

How Prepared Are You for a Communication Crisis?

By Dianna Booher

Do you remember the childhood game “Hide and Seek?” Whoever is “it” hides their eyes and counts to 100. That’s your chance to run and hide—to get prepared. On the count of 100, they open their eyes and yell, “Ready or not—here I come!” and you have to make the best of the situation at that point or you’re “caught” out in the open.

Some people are still experiencing that adrenaline rush with their internal communication. An event happens or a crisis occurs and—ready or not—they have to make do with their preparation.

With all of the different modes of communication available today, it seems that information transfer should be easier and smoother than ever before. And yet, when the satisfaction of customers, employees, and the success of projects and bids relies on how quickly and efficiently details can be passed from source to recipient, there’s always room for improvement. Whether a company or community is dealing with an emergency or the routine, without a detailed communication plan, every situation holds potential for crisis.

A private task force, Business for Diplomatic Action, commissioned a study in order for businesses to learn how to communicate better in a crisis. The study, conducted by Echo Research in six global markets and reported by Robert Holland and Katrina Gill, found that 84 percent of the articles running in the international press following Hurricane Katrina were negative toward the United States. (No surprise, considering the tone of the articles here in the United States as well.) Seeing what happened with no plans, or at least minimal back-up plans for communication in a crisis, companies took note. The survey found that 69 percent of the companies that had a crisis communication plan used it during 2005 in response to some crisis.

Specifically, getting information out fast helps you take care of people’s immediate needs, address the rumors and concerns, and maintain morale.

In short, if you have a plan, you use it. If you don’t, you suffer.

So step one is to have a crisis communication plan and to let everyone know what it is. Then for the everyday communication, keep the following principles in mind.

Reduce the Volume

If the neighbors next door are always yelling, you won’t pay much attention to a tirade at 2:00 in the afternoon. But if you never hear from them and then all of a sudden a blood-curdling scream wakes you at midnight, you’re probably going to call 911.

The same holds true for your e-mail. The more people hear from you, the less they notice. If people typically read your information only “the morning after”—the morning *after* they were supposed to have attended a meeting, the week *after* they were supposed to have submitted a report, the day *after* they were supposed to have been on a teleconference—investigate why. Do people receive so much trivial, unnecessary, or related information from you that they ignore the vital?

If so, decrease the flow.

Prefer Substance Over Shine in a Crunch

When faced with a time crunch, make it a habit to get the information out today in less-than-perfect form rather than wait until tomorrow for polished prose. Wait too long to let people know what’s going on behind the scenes and you set up the same disappointment that moviegoers experience when reviewers have already given away the ending.

And besides that, polishing the prose to perfection creates the perception that you’re varnishing the truth.

Send Information at the Point of Relevance—or Not at All

I know, I know—this seems like an obvious point. But for some people, teams, and organizations, it must be harder than it looks. Otherwise, you and I wouldn’t get:

- Customer satisfaction surveys so long after the service was performed that we don’t even remember what the survey refers to
- Items so long after our request that we toss them upon arrival because we can’t remember why we wanted them
- Calls from people who e-mailed or wrote to say they’d be “following up” and we have no recall of ever having heard from them before
- “Official” documents and certificates months after the proper paperwork has been submitted—and long after the need for them has come and gone
- Brochures months after stopping by to request information at a trade show booth—and long after we’ve already made a decision and purchase elsewhere

You can blame occasional late deliveries on a glitch in the technology. But when the message is oral, whom do you blame?

The purpose of information is to inform. The end goal is not just to send data, but to make sure that it arrives quickly and at the right time. It wasn’t that the U.S. was completely ignorant of the danger to the Pacific Fleet on December 7, 1941. The warning just arrived too late.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." Visit www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*