specialist, which is the only one who can defuse the crisis and avoid a crisis of image to develop in the context of an organizational or situational crisis.

But what is a crisis of image? In the era of globalization of the market economy and stiff competition for material, financial and public resources (customers, partners, policy makers, opinion leaders etc.), many organizations appear and disappear. Researchers\(^4\) revealed that beyond the classic economic, financial and managerial aspects, one of the causes that led to the failure was the bad public image.

Socially, the image of an organization is relevant by the degree of public awareness and confidence with which it is listed in the environment in which the organization operates. In other words, the image is the public reflection of the reputation, of the personality or of the identity of an organization. Whether we like it or not, every organization once built, has a specific image in the public consciousness.

In everyday life, people buy products and services based on the image they have formed about these products or about the organization that produces and offers them. Many times, they remain "hanging" on the image and refuse to see other products or services that the market offers, even if these may sometimes be better than the old ones. This is because the "image" of that company is their own creation, their own representation.

A coherent, positive image gives the organization the stability and success in the continuous competition for resources and public. In addition, it is less vulnerable to attacks pursued by its competitors and less at risk to deal with a crisis situation.

On the contrary, reduced compatibility between what the organization does, what it says and what people think about it, and reverse polarity to the negative image of public assessments, determines performance decreases within the organization, reduced market share and even bringing it into crisis.

From this point of view, Levinson\(^5\) compares the organization with the human body: "If you want to understand a person, you examine it. You can do it systematically as physiologists do or you can try to find out more about it over time, as friends do. First try to find out who and what that person represents. Second, try to find out how he/she behave in different circumstances. Third, you want to know what the person thinks and how he/she

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\(^4\) Morgan, G., *Imagini ale organizației*, De Boeck Université, Quebec, 1999

\(^5\) Levinson, Harry, *Organizational Diagnosis*, Cambridge, Harvard University Publisher, 1999, pg. 158
perceives and understands the world, how he/she presents himself/herself to the world and why he/she does it that way. If there are big differences between the projected image and who the person who really is, the emotional conflicts are inevitable."

It follows, therefore, that stability and consistency are two of the essential features of a successful public image.

There are some types of organizations whose dependency on preserving their public image is essential for their success and even for their survival: banks, financial institutions and political organizations. They base their functioning on the fame (reputation) and on the public trust they are listed with.

Economic organizations that aim goods or services production may face an image crisis that can manifest in intermediate stages. First, it can affect only some of the goods or services of the organization that lose the competition for public image. In this case, the overall picture of the organization can maintain appropriate boundaries, the reputation and public trust ensuring the normal functioning of the organization. However, not solving in good time the problems with high public impact, generated by the products and services whose image was damaged will cause severe crisis situations for the entire organization.

Under these circumstances, we define the image crisis that stage of damage of the fame, reputation and public trust that endangers the functioning or existence of an organization.

This means that the products or services do not have the same market search and the honesty of purpose, accuracy and legality of the organization become subject of public or legal debate.

Unlike organizational crises or media crises, image crisis does not occur suddenly, but its evolution is slower and more complex. Its development is influenced by the number of audiences involved in the process, by the capacity to communicate of the organization and by the overall environmental hostility. The changes at the level of individual beliefs are slower than the changes at the level of opinions and attitudes, and the assessment, resulting in an image, is influenced by the convictions of the individuals.

Often the image crisis overlaps and is determined by an identity crisis that is specific to an organizational culture, or can cause in turn the emergence of an identity crisis, affecting the organizational culture and the psychological side of the internal and external audiences. Individuals tend to refuse to even identify themselves with an organization they do not believe in anymore. They try to protect their own image this way though, as members of the organization, they are jointly liable for its actions in the face of the public opinion. The image crisis questions the ideals and values of the organization, demanding acutely the alignment with the external and internal public's expectations.

On the other hand, the image crisis is more difficult to identify than other types of crisis, requiring more complex analyzes and evaluations, conducted by specialized structures to identify the attitudes and the thrust of the internal and external public.

The consequences of the image crisis are long-term ones. The credibility of an organization is hard to obtain, it maintains with great efforts and is regained even more difficult, with great expense. The organizational crisis effects cease when solving the crisis through organizational restructuring, through redefining goals and objectives, through eliminating the causes of incidents, accidents and conflicts. Media crisis cease immediately
that the media believes that his duty to submit to public judgment the work organization is
fulfilled, and meanwhile, it found a new hot topic. The image crisis is, however cumulative
and deeper than other types of crisis. Because of the image crisis, an organization can remain
stigmatized throughout its existence if nothing is done to restore the public image. Moreover,
in such a case, its existence can be very brief or the strategic sense of the mission of an
organization in the public perception can be dramatically changed.

Moreover, the image crisis of an organization can affect the credibility, legitimacy and
development of an entire field.

As one can see, role of the spokesperson or a public relations and communication
specialist is a strategic one, essential when talking about crisis communication, about the
implementation of a communication plan whose ultimate goal is to overcome a crisis situation
and to restore the confidence in the image and culture of the organization they represent.
Media communication, the external but also the internal one, must be coordinated clearly by a
trained person, but who knows in-depth the activities and characteristics of the organization.
The PR specialist is, in the context of this research, the one who saves, recomposes or
recreates the image of an organization affected by crisis, and it is his skills that the very
survival of the organization often depends on.

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