When it comes to crisis communications, that sentiment could not be more accurate. Every organization could face a crisis that can now unfold at lightning speed in the digital age. With social media, missteps ricochet around the world, and leaders must act quickly to determine and implement the right response. That’s why companies and nonprofits should have a crisis communications plan in place BEFORE a crisis arises. Taking the following steps will help prepare you:

1. **Identify. Analyze. Assess.**
   Inventory the things that could lead to a crisis. Mistakes, scandals, natural disasters, malicious data breaches, lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Even negative press coverage can be a crisis. From that list, identify the most likely — and most potentially damaging — risk scenarios to prepare for.

2. **Establish the crisis team.**
   It’s critical to have the right people at the table. Common crisis teams include the CEO or Executive Director, communications staff, and legal counsel. But every organization, and every crisis, is different. Depending on the type of crisis, other employees may need to be brought on as subject matter experts (such as human resources for a staff scandal, for example).

3. **Determine the roles of each team member.**
   Crises require thoughtful decisions, but speed is essential. As you prepare, determine who needs to be notified, your internal review process, who will be the spokesperson and who will make the final decisions. Crisis situations require clear, distinct roles.

4. **Prepare statements.**
   Based on the potential crisis situations you brainstormed in Step 1, develop holding statements to save time. Have general responses outlined for the most likely scenarios and add specific details later. Consider having a legal representative approve them ahead of time to prevent confusion under already stressful and confusing situations.

5. **Develop a crisis communications checklist.**
   Develop guidelines for the team to use in the heat of the moment — from establishing notification systems to rapidly reach the CEO, staff, Board and other stakeholders to suspending any pre-scheduled posts on social media and monitoring news.

**Remember:** The more preparation you do ahead of time, the quicker you’ll be able to respond in a crisis situation.
It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.” – Benjamin Franklin

It’s happened – a crisis has struck. Your organization’s reputation is at stake. Now what?
Remember some basic crisis protocols:

1. **Get ahead of the story.**
   Even if you don’t have all the facts, quickly provide an initial statement that lets the public know you are aware and looking into the situation and where and when you will provide regular updates. Also remember to integrate social media. Stop scheduled posts and use your accounts as another tool to communicate your crisis response.

2. **Never start with the CEO as the primary spokesperson.**
   He or she should be visible and available for key written statements early on, but once you make him or her available to the media, reporters will expect to gain access all the time. Instead, start with the designated spokesperson, typically a leadership team member from communications or public relations who is trained and tested.

3. **React with empathy.**
   As you prepare statements and messaging, take ownership of the situation and express concern; do not point fingers. The court of public opinion ultimately will judge you more favorably if the organization immediately acts morally, honestly, and responsibly.

4. **Take action.**
   Communicate what you are doing to rectify the situation. And remember, during a crisis, any vacuum will be filled. Provide continuous, accurate updates on social media and other platforms until resolution. Finally, let the public know you are taking concrete steps to avoid a reoccurrence.

5. **Don’t forget: It ain’t over ’til it’s over.**
   Never assume your crisis is finished; manage the aftermath. Prepare for a swell of emotions and for possible public scrutiny about how you handled things. Listen, monitor media and social media, and respond accordingly. And then ask, “What did we learn from this?”

Is your organization adequately prepared? While you can’t prevent a crisis from happening, you can be better equipped to deal with one. Contact The Hatcher Group so we can help your organization develop a crisis communications plan.

**Contact: Kristen Peterson**
Senior Director, Communications
kristen@thehatchergroup.com
410-990-0284

www.thehatchergroup.com
twitter / @thehatchergroup
facebook / @thehatchergroupinc