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Effective Risk Communication Starts with Solid Research

by Sandra Macleod

The terms risk communication, crisis communication and risk management are often used interchangeably. Crisis communication we understand to mean communicating once the crisis has hit. Risk management entails ensuring as far as possible that risks do not become a reality. Risk communication is part of risk management—informing responsibly on the extent of risk.

We have entered the age of perceived risk. What do we mean by "perceived risk?" Here's an example: Disputes have raged in the news media on the health risks of not only smoking, but stopping smoking (you may get broken blood vessels), of sunblock, Chinese food, aspirin, text messages, vitamin C, exercise, sex, the full moon, living in Glasgow, and having short legs. So perceived risk comes into play whenever it is hard, even for experts, to identify the cause of something—especially in health matters. Nothing is now seen as "risk-free," and as a result, the public is wary.

Add consumer angst and social power, the might of the litigant, and legislative censure to loss of trust and credibility in large institutions, and you have a cauldron of risks and challenges that organizations can no longer ignore.

It is no surprise that conscientious and beleaguered organizations alike are turning to research to get a sense of the risks to which they may be vulnerable, as well as how the public views those risks.

More and more, companies are using independent and unbiased research to test internal and external stakeholder perceptions and expectations, and to monitor the "weak signals" that may yet destroy them in the months or years ahead.

Organizations must be prepared to deal honestly and effectively with a complex web of risk controversies. They also need to develop skills for negotiating with publics, such as activists, whose perspectives and priorities may be radically different from their own.

Welcome, then, to the world of risk management, the world of assessing and balancing the expectations of a variety of increasingly important stakeholders. The era of reputation risk research has arrived. Here are the basic steps to follow to develop an effective risk research program:

1. Who are your stakeholders and what do they think?

The success of any risk communication program depends on your understanding of those with whom you communicate. Early in the process of risk assessment, identify your stakeholders and audiences, what their concerns are, how they perceive risk and whom they trust.

Intelligent, rigorous and forward-looking research—through interviews with groups and individuals, or media analysis techniques—can help here. These techniques are indispensable in discovering what audiences think of a company to learn what should be

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- **Integrated Risk Management Implementation Guide**

This guide from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provides practical advice to those leading and facilitating implementation of integrated risk management in their organizations.

- **Self-instruction Course in Risk Communication**

This course, which is designed for professionals and all other persons interested in risk communication, is promoted by the Pan American Health Organization, through the Risk Assessment and Management Unit of the Sustainable Development and Environmental Health Area. The course material is intended to help improve performance in the communication of health risks to different audiences, and recognize the importance of community participation in the solution of problems relating to health risks.

- **Search Engine Reputation Management**

In this article, internet business consultant, Rick Contrata, examines the reasons behind and approaches to search engine reputation management. Together, search engine optimization and reputation management can do double duty and provide a hybrid form of risk management.

communicated back to those audiences.

Map out your key constituencies, from customers and staff to media, from regulators to activists, from elected officials to local residents. For each, profile their attitudes, levels of interest and involvement, and concerns, such as health, safety, environment, economics, or less tangible issues such as fairness.

When interacting with stakeholder groups, keep in mind the following guidelines:

- » Do not assume anything about what people know, think or want done about risks.
- » Let every group who has an interest or a stake in the issue be heard.
- » Let people know that you have registered their comments and will act on them.
- » Identify with stakeholders and try to see the world through their eyes.
- » Acknowledge the validity of people's emotions. Indeed, acknowledge that there is a huge emotional component to the perception of risk.
- » Identify which strategic relationships and networks would be best built before a crisis.
- » Use communication techniques that match the needs of each audience: interviews, facilitated discussion groups, advisory groups, online feedback, news evaluation, blog evaluation, web site analysis or others.

An example of implementing these guidelines might be building a new runway for an overly congested airport. Do not assume you know what others think about the risk of higher noise levels and greater aircraft traffic because you have heard the most vociferous views. Listen to all the interested parties using the most suitable research techniques, find the best way of dealing with the outrage of those who feel it, and find a fair and balanced way of reconciling your interests with theirs.

Recognize that that you may eventually have to respond to the public's beliefs, whether or not they are accurate. Keep in mind that competing agendas, symbolic meanings, and broader social, cultural, economic or political considerations often exist and complicate this task.

2. Plan in detail.

You are now ready to conduct your pre-crisis planning, identify risk areas within your organization, determine how to reduce risk and plan the initial response.

3. Assess the effectiveness of your plan.

A frequent sin of omission here is not building measurable objectives into your communication program. Measurable objectives are crucial because, following a rehearsal or actual crisis, they will allow you to determine what went well, what could have gone better and why. Use research where it is needed to answer those crucial "five W" questions:

- » Were the objectives met?

- Did changes result from your program?
- What went well? Why?
- What could have gone better? Why?
- How can the program be improved?
- What lessons are there to be learned?
- With whom should they be shared?

Organizations need to keep themselves up-to-date, objectively and quickly. The greatest challenge is to identify issues and potential crises before they gather momentum and become difficult to address. As the Chinese proverb goes, "You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair."

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