

# WHITE PAPER

A REPORT TO THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

## DEVELOPING A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY

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Submitted by:

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Stevens Strategic Communications has been involved with the top crisis stories of the past two years – salmonella food poisoning and the gulf oil spill.

Our work on salmonella food poisoning product recall won The Best of Show in the Public Relations Society of America's Cleveland Rocks Awards competition.

Crisis preparation starts with the creation of a crisis plan. Does your organization have one? Maybe it is time to contact Stevens Strategic Communications. We can work with your crisis team to produce a crisis plan that is appropriate to your needs.

In this white paper, you will be exposed to the ins and the outs of crisis planning. We hope it helps you.

Let us know if we can be of service.

Sincerely,

Edward M. Stevens, APR  
President



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INTEGRATED MARKETING, CORPORATE AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

When a crisis occurs that threatens your business, what will you do? Waiting for a crisis to happen and then reacting is probably the worst possible choice, so it is imperative that you have a detailed plan of action and a team of professionals to help you.

With recalls and outbreaks of foodborne illness costing restaurants and food companies millions of dollars every year, your company should have clear crisis policies and procedures on the books. Designated and trained employees need to be assigned specific roles and responsibilities, depending upon your company or restaurant. You as the CEO/owner need to communicate with your employees, board members, shareholders and anyone else with an interest in your company the importance of full cooperation and assistance throughout a crisis. As the head of your company, you are the person who will be the single best spokesperson for your company depending upon the seriousness of the incident. A lot of thought needs to be put in to determine your company's course of action before a crisis comes knocking at your door. "Doing the right thing" should be the driver of all that you do or plan to do.

In creating your company's emergency plan, you first need to determine a list of primary objectives. Whatever crisis occurs, cataclysmic or minor, it will be news and there will be reporters calling you or whomever at your company is the spokesperson or authority. That's not a good thing if the only one talking is a disgruntled employee or just a misinformed person who thinks they're helping, but in fact is sharing completely false information with the media. As the head of the company or restaurant, you need to make sure that accurate information about the crisis is gathered as quickly as possible. Report only what you know is fact; if you don't know the answer to a reporter's question, say "I don't know. We are investigating the situation and we will report our findings to you as soon as we can." Of course, you should rely on the expertise of your Public Relations department in terms of helping you deal with the media and community.

After you've addressed the need to get accurate information to the public, take a look at the crisis as it affects your company or restaurant. How will the crisis do damage to your company? This question applies to damage that may be physical, financial or reputation. But more important is concern for those who may be hurt by the event – your customers, your employees, your community. What will you be doing to make things better? If your business needs to be repaired due to a fire or act of God, you may want to consider assessing the damage as soon as possible so you can get the word out as to when you can safely reopen.

To preserve the credibility and good reputation of your company, you will need to respond promptly to multiple audiences. Of course the media is important, and you absolutely should spend a lot of time in contact with various reporters, ensuring that they have the most up to date and accurate information possible. However, in respect to managing corporate reputation, it is just as important to contact victims of the crisis, if any, and their families, employees, union leaders, investors, government officials as well as local law enforcement and the healthcare community, if necessary.

A good example of a company that balanced media relations with customer care is that of Jack in the Box. In 1993, three toddlers died from eating contaminated beef at Jack in the Box restaurants. With sales plummeting fast, Jack in the Box faced a crisis that threatened to put them out of business.

The company's first reaction wasn't good; it took decision-makers two days to address the public and remove all meat from their restaurants. However, they soon moved into full-scale crisis management backed by real concern for their customers' well being. Profoundly affected by the deaths of the children, Jack in the Box officials made it their only priority to see that this type of tragedy never happened in their restaurants again. They faced legal responsibilities head-on—admitting fault, opened a line for constant communication with the public and began a complete redesign of restaurant operations.

This resulted in a revolution in the way food was handled, making Jack in the Box an industry leader in food handling safety. With the help of a new and aggressive public awareness campaign (Jack the mascot), the company has survived and thrived.

Once you've outlined your company's primary objectives, move on to your emergency plan's secondary objectives. Now that you've gathered correct information about the crisis, use that to calm the fears of anyone who may feel at risk. Knowing the truth of the situation will allow you or your spokesperson to reduce any uncertainties about the crisis and stop rumors that may have resulted. Taking a proactive role in both seeking and reporting the truth will do wonders to minimize the impact the crisis has on your business and to preserve its ability to operate and return to normal as soon as possible.

Again, depending upon the size of your business, you won't always be able to handle a real crisis on your own. Assembling a crisis team and preparing them for their roles in handling a crisis is a must.

Here is a sampling of the kinds of employees or consultants that you might want on your crisis team:

- Public Relations
- Human Resources
- Operations
- Security/Production
- Legal
- Risk Management
- Environmental
- Safety/Health
- Facilities
- Marketing/Sales/Advertising

As you'll find, preparing your company's emergency plan will take a great deal of research. First you must review any existing plans and policies you have. They might be out of date or no longer feasible. What crisis has your business faced in the past and what did you learn from it? You should also look into the crisis history in your industry. What have similar company's done? Taking these questions into consideration, perform a crisis audit of your business, determining how likely it is that a crisis will occur and what types of crisis your company may be vulnerable to.

When you've assembled your crisis team and decided what types of crises your company may have to face, you need to come up with a plan to exercise your team's crisis management skills. If you have an in-house public relations team, have them study and critique your crisis plan. For small businesses or restaurants without the luxury of a PR staff, it's a good investment to seek out a firm or consultant that specializes in crisis communications. Conduct a dry-run exercise for the PR staff only, with them brainstorming on how to organize and report crisis information. Using the PR staff's critique, develop simple scenarios for training your entire crisis team and involve them in planning a full-scale crisis exercise. Conducting these exercises regularly is vital for your team and exponentially increases the odds that your company will continue to do business after any crisis.

When the time comes for your company to put its crisis communications plan into effect, it will be important to follow up afterward with a comprehensive evaluation of the plan. In the meantime, practice evaluating after your crisis team's regular full-scale crisis exercises. Assess all actions taken by your team and the results of those actions. For practice purposes, seasoned PR pros will gauge the effectiveness of your media relations tactics throughout the crisis exercise. For in-house PR departments, you should advise them to take a "worst-case" mentality and grade the crisis team's actions as rigidly as possible. Make changes to your plan as necessary and establish procedures for periodic review and updating.

As far as the crisis plan itself, what you will do depends largely on your type and size of business.

- Here is a list of general plan elements that you might find helpful:
- Keep a chronological log of events.
- Conduct consistent communications with employees.
- Augment PR staff if needed.
- Determine your spokesperson(s).
  - Major crisis (deaths due to contaminated product)—CEO/Owner.
  - Minor Crisis (small recall of product before any major illnesses are reported)—PR head or other Department Head.
- Conduct media training for spokesperson(s).
- Cooperate with other agencies (EPA, FDA, etc.).
- Establish the role of phone operators, guards and receptionists.
- Create an emergency kit that includes individual, organizational and equipment/process sketches.
- Create media materials including backgrounder, photos/video, fact sheets and biographies.
- Notify local, state and federal government officials as needed.
- Respect privacy rights.
- Conduct advanced media briefings.
- Use paid advertising as necessary.
- Follow-up with “thank yous” afterwards.
- Keep the public’s rights ahead of organization
- Do what is right.

Our last bit of advice is the most important. Always do what is right. In the food industry, crises often involve issues of public health and safety. As in the case of Jack in the Box, real concern for the health and welfare of your customers should be the driver for your crisis plan. People recognized that Jack in the Box was sincere in their determination to make their food safer and because of that, the company bounced back from one of the food industry's worst crises. Take this into consideration when forming your plan and you will have a solid base for which to prepare your business for any crisis that may occur.

### **Suggested Readings for Additional Information on Crisis Communication**

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