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Why You Need a Crisis Communications Plan

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Podcast Transcript

What would you do if someone started badmouthing you on social media? How would you respond if someone set off a firestorm about you in a Facebook group? Would you be prepared?

As a solo entrepreneur or small-business owner, you've probably never considered a crisis communication plan. I mean, what could possibly happen that would make you need one? It's not as if you're United Airlines having to respond to a customer getting beaten up on a flight!

But there *are* issues that can pop up that we have to respond to. And it's so much easier to respond when we've prepared ahead of time.

Remember the BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010? In April of that year, an explosion caused a fire on the rig that killed 11 crewmen and injured 17 others. The fire couldn't be put out, and the rig sank two days later. The oil gushed from the site from April 20th until July 15th, when the opening was finally capped. Approximately 134 million gallons of oil erupted into the Gulf during that time. To this date, the Deepwater Horizon is still the worst maritime oil spill in history.

BP, and specifically then-CEO Tony Hayward, massively failed at crisis communications during the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Let me jump to the chase and tell you what three messages you've got to relate to your audience in any kind of crisis: Big or small.

First, you have to take responsibility for the problem. Second, you have to show that you care about the people involved. And, third, you have to demonstrate that you're taking action on a plan to fix the problem.

So, on taking responsibility for the problem, Tony Hayward blamed the owner of the rig, Transocean. BP was licensing the rig. In the public's eyes, it was a BP rig. Hayward even said, "This was not our accident." Okay.

Hayward couldn't even manage to show that he cared about all the people involved in the disaster. The immediate response should have been to acknowledge the deaths of the 11 crewman. That took longer than it should have. And Hayward did not immediately mention their deaths publicly.

He was also dismissive of the residents of the Gulf Coast and of the environment. He said, "I think the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to be very, very modest." I mean, at least he called it a disaster. But, to quote Inigo Montoya from "The Princess Bride" about Hayward's use of the word "modest," "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Finally, BP and Hayward were totally lacking in committing to a mitigating or clean-up plan. When constantly pressed by the media, Hayward infamously replied, "There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I just want my life back." Wow.

BP is *the* textbook example of why you need a crisis communications plan because everything they did during the disaster was just so wrong. They did not have a plan in place. And their response could have been better from a communications perspective, as well as from a logistics and environmental perspective, if they had planned ahead.

I know you're likely not a huge corporation such as BP. But companies of every size need a crisis communication plan.

As I asked at the very beginning, what would you do if you get dissed or canceled on social media?

Sure, you can figure it out in the moment. But, social media moves so quickly. You can't wait 24 hours to figure it out.

I tend to recommend waiting a few hours before responding to heavy issues so that you have time to consider your thoughts before replying. But, when it comes to any sort of crisis, you have to act fast.

So, let's define what I mean by "crisis" before you turn off this episode since you may be thinking, "Look, I'm a coach. I write a blog. What kind of trouble can I get into?!"

A crisis at this level can include a complaint from a client or customer, a bad review on social media, or a negative comment about you in a Facebook group or some other community.

Moving up from there, a crisis can be getting a bad review in the traditional media or getting disparaged in a podcast, blog, or video.

From there, a significant crisis would be getting sued for copyright infringement, trademark infringement, or failure to fulfill work that was promised.

This doesn't even include lawsuits that could come from owning a brick-and-mortar store, being a hands-on service provider, such as a massage therapist, or having access to intellectual property.

I'm not an attorney, and I don't play one on this show. So, I'm not going to give any sort of legal advice at all. If you have any concerns over the potential of any kind of future litigation, please talk to an attorney and make this part of your crisis plan.

Actually, what I can say about legal issues is you've got to be very careful about copyrights and trademarks. Don't use anything you don't have the express permission to use. All right. That's it for the legal stuff!

So, let's talk about social media. This is the most likely place for a crisis to occur and your greatest need for a crisis communication plan.

I have a client who once had a guest on her podcast. The guest said this one thing in passing that slipped by in editing. One person in a Facebook group caught it and brought it up in the group.

Immediately, a bunch of other people jumped in and attacked my client—for what her guest said. Now, these other people hadn't even listened to the episode. They were just going along with what the original poster wrote.

People love to be outraged, whether it's warranted or not. And they love making their outrage public.

The original poster easily could have private messaged my client to air her concerns about what the guest had said. Making it public caused this firestorm that my client had to respond to immediately.

She doesn't normally check the group multiple times a day. But, fortunately, she did that day. She emailed me immediately about what was going on, and I gave her a plan on how to respond.

First, I told her to edit out the bit that the guest had said. Never mind what it was, just get rid of it. With podcasts, you can delete the original audio file and upload a new one. It might take some of the podcast platforms a bit of time to update the episode. But it will get updated.

Then I told her to go back to the group, accept full responsibility, and apologize. Do not blame the guest. Do not make excuses or give an explanation. Give a simple apology.

For example, "I'm so sorry for the hurt that this caused."

Then I told her to tell the group that she had edited out that part and to let them know that it might take a bit of time for the podcast platforms to update. That way, if someone checks immediately, they'll understand if that part is still there.

Finally, I suggested that she should private message people individually. Again, this should be a simple apology, as well as a thank-you for their thoughts and concerns. No excuses and no explanation.

The key to this plan is to act immediately, which she did.

How did it work out?

Not only did everyone accept her apology, it appears that her reputation got a boost because of how gracefully she handled the situation. Everyone loved that she reached out individually. They thanked her for deleting the bit from the episode. And they thanked her for not being defensive.

When you've ever had a complaint with a store, a restaurant, or a service provider, what is the very thing you want to hear?

A sincere apology, of course. And you don't want to hear any excuses or explanations.

All you want to hear is, "I am so sorry that this happened, and here is what I'm going to do to make it better."

I mentioned earlier that you have to take responsibility for the problem, you have to show that you care about the people involved, and you have to demonstrate that you're taking action to fix the problem.

My client did exactly that. She apologized without excuse. She messaged members of the group individually. And she deleted the offended part of the episode.

So, could she have predicted a crisis like this?

No. This isn't something like an oil spill. I mean, every single oil company can predict that they *will* experience an oil spill at some point.

So, when I saw that you need a crisis communication plan, I don't mean that you can predict specific issues that will come up. I mean that you need a general plan that you can customize based on whatever issue comes up.

Here's what you'll put in your plan.

First, you'll need to know who's in charge and who can assist. If you're a solo entrepreneur, then you're obviously in charge. Do you have any team members who can help? Do you have a social media manager?

Second, you'll need to develop a process for activating the plan. Some crises are obvious. Others are more subtle. If you have a team and someone else is in charge of your social media, when should they involve you? How big does the problem need to be before they pull you in?

Third, you'll need to define the key messages of your business. I suggest writing out short statements about your business values and mission. You might not end up using them in a crisis. But you'll have them on hand if you need them. And you can tweak them to fit the situation.

You can go ahead and write out generic apologies, as well. You will definitely customize these for the situation. But taking time to brainstorm a variety of apologies in advance can save you time when a crisis arises.

Fourth, if you have a team or employees, you'll need a plan for communicating with your team and for how your team should communicate about the crisis. For example, would you want your team to comment publicly about an issue? How are you going to let them know?

Fifth, large corporations have media contact lists as part of their plans. As a solo entrepreneur or small-business owner, this might not be as necessary. But such a list

can be highly useful for your marketing in general. So, it won't hurt to start creating the list anyway.

Finally, you'll need easy access to your bio and facts about your business. If the crisis is something in which you have to answer the media or questions from the public about who you are or what you do, it's best to have all of that written down ahead of time.

When you have all of this in place, in one document, when a crisis comes up, you can pull it out and quickly pull out the pieces that can help you in that moment.

By the way, in the messaging section write those three messages that you have to get across immediately in a crisis: Taking responsibility, apologizing, and taking steps to fix the problem. Remember that that's what people really want to hear.

Hopefully you'll never need to use your crisis communication plan! But, just like with an umbrella, it's better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it!

Thanks for being here today! I'd love it if you'd leave a positive rating and review. And, if you liked this episode, please share it!

I'll be back in a few days. See you next time on the Marketing Chat Podcast!

Link to this episode

Angela Kelly Smith is a marketing strategist, Squarespace website designer, and the founder of the [Women Podcasters Academy](#). Her mission is to help women entrepreneurs create the successful business of their dreams through strategic marketing that establishes them as authorities in their field and helps them attract more of their ideal clients.