

Reputation Management.... Much More Than Media Response

A paper to accompany the presentation made by Kim Barbero, Principal, Carah Worldwide Consulting, Inc. at the Riviera Maritime Media Tanker Safety Conference, London, UK, Nov 13, 2009.

The best time to plan how you would manage your company's reputation at times of crisis is when you're not in one. A perfectly logical concept for most companies but a difficult one to adopt and put into practice when there are, arguably, so many other immediate business priorities, stretched resources and budget constraints due to the unwavering health of the world economy. The question is: can you afford not to?

It really is a chicken-and-egg type question, even at the best of times.

What's most important: financial returns or the reputation of your company? The answer is obvious. Without financial strength your company's future is in jeopardy. But can you really have one without the other? Can you maintain financial strength and secure stakeholder confidence in your company with a tarnished name and reputation?

Your company's reputation is defined by its stakeholders and a direct result of your efforts. Whether or not your company can withstand scrutiny and secure stakeholder confidence at times of crisis is dependent upon its behaviours and actions leading up to, during and following the event.

Is risk and issues management part of your corporate culture? If so, you've considered the threats to your business, anticipated how to mitigate, if not prevent, a crisis, regularly re-visit your plan, actively monitor stakeholder sentiment to ensure you are at the pulse of perception and engage your constituents. This mindset of preparedness is very different than one that just ensures you are well prepared to react, put steps in place to resolve a situation and respond to stakeholders who may have questions. While being prepared to do both well is important, an emphasis on planning before a crisis strikes will be instrumental in protecting your company's reputation and that of your customers, business partners, other stakeholders and, ultimately, the maritime industry.

Preparedness, I like to say is 50 per cent planning and 50 per cent awareness. Planning is employing the expertise, developing the structure and implementing the processes and procedures required to execute a large-scale physical and integrated communications response. It also takes into consideration the business continuation, recovery and ongoing financial needs of the company.

Crisis planning takes into account all of your stakeholders, their perspectives and identifies how best to engage them. Planning puts measures in place to coordinate and, in some cases, unite your stakeholders in an efficient and timely manner.

Awareness is understanding your stakeholders concerns and anticipating their information needs and expectations at times of crisis. Awareness is knowing that a marine crisis is not when you identify it as one but when your stakeholders perceive it as one. Awareness is knowing that what an operational person may consider a minor issue may, from a reputation management perspective, require a large scale communications and consultation process with company stakeholders.

Contrary to common practice, protecting and managing your company's reputation at times of crisis is about much more than media response. Today more than ever before, perception is influenced by many different stakeholders of which media is only one. Consider your opponents for example. They are often perceived as subject matter experts. They are media savvy, progressive and influential. They are also fluent in social media.

Tanker companies operate in a sensitive, increasingly transparent and evolving environment dominated by online conversations and citizen journalists who wield tremendous influence and shape public opinion. While you cannot control stakeholder sentiment, you do have an opportunity to influence it. Companies have to be prepared to communicate more than less and value the impact, importance of and reliance on social media.

Social media is a conversation. You will never be able to control it and you don't necessarily need to contribute to it but you do need to be aware of what is being said. This is where reporters get their information and this is one way you manage issues before they become a crisis.

This year's bombings in Jakarta were first reported on Twitter. The 2008 earthquake in China and the Mumbai attacks were first reported on Twitter. The 2005 London tube bombings spurred more than 24,000 emails, texts, videos and pictures to the BBC in just one hour. Citizen journalists and social media are breaking and making your news.

The shipping industry has learned the hard way that it can take years to gain stakeholder trust and confidence and only one incident to lose it. One poorly managed response can negate all positive achievements.

Research supports that employees, customers and shareholders place significant value on risk management planning. So why risk the reputation of the industry? Shouldn't this be an immediate business priority, even in today's economy?