Lessons from the PM on crisis communications

The start of this new year has been anything but happy for many and our thoughts are with all who have been affected by the fires. One subject that has unexpectedly been a focus of the media coverage is the Prime Minister’s handling of the disaster, which has been widely criticised and ridiculed. His actions and the public and media reaction present a valuable crisis communications lesson for companies and organisations.

So here are six lessons we can take from this:

1) Lesson: Even when the crisis is not directly your responsibility, you are vulnerable.

Fires are clearly a state responsibility, and this was the PM’s initial thinking. Yet the sudden magnitude of the disaster meant that he was in the spotlight, and he didn’t step up until he was forced. In fact, he went on vacation.

To do: In your crisis preparation, plan for scenarios that might involve a larger issue – maybe a supplier or industry issue or a political development - that may see you become the centre of attention, even if you are not directly responsible. Be ready to step up at times of crisis and fill a leadership void if appropriate.

2) Lesson: Plan for unfair and sensationalised media coverage.

Some of the criticism has been unreasonable and unfair. Disasters like this are a state responsibility although it is common for the federal government to provide support. When the PM initially went on vacation the fires were being handled by authorities. He has also been blamed for issues on the ground which have nothing to do with him or the Commonwealth. His failure was his inability to read the mood, adapt his responses, take control and stay in front of the story.

To do: Understand that irrespective of how well you plan, a crisis never unfolds exactly according to plan. Be adaptable, expect the unexpected including media coverage that goes in a different direction, and be prepared to change the strategy as events unfold.
3) Lesson: Perception is what matters in a crisis. It can elevate you or condemn you.

The PM and his team undoubtedly made many communications blunders, which were amplified by social media and mainstream reporting. Keeping his vacation a secret and then misleading the media (and therefore Australians) about his location was unnecessary and became the catalyst for all that came afterwards. He allowed himself to be photographed sitting on a lounge chair looking relaxed while Australia was burning. In his first radio interview (from Hawaii) he said “I don’t hold a hose mate”, which was perceived as dismissive. Later he came across as lacking empathy when talking to victims, while trying to force people to shake his hand presented the wrong optics. At the height of the disaster – while people and property were still in danger – he (or someone on his team) inexplicably released a slick Liberal party branded political video ad with upbeat background music featuring himself. The timing and the style of video were poor. The PM effectively made himself the story, and not in the way he wanted. He gave the perception of weak and confused leadership.

To do: Carefully plan what you say, how you say it, what you do and how you are photographed and filmed. The facts can easily take second place to perception. Planning in advance is vital so you are ready and not caught off guard.

4) Lesson: During a crisis a leader must lead.

Former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern have all been hailed for their handling of disasters and crises. They were perceived to have acted decisively, provided information quickly and regularly, and said the right words to bring comfort and healing. They showed up when and where they needed to. In these situations leadership is proactive, not reactive.

To do: Ensure that the CEO and other senior leadership of the organisation are prepared and trained to deal with media. This must be covered in any crisis communications plan.

5) Lesson: Listening is vital during a crisis. Reading the mood and following what others are saying about you is as important as what you say.

All of the aforementioned examples indicate that the PM’s team spent too much time talking and not enough time listening. During every crisis, there is feedback and commentary from stakeholders, and all of this provides an insight into how your handling of the crisis is being perceived, and the public perception of the issue itself. While social media doesn’t always represent the mainstream view, it is one of many indicators of public opinion.
To do: Allocate one person in the crisis communications team to monitor social media, mainstream media and feedback from your stakeholders. Ensure this is considered when developing responses, statements and strategy.

6) Lesson: Having the right advisers around you is essential.

The problem with political responses is that everyone developing strategy lives in the same bubble, meaning there is no objective, ‘outside’ advice’. However, an effective crisis communications response means that you must view the situation the way others view it – from the outside looking in. The political marketing video released when lives were being lost and property was being destroyed would never have been released if the PM’s team had objective advice. Fortunately the corporate sector often uses outside advisors.

To do: Whether you have an internal communications team or not, during a crisis hire outside crisis communications advisors. At the very least have someone around the table that isn’t part of the organisation who can provide an independent perspective. It’s vital.

For crisis communications consultancy and planning, or to have an initial discussion around areas of vulnerability to a reputational crisis, call Mercer PR on 1300 780 355.

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