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10 tips construction companies should know about crisis communications - by Susan Shelby

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Construction firms designate time and resources to safety programs, equipment, and coordinators, yet often neglect to plan for how to handle a crisis. Even with safety precautions and good business practices, accidents happen. How would you respond to a reporter asking about a construction incident involving your company?

A crisis or unexpected event that focuses media attention on your firm can be disruptive to normal business operations and have a real or perceived negative impact upon your company. Especially in this digital age of social media, bloggers, and the relentless 24/7 news cycle, construction companies would be naïve to think that they alone can control the dialogue during a crisis. Here are 10 tips every construction company should know about crisis communications:

1. It's important to view crisis communications planning as a necessary part of business, on par with a strategic business plan. A crisis situation on an active construction site can happen to any firm at any time. Construction companies would be wise to prepare now to prevent one from turning into a reputational crisis.
2. Crisis communications is as much a preparedness exercise for responding quickly and ethically in a challenging moment as it is a tool for reputation management. The goal is to provide precise, consistent information to the press, employees, clients, and partners in an effort to protect the firm's reputation. If you do not provide information, the story can take on a life of its own – and not always an accurate one.
3. A detailed crisis communications plan will help you evaluate the scope and level of a crisis while establishing a uniform communications system, procedures and protocols to help your company deal effectively with an unexpected emergency situation.
4. Whether you hire someone to develop a crisis communications plan for you or handle it in-house,

you should create and implement a crisis communications plan before a crisis affects your company. A well-conceived crisis communications plan provides actionable steps to help a company best control its narrative when it will matter most.

5. Appoint a crisis response team and outline their roles, including one effective, well-informed spokesperson to interact with the press. Be sure to instruct staff where to refer inquiries.

6. In the event of a crisis, activate the pre-determined crisis team and gather available information to assess the situation. The goal is for the company to control its narrative when others are highly likely to create competing and ill-informed story lines. Until you have confirmed information, don't speculate on the cause of the emergency, the condition of the people involved, the resumption of normal operations, the dollar value of losses, etc.

7. Offer an explanation instead of flatly refusing to answer. If something is too controversial to discuss, explain as much as you can. "No comment" sounds as though you're hiding something. Answer truthfully and remember that nothing is truly off the record.

8. If a reporter calls and you're not prepared to be interviewed, assure them you will call back before their deadline. Return phone calls as quickly as possible. You can't influence a story once the deadline has passed.

9. If a TV crew shows up unexpectedly at your office, escort them to an area where they will not have access to staff and clients and have someone stay with them until you're ready to speak with them.

10. Consider creating a micro-website to post relevant event updates. Social media and online posts should be monitored diligently and responded to immediately via the same platform. Deal with rumors swiftly. Update information frequently and always stay on the record.

A crisis communications plan needs to be a living, breathing document and something you visit and update on a regular basis. Many firms either don't have a crisis communications plan, create one and let it gather dust, or mobilize on the fly, which can be disastrous. The more up-to-date your crisis communications plan, the better prepared you will be to handle an urgent event professionally and with minimum impact to your firm.

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