

In Case of an Emergency: What Plans Should Be in Place?

Noah Eskew

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Professor Takenya Fulks

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Considerations toward public relations, as a practice and profession, have been steadily growing over the last century. Even in the troubled days of World War 1, “the need for public relations thinking and skills was developing fast.” (Fitzgerald, 1946) Back then, the level of uncertainty was high. Lots of noteworthy, historical events were unfolding before the eyes of business owners, investors, and employees. The sudden expansion of mass media, due to several advances in technology, allowed for emergencies to be publicized on the national level. Such attention on the business sector began to magnify the value of establishing a positive public image. Many of those in leadership positions were left wondering “Is public relations the next profession? If so, what is the proper way to use it for our advantage?” These sources of ambiguity led to a great mishandling of ethics in relation to professional communication. Certain tactics, including the use of propaganda, demonstrated an ability to spark hostility between publishers and the public. More than a hundred years later, the cloudiness that surrounded public relations continues to linger. This resulted in an abundance of “bad PR moves” dating back to the initial outset of the profession. Most of these mistakes were caused by inexperience, unpreparedness, or bad intentions. In an emergency situation, failures, mishaps, and blunders are intensified. Fortunately, a strong and foundational understanding of proper public relations will inform professionals, students, and management on adequate emergency planning.

Public Relations - An input or an output to the strategy formula?

Unfortunately, the function of PR is far too often overlooked by corporations. “Public relations has always played its part in the marketing mix, even if it was added to plans late and rarely recognized like other disciplines.” (Stein, 2016) Using PR as an afterthought is equivalent to flirting with danger. Precautions must be put into place well before a crisis reveals itself or a new product is launched. Often times, when entrepreneurs have a great idea, the Google advertisements, paid endorsements, and special online discounts ensue. But how often do inventors and creatives even consider an alternative way to market themselves, their products, and their brands? What happens when some sort of cognitive or physical ad avoidance occurs throughout at least 60% of their commercial? (Lee, 2011) A big chunk of the audience is liable to set their phones down, change the channel, and pay no attention to company messages.

Using public relations as an input to the marketing strategy is a solution to the current zipping and zapping trends. Rethink interrupting the regularly scheduled program to plug a product, address disasters, or initiate a recovery plan. Instead, consider getting the company into that program by doing something newsworthy. When mapping out an emergency plan or a product launch, incorporate ideas for public events, community outreach, or even charitable acts. These all have the potential to garner meaningful news coverage. Consumers like hearing about companies giving back to the community, and those who provide such stories typically see a boosted brand image.

Planning the placement of a message is another key step in optimizing an emergency strategy. A skippable advertisement before a YouTube video is not an appropriate way to address a more serious topic. Video packages that focus on tragic events do not usually belong in the commercial break of a funny TV program. In order to secure an adequate amount of reach, PR practitioners must maintain regular contact with the right forms of media that can accommodate urgent stories. When PR is considered as an input function, and most of these details are hammered-out beforehand, planning content and placement for announcements becomes easier.

Can PR planning be called strategic when it isn't included in long range plans?

Strategic planning is an aspect of business that essentially develops a set of goals that an organization seeks to accomplish within the next 3-5 years. In other words:

A strategic plan is a coordinated and systematic way to develop a course and direction for your company. Basically, not having a strategic plan is akin to navigating unknown territory without a map. And without a map, you're lost in a highly competitive business environment that will inevitably throw challenges your way. (The Mountaineer, 2019)

Public relations, though strategic, does not always operate on that sort of long-term schedule. PR managers could be working on something for the next week, day, or hour. However, many of the skills utilized in PR are transferrable to strategic planning. Both disciplines are action minded and involve setting goals

and determining ethical and effective ways to pursue them. Each tool should be used by businesses that are launching new products and services or developing an emergency protocol. Strategic planning is also a helpful system when a company must alter their procedures due to new laws or the changing cultural climate.

The key differences between long-term plans and public relations are found in their development processes. Typically, a marketing manager should **design a PR strategy that is applicable to a wide array of circumstances**. The methods of communicating with reporters, choosing and coaching a spokesperson, and being transparent are best when permanently incorporated into the company's policies. These elements have no reason to be rewritten in each situation — they are universal principles. However, strategic plans could vary a great deal from set to set, as companies, promotions, and organizations have unique goals, aim, and aspirations. Consequently, the formulas behind proper public relations are often weaved into good strategic planning, and the best strategic plans are carried out through good PR.

Where does emergency planning fit into strategic planning?

While strategic plans are often crafted years in advance, that luxury of ample time is not always available. Things can change in an instant. The stock market crashes, the oil is spilled, or an executive makes a careless remark. Hardly anyone wants to think about these emergencies. After all, having 3-5 years to plan, execute, and train the staff on a specific and unknown emergency.

While the future is mostly uncertain, proven methods of crisis preparation do exist.

Sadly, some organizations are unprepared; never anticipating that an extenuating circumstance might come their way. **Preparing for the worst, while not the happiest part of the job, is a responsibility of PR** and strategic planners alike. These professionals must realize the necessity of “conceptualizing crisis communication in pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages.” (Heath, 2009) When an accident happens or catastrophe strikes, it’s too late to start planning. NASA had to learn this the hard way...on multiple occasions. When the Apollo 1 spacecraft caught fire, and three astronauts were killed, NASA needed extra time to collect facts and scrounge together a press release. Years later, when the Challenger exploded, a statement from NASA was delayed, allowing much speculation concerning the livelihood of the astronauts.

According to the NASA website, the mission, vision, and core values center around “revealing the unknown for the better of humankind, advances in science, safety, and integrity.” (Blodgett, 2020) By the time of the next incident, NASA had learned to take better control of things. A public comment was made by spokesperson, Sean O’Keefe, reminding the public of the organization’s values saying: “safety is our top priority.” (Lattimore, 2009)

Strategic planners and public relations workers can also learn from the cases at NASA. Running an organization without plans and procedures in place is too risky. When it comes to preventing a mid-crisis, communication debacle,

there are a few wise moves for corporations to make. First, marketing managers should draft a holding statement. A holding statement is a document that serves as a template for company announcements. The majority of the words will be prewritten, and space will be allowed to add further details (date, time, and specifics) at the moment of the crisis. The mission, vision, and core values of an organization should be included in the template. Those 3 aspects of strategic planning are designed to be read, heard, and leaned-on in times of uncertainty. When the unpredictable happens, public relations practitioners can turn to their holding statement in order to respond almost immediately. This is a simple but truly crucial document. Within the process of navigating an emergency, “the publication of a holding statement, designed to help control the message the public will hear immediately following an incident, is also essential.” (Pinter, 2018)

What is the role of PR after considering an organization's the mission/vision/values?

Furthermore, the mission and vision of a company, group, or organization should interpret the primary means of public relations. Any campaign, message, or strategy that is introduced to publics must reflect a similar sentiment as the mission statement. For instance, if the purpose of a company is defined on its website as “helping build a better community”, then it would behoove them to be frequently involved in charitable acts and volunteer work. **The public relations effort must correlate with the mission statement.** “Doing so sends a message to employees [and others] that you mean what you say, and you're willing to be held accountable by customers, investors and the media.” (PR News, 2000)

When those statements are honest and straightforward, the duties of a public relations team become more defined and better focused. In turn, **the values, mission, and vision will serve as a starting point for company action** moving forward. When NASA announced their safety related priorities, that did not conclude the recovery process. Rather, it was a launching pad for their response. The representative fell back on the mission statement for support until better and clearer detail could be discovered.

Summary

In conclusion, anticipation is imperative within the tasks of emergency planning and public relations. It has often been said that “failing to plan is planning to fail.” Companies can ready themselves in 4 simple ways. First, **public relations should be used as an input to the marketing strategy**. Starting out with a proper framework, guided by PR, ensures accurate campaign executions and disaster recoveries in the future. It is never too early to begin brainstorming. Next, the design of **a PR strategy should be flexible**. Obviously, particular steps and reactions are more appropriate in some situations rather than others. But, the overall core routines, such as ethical standards and utilizing multiple forms of communication, should not differ from day to day. Then, organizations must **prepare for the worst**. Drafting a holding statement, or a response template, is beneficial in the early stages. A holding statement will organize the thoughts of leadership, allow room for the latest details, and ease the assignment of releasing timely messages. Finally, when strategic plans are

being arranged, public relations practitioners must ensure that the implementations of such plans **align with the organization's mission, vision, and value statements**. When all messages, websites, and public information correlates, an organization earns the reputation of being honest and unified.

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