

## Key Note- Crisis Communications

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### #RestartRethink2020

Let us look in the first instance at a crisis and what it is. I have tried to focus how it might be relevant to smaller organisations in business.

Over the years I have looked at numerous of definitions for a crisis. Some of them are quite wordy, so I have arrived at the following hybrid, which for me, best describes one:

***A crisis is any event that can lead to an unstable or dangerous situation.  
It is deemed to be negative and often occurs abruptly with little or no warning.***

The definition contains some unpalatable words for anyone owning or running a business, should they become a reality.

#### **So – how do you know you have a crisis?**

The types of crises businesses – large or small - might face are numerous and can vary depending on what you do. Are you in the service sector or in production? Let's have a quick look at what might happen:

Under the operational heading, we might have crisis in areas such as:

- HR – a strike, industrial unrest, a charge of harassment, unfair dismissal or redundancy
- Environment – a leak from a plant into the water supply chain or a local river or lake; emissions from a plant; or odour issues or noise pollution from the manufacturing process.
- Health & Safety – an accident at the production line; wrongly labeled produce; a warning or sanction for non-compliance by a regulator
- The Planning Process - can be another minefield for companies looking to expand – the planning application, objections, escalation to An Bord Pleanála and so on. If a development is rejected, maybe a company's expansion plans and future success will be put in jeopardy.  
OR
- A serious customer complaint – possibly for someone operating in the hospitality sector

Then at a corporate level, there can be a range of other crises:

- The area of Governance can deliver a crisis – for example, infringement of the Companies Acts such as the misstatement of accounts, non-compliance in relation to tax matters, or even embezzlement or fraud.
- Litigation is another area that anyone in business needs to be mindful of – either as a plaintiff or defendant - it can be extremely expensive and it is also public. Court hearings are open-season for the media and can lead to high-profile, yet unwanted exposure for a business.

- A Financial Crisis – maybe the worse type of crisis for a business owner - sometimes created by cash-flow issues, can have a deeper and more detrimental impact on the business, resulting in insolvency – is there a risk of administration or receivership?

### **So – a crisis happens...**

Something serious has occurred – maybe employees have downed tools and you have a strike; you have been served with a notice to close for a health & safety reason; you have been named and shamed in the national press for being in non-compliance with a regulatory obligation; there has unfortunately been a bad accident on site; or having lost a major contract, you will have to make a number of people redundant. Any of these, or scenarios like them are described in business terms as a crisis.

These are the types of scenarios faced by companies day-in-day out. But how they respond to them will have a central bearing on the business and its reputation as it moves forward. Sometimes the proposed response and how the crisis is managed can lead to an enhanced reputation for an organisation.

As a business proprietor or managing director, the ultimate responsibility is with you in responding to and managing the crisis. You are vested in the business, you are the key decision-maker and you are ultimately responsible for the reputation of the business.

Before looking now at some suggested steps you might take if you find yourself in that crisis situation, we should address some of the pitfalls that might make a situation worse.

### **So, when a crisis occurs, what steps do you take:**

**Knowledge** - First and foremost, get to the bottom of the matter and understand precisely what has happened. To consider, even on an initial basis, how you might respond to the crisis, you have to know precisely what it is, and as soon as you can, understand how and why it has happened.

**Team** - You will know who your trusted colleagues and advisors are, who will support you in response to a crisis. You want to build a small but effective team that understands the issue. It can be counter-productive and inefficient to have too many people at the table.

**Decisiveness** – sometimes good decisions have to be made really quickly in a crisis. It can be damaging to spend too much time reaching a vital decision.

**Stakeholders** - Understand the stakeholders and audiences the crisis is relevant to – staff, customers, and in the unfortunate case of an accident, first and foremost, family members. You may have a statutory obligation to inform a regulatory authority. And depending on the company or issue, the media might be on your list.

**Transparency** – Be open and honest about the situation, no matter how difficult that might be. So do share the hard facts in your communication and take the short-term reputational hit.

**Messaging** - Once you have these key stages completed – and this should happen quickly, prepare some initial messaging to share with the key stakeholders.

**Media** - It is possible a journalist will contact you for a comment or statement. Do not respond until you are ready. They are doing their job but you have to do yours too and you have to be sure of the facts. Once you are in that position, you can provide an initial statement that should be based on the following key messages:

- Acknowledge something has happened;
- You are examining the cause;
- You have informed the relevant authorities; and
- You are taking steps to consider your response

This is a tried and tested hierarchy of messaging for an initial media statement in a crisis situation.

It might be disconcerting that while you have a crisis in your business you are trying to resolve, that you have to dedicate time and attention to dealing with media inquiries. However, their job is to report news in the public interest and if they have a story on your company, you need to be prepared to protect its reputation. But you also need to ensure that any reporting on your business is factual and accurate.

However, there are also times to be proactive approach with the media. If the crisis is a significant one, such as that accident referred to or maybe a number of lay-offs to employees, it is better that the company proactively engages with the media. This allows for a better overall management of the issue in terms of communications.

**Social media** is also a factor and indeed can be the initial source of information for the mainstream media. The reporter has seen something on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram and you then get that phone call. You have to be careful in terms of engagement on social media – for one thing, as and SME you probably don't have the time in a crisis situation to spend on it. Do however post any statement you are proactively sharing with the mainstream media on your usual company platforms.

Also consider if the matter should be noted on your web-site and company LinkedIn page or other platforms. But this might not be necessary if the event is a short-lived one.

So - most times when a crisis has passed it is back to business as usual. Large companies will have de-briefs and learning sessions on what worked and what didn't work and so on. They will update their crisis plan. But SME's probably have the next customer waiting at the door. But no harm to keep a note of what happened, the decisions made and recovery actions.

That is an overview of a crisis and how you as an SME might respond. Your primary responsibility is your business and its reputation.

### Communicating During Coronavirus/Covid-19

We'll now spend a few minutes on what you can do as a company in the face of the crisis we are all in the midst of at this time - Coronavirus/Covid-19.

But, how can you as an SME engage with your audiences during this difficult period. There is a mix of companies with a range of different challenges. On the positive side, technology is helping

companies to enable them and employees to work remotely and to operate on a business-as-usual basis, while other businesses are closed – but hope to be back soon.

While there will regrettably be commercial casualties, many businesses will recover. So whatever your situation might be you can look at a communications response, to inform your audiences in the appropriate manner.

### **Communications Strategy**

Firstly – when looking at communications – in any situation, crisis or otherwise, you should follow a simple process and build a strategy. The key elements in the strategy are defining what you want to say and who you want to say it to. In other words, your key messages and your audiences.

Let us first look at messaging in the current context – and you might be saying at this time:

- Your office or facility has closed, but you are working remotely and it is business as usual
- Maybe you have reshaped your business offering or service to adapt to the demands in the market created by the crisis. That is an important message.
- You are temporarily closed due to Coronavirus – but you will be back
- You have had to close down – it is difficult to be positive in this circumstance – but maybe a message to simply keep in touch with your contacts, as no doubt you will be back in some capacity in future – and remember positivity is infectious.

So who are your key audiences at this time?

**Staff** – first and foremost, keep your staff up to date with the status of the business and engaged where possible with customer activity; communicate with them by email, call them or hold briefing sessions on platforms such as this one, Zoom or Skype or Google Hangouts.

**Customers** – keep in contact with your customers. If you are conducting business with them, that is great, but if things have slowed down make an effort at contacting them to express your support for them in this difficult time.

**Suppliers** – let them know that status of your business at this time and what level of support you may or may not need. They too are in difficulty and need some clarity for their own purposes of planning.

Depending on the nature of the relationships you have and the importance of your customer or supplier you can choose the appropriate method to contact them.

I have seen a range of communications over the past two or three weeks from companies in all sorts of situations – a couple of particular communications, I thought were good examples of audience engagement:

I received an email communication on 31<sup>st</sup> March. It was from a business that is closed due to the crisis, but the tone and spirit of the email was uplifting:

*#HereForYou*

*Greeting from Park Hotel Kenmare*

*As we look out onto a beautiful spring day, our gardens coming into bloom and lambs appearing in the fields we are feeling at one with nature. Like you we are reflecting on what is most important: family, friends, home and health. We are thinking of you, our valued guests, and hope this note finds you well. When you are ready to venture out, we are here for you, ready to extend the same warm and welcoming hospitality you have come to know and expect. We sincerely appreciate your support and wish you an abundance of health and happiness.*

*The Team at Park Hotel Kenmare*

That business that will remain closed until who knows when, and will have had to lay off numerous employees – but it was a message of positivity and hope.

Another that resonated with me was by Datalex – a larger firm, but one whose customer base is the aviation industry and consequently facing a very challenged time:

*To our Datalex community*

*As Ireland, and the wider world responds to the rapidly-shifting challenges of COVID-19, we at Datalex want to wish everyone good health and wellbeing at this very difficult time.*

*Our utmost priority remains the health, safety and well-being of our customers, team members and the wider community. We are closely monitoring and adhering to all recommendations and guidelines issued by the relevant authorities across our global network.*

*We continue to support our incredible airline and travel retail customers, those in the front-line, repatriating and managing the needs of their customers. With over 30 years' experience in this industry, we know what needs to be done to support our partners, and we are acting quickly.*

*Stay safe and well.*

*Datalex Team*

Again, another example of positive engagement by a firm in very challenged circumstances. That was on the company's web site.

As we are well into the crisis I am sure many of you will have by now produced similar communications and other related initiatives. However, here are some simple things you can do:

**Web-site** - If there is interruption to your business, Post an appropriate message on the home page of your web-site.

**Social Media Platforms** - If your office is closed, place a notice on your social media platforms informing your stakeholder of your status – you are not trading at this time or you are open-for-business and providing a full service remotely. Even if there is no impact on your business and you are continuing to produce or providing a service, you should note that you are working as normal and you are open for business.

Social media is also a quick and efficient way to engage audiences. Strategies can vary

depending on the platform you use and interesting content, sometimes being supported with good imagery can have a positive impact. It is a great way of keeping in touch with contacts and demonstrating proactivity. It requires consideration however and the best approach is to come up with two or three posts a week, plan them and post at good intervals. This can be repeated on a weekly basis. Some companies are creating engagement for their employees by asking them to operate the social media function.

**LinkedIn** – in terms of platforms, LinkedIn is the key platform for B2B engagement. A cursory look at LinkedIn will give you some really good ideas around the type of content that is currently being produced. However, you need to make any postings unique to you individually or your business or sector to keep it engaging and relevant.

**Video** – Again, looking at LinkedIn, you will note that video has become more prevalent at this time and people are producing videos about how their companies are responding to Coronavirus and also about their personal experiences. Videos can have multiple uses across social media platforms.

**Mail-chimp** - Create a mail-chimp email to your customers and wider customer base to update them on your status and provide them with a clear reminder you are present – irrespective if you are operational or not.

**Media Communications** – If media communications is something your company engages in, you should consider it, but on the basis you have something to say that is of interest. In the current environment content and tone are important. Journalists frequently use the term “in the public interest” when they are reporting on a matter. This is a good time to keep that phrase in mind when issuing a media statement.

Also, it might be easier for SME's outside Dublin to achieve publicity in their local media which is looking for local content. Each county has its own weekly newspaper and in some cases two or three newspapers. A local radio station and an online news portal.

Something to note also when engaging with the media is it can be very helpful to have a good image – photograph or good infographic, depending on what the story relates to.

So, with a little thought and not much expense, you can come up with a range of good initiatives to create engagement with your customers and others at this time. And remember – make sure you define your key messages and know the audiences you want to target.

Maybe I have noted something that will interest you or your company. Thank you.