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BUSINESS

The Magazine of The New Jersey Business & Industry Association

Corporate Scandals Present Need For Crisis Communications

Public relations professionals teach companies how to assess the crisis situation, handle the media and be honest.

By Anthony Birritteri, Senior Editor

The phrase “There but for the grace of I God go I” was probably on the minds of many public relations professionals this year as they watched corporate scandal upon corporate scandal unfold in the news media. No, thousands of PR people across the country are not involved in corporate corruption, but they are responsible for dealing with the ensuing crises—the media deluge, the negative public perceptions, stockholder wealth washing away and employees finding themselves unemployed.

For experienced PR professionals, fears of a crisis do not keep them awake at night—not at all. For Liz Thomas, CEO of Thomas/Boyd Communications, Moorestown, the crisis is “the ultimate communications challenge.”

This stance bodes well for companies who depend on their public relations team, whether in-house or agency-based, to expertly handle any crisis, whether it's a case of natural disaster, fire, explosion, harassment, bankruptcy, violence and death, product recall, boycott or demonstration, judicial action, civil rights issue, and embezzlement or fraud.

Some rules of thumb in handling a crisis from the outset are: be prepared with an

existing crisis plan; assess all information before talking to the media; respond to the media in a timely fashion; and, perhaps the most important aspect of handling a crisis: tell the truth.

“Avoid the temptation of talking to the media before you assess the situation,” warns Thomas. “When there are countless news crews waiting on your doorsteps, the inclination is to say something, but I don't subscribe to that. You can't just walk onto the scene and issue remarks off the cuff.”

The hungry media, however, is eager for news, and statements must be made as soon as possible or else reporters will look for other sources that may provide “misinformation.”

“In my 20 years of doing this, you have to tell the media that you will have something for them in a timely fashion. You have to be conscious about their deadlines, but you still have to first get the facts straight and gain control of the situation,” says Thomas.

Thomas cut her teeth in crisis communications handling the New Jersey beach closings of the late 1980s. As deputy press secre-

tary for Governor Tom Kean, she had to deal with blood bags and syringes washing up on the shore and was on the front lines developing a response to the situation.

“It was as bad as it could be,” she recalls. “I had to coordinate a response through different entities including the Governors Office, the Division of Travel and Tourism, the Department of Environmental Protection, local political figures and the communities affected. From that, I learned the ability to process information from a number of different sources in a timely fashion.”

Her environmental experience with the beach closing came in handy years later when an oil spill occurred at a New Jersey hotel owned by a Texas-based company. “It was an oil tank leaking into a stream,” recalls Thomas. She went on-site, underwent a two-hour learning and fact-finding process, met with the hotel's manager and state and federal officials. She then handled the media.

Whatever the crisis, a quick and honest response is needed. Facts must be gathered before talking to the media and updates should be given in a timely fashion.

Be prepared, warns Liz Thomas because, “You never know when a crisis will occur, and it can happen with the least likely client.”



Liz Thomas