

Unpacking Corporate Resilience: Part II. Crisis Communications Either Safeguards or Erodes Trust

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Part I of our Corporate Resilience blog series entitled, 'Business Continuity and Crisis Management are Different and both are Essential' discussed two essential resilience functions Business Continuity (BC) and Crisis Management (CM). The blog postured that BC's goal is to return to normal operations, or at the very least, sustain the bare minimum of critical processes that allow the company to operate. CM's goal is to manage the consequences of an event and protect the brand, reputation and trust the company has built with stakeholders. A third equally critical function, Crisis Communications (CC), focuses on the strategic dissemination of information during a disruptive event. When working together, these resilience functions build upon and account for one another throughout the event management lifecycle (prepare, respond, recover).

The effectiveness of an organization's CC function reflects the maturity of its overall approach to preparedness. A major challenge to becoming a mature crisis-prepared organization is that CC is a complex, multi-layered and fluid discipline that requires rigorous preparation and precision execution. Most organizations only communicate during the disruptive event, without the benefit of a well-articulated strategy and communications protocols that determine roles, actions, audiences' messages and timing.

The consequences are predictably poor: confusion, indecision, delays, sloppy execution and weak messaging. The outcomes are equally bad: public frustration and mistrust, internal confusion and skepticism across staff, criticism by pundits and public leaders and skewering by social media platforms and traditional media. Today's hyperdrive digital information and misinformation culture makes it even more critical to have a finely tuned, mature CC function in place before, during and after an event. Integrating communications into the BC and CM functions requires top-down commitment. The first step is for leadership to mandate a well-developed, strategic communications framework that defines and governs the communications function in crisis scenarios.

The framework organizes CC functions such as objectives, principles and policies, strategy development, notification requirements, tactical procedures and protocols, stakeholder relationship mapping, spokesperson guidelines and message and response development. It should also outline the systems and technologies that will be used to manage notification and information dissemination, as well as public sentiment monitoring.

Having a mature communications framework in place streamlines the development of event-specific messaging, which establishes your firm as the go-to, trusted source of information. This allows your communicators to manage the narrative more effectively during and after an event by minimizing misinformation and skewed perspectives that erode trust from confusing and misleading stakeholders.

The complexity of CC and the speed at which companies must deploy it once an event occurs drives home the critical need to have communications professionals as an integral part of the CM team. The CC team should be engaged at every step in the process planning, documentation, testing and the execution of crisis responses. Throughout that progression of an event, the CC team remains alert to every change, considers its impact, listens – and manages the company's message – ensuring that what a business does and what it says publicly during a crisis event are always aligned.

Another important consideration of an organization's CC function is knowing what can and cannot be handled internally. This is especially true for mid-sized companies. CC is a highly-specialized discipline and few mid-sized firms have the resources to field a full-time, dedicated team. Further, even seasoned in-house CM professionals can lack the experience to develop a comprehensive and workable CC framework.

This is the principal reason Witt O'Brien's developed **CO:RE** – an outsourced corporate resilience service that enables mid-sized companies to partner with BC, CM and CC experts that build the framework and provide guidance and tactical support during an event.

The ability to manage communications during a disruptive event is a measure of true corporate resilience. You need reliable information to establish the scale and impact of the crisis. A holistic integration of strategic communications into BC and CM planning and event response can help reduce risk, minimize negative reputational impact, drive best possible outcomes, and sustain resiliency during recovery. Strong alignment between BC, CM and CC allows stakeholders and the public to transparently observe what a company is doing to respond to a crisis, which helps protect and rebuild trust.

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