

The Communicator

February 2012

Communicating in a crisis

Preparation and communication are key to managing a crisis

By Heather Hudson

For most ag-retailers operating a business in a rural community, reputation is everything. Even when things are running smoothly, a simple miscommunication can set tongues to wagging and toss you into a defensive position.

Now imagine if there was a *real* crisis.

A fire breaks out in a plant, trapping employees. A storm causes a roof to collapse. A dangerous chemical spills in a warehouse located near the town's water source. An employee makes allegations of financial misappropriation of funds or sexual harassment. All eyes will be upon your company and the way you choose to handle it. What would you do?

If your blood pressure rose just contemplating some of the myriad things that could go wrong, you might want to sit in on Nicole Harris's talk on risk management communications issues at the upcoming CAAR Convention.

The president of Winnipeg-based Maverick Media Solutions, Harris knows a thing or two about risk management communications issues. As a former producer and TV/radio anchor, she's seen both spectacular

and simple problems become fodder for the media and the public and she's bent on helping companies avoid becoming mincemeat.

"How you communicate with the public and the media during a crisis will set the tone for your company's reputation and brand. In a crisis, you have to be 10 minutes in front, not 10 steps behind in terms of managing the message," she said.

Harris's definition of a potential crisis is any issue that takes you away from the daily business of running your business. Problems have a way of snowballing when not satisfactorily addressed and you could find yourself with your credibility at stake in the span of a few hours.

She recommends cobbling together a team devoted to manage crises should they arise. Hold a meeting every quarter with department heads to discuss any smoldering issues that could potentially ignite and then have a plan in place to mitigate them. Identify your company's weaknesses, threats, risks and strengths. "The things that keep you up at night are the very items that you need to make a plan for should they ever become a reality."

The first course of action in a crisis is to gather all of the information you can. “You need to find out what happened, when, where, who is affected and how bad it is. Once all of those answers are on the table you can figure out a positive way to manage it from the inside before communicating to employees, suppliers, the public and the media.

“The media is a strong conduit that will get the message out. If you’re not working with them, they will be forced to dig up information from other sources that may not be accurate or flattering.”

Once the facts are out there, it’s time for the face of the company to respond with empathy and concern. “Don’t be glib, flippant or make jokes. Your response will affect public perception.”

Indeed, failing to respond in a timely manner and in the right way can make all the difference between strengthening your company’s image and shattering it.

Remember the Maple Leaf listeriosis crisis of 2008? Twenty-two people died and dozens more became ill after eating contaminated deli meats that originated in at a Maple Leaf plant in Toronto. Within hours of the confirmation, President and CEO Michael McCain was available to the media to accept responsibility and express empathy and concern.

Two years later, the company is back in the black and remains a trusted brand in Canada. Harris says things

could have turned out very differently had they not taken such a transparent and communicative approach.

If you could you use some crisis communication advice, stop by this session at the conference. For more information about Harris, visit www.maverick-media.ca.