



## BERNSTEIN CRISIS MANAGEMENT, INC.

Crisis Management, Response, Prevention, Planning & Training

### **30 Lessons from 30 Years of Crisis Management**

*By Jonathan Bernstein*

1. Not planning for crises is the same thing as planning to have a crisis.
2. One hostile and/or ego-driven person with a computer and some Internet savvy can do a huge amount of damage to any organization.
3. Damaging information present on the Internet spreads virally, being reprinted by other websites and/or even news organizations regardless of accuracy. Ignoring it will only make matters worse.
4. All legal threats - e.g., threatened lawsuits, regulatory investigations - are potential threats to reputation and should be brought to the attention of whoever is responsible for reputation management/PR as soon as they're identified. Typically, however, legal counsel and even senior company management delay notifying their PR advisor, internal or external, until the stuff hits the fan or will do so imminently. Rushed consideration of PR strategy and messaging is seldom as good as that which can be produced given more lead time.
5. There are PR agencies and consultants who - out of greed or ego - fail to consider how much damage they do to their clients by claiming to have more crisis management capabilities than, in fact, they do.
6. Mid- to large-size organizations, in particular, need an automated system of notifying their Crisis Management-related teams and impacted stakeholders instantly and concurrently. Relying on human "call chains" by people who have other responsibilities and/or who are also trying to put out the fire is unrealistic and results in delays and more damage.
7. Sometimes it's wiser to make peace than to be right.
8. Even organizations whose leadership believes that they are very transparent in their internal communications are usually surprised to learn about some of the flaws uncovered by a vulnerability audit.

9. The ability to make a flawless personal presentation to 1,000 people at a conference does not, without training, automatically translate to an ability to conduct an on-camera media interview related to a crisis.
10. Don't get into a public spat with government agencies or the media, they carry bigger sticks than you do and have long memories.
11. With rare exception, media interview skills were not part of a CEO's scholastic experience and - even if they were - they have eroded to the point of uselessness if not practiced.
12. Any significant operational decision has a public relations impact, internally or externally, and should be considered in that light before being finalized. Some decisions that seem to make perfect sense financially, for example, may end up seriously damaging relationships with stakeholders and, ultimately, costing money versus saving it.
13. Everyone in your organization, from highest-paid to the lowest, should understand what your organization considers to be a crisis and their individual responsibilities for crisis prevention and response. Even when their responsibility is to do nothing and/or say nothing. Or else they'll wing it!
14. If you don't engage in a thorough post-crisis analysis, your crisis preparedness and response is unlikely to improve – ever.
15. You are on camera and on the record anytime you're in public, and often when you're in private. Get over it – and learn how to avoid the types of crises such constant exposure engenders.
16. Effective spokespersons in a crisis must come across as compassionate, confident and competent.
17. Learn to practice restraint of pen and SEND button.
18. It's much wiser to encourage and even reward internal whistle-blowing than to find yourself at the wrong end of news coverage, a lawsuit and/or a governmental investigation prompted by a whistle-blower.
19. The court of public opinion can destroy your organization much more quickly than a court of law.

20. Criticism is only damaging if your stakeholders believe it - but never assume you know, without asking, what your stakeholders believe!
21. Crisis communications and emergency response plans are not created to provide a flawless method of response to every crisis situation. They are created to establish a system for effective response to any crisis and to serve as a basis for training crisis responders.
22. If you think a crisis-related response mechanism will work, but you've never tested and trained with it, you're inviting much higher levels of damage when the crisis occurs.
23. Companies that respond well to crises can actually gain market share and enhance their reputation.
24. If crisis preparedness does not receive the full support of an organization's leadership - particularly the CEO - the organization will not be prepared, even if they have some plans on the shelf and a bit of training to go with it.
25. There are five Tenets of Crisis Communications that are a template for crisis communicators to follow and a standard by which the efficacy of crisis communications can be assessed. Crisis communications must be:
  - a. Prompt – or rumor and innuendo fill the gap
  - b. Compassionate – if you don't deal with people's feelings first, they won't listen to the facts
  - c. Honest – no lying by commission, omission, or understatement and/or exaggeration for the purpose of obfuscating the truth ("spinning")
  - d. Informative – answering the basic journalistic interrogatives of who, what, why, when, where and how
  - e. Interactive – in our Digital Age, providing stakeholders multiple media for asking questions and engaging in constructive commentary
26. No person, no organization, has a reputation so fine it is immune to reputation threats from within or without. The arrogance inherent in denying this reality has been a major contributing factor to innumerable crises.
27. Never stop learning about significant potential threats to your organization's well-being, as well as the ways to best prevent and/or respond to such threats.
28. The greatest obstacle to effective crisis preparedness and response at most organizations is the existence and perpetuation of virtual "silos."

29. For public relations purposes, the terms “social media” and “traditional media” are almost useless. There is only media, with a medium being the channel through which you attempt to communicate your messages to your stakeholders. A daily newspaper and a private blog are both media. Facebook and *Fox News* are both media. So-called traditional media all have a strong presence on social media platforms, and all of them are multi-media – print, audio, video, pictures.
30. It is not worth selling your soul for any amount of money.

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*[About the Author: Jonathan Bernstein is president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc., a global virtual crisis management consultancy. His crisis management public relations career began in 1982. More information at <http://bernsteincrisismanagement.com/bios.html>.]*