

Dealing with the media in a crisis

By Pete Burdon

When it comes to crises and how well companies deal with them through the media, most people think of big events like the Christchurch earthquakes or the Pike River disaster.

But what few people realise is that any business, big or small, could suffer a crisis at any time with the potential to threaten its very existence.

Unlike the Christchurch earthquake, most crises involve a single company. They are put under the media spotlight as likely instigators of the crisis. How they respond determines how well their business survives. For example, an apprentice electrician could fall off a building, bringing into question his host company's safety procedures.

A local bakery could be accused of inadequate hygiene after a customer suffered food poisoning, or a lawyer could be blamed by a client for losing money following bad advice.

While these examples are not as serious as the Pike River disaster, negative publicity through the media can be disastrous for business bottom lines. That's because if public opinion

is against your business, clients will leave and prospects will look elsewhere.

The key is knowing how to handle approaches from the media before anything happens. As an example, what would you do if a TV reporter and a cameraman arrived at your house as you were leaving for work asking you about some crisis that had just happened in your business?

The last thing you should do is run, look angry, try to push the camera away or say 'no comment'. These things all make you look guilty and are great pictures for the TV news. This is probably what the news crew is looking for.

What you should do is confidently say with a smile that you will look straight into it and you'll be available for an interview at your office in two hours. That way there is no publishable footage for the news, you looked relaxed and when you do see the reporter in two hours, you will be ready with your response.

Taking control

Those who have been media trained will then know how to control the interview, getting their points across, rather than defensively answering the questions thrown at them.

It's important that you do front up to the media. Firstly, if you are not there to clarify

the situation, it could get blown out of proportion. That's because the media will find someone else to comment, and that person will not know as much as you. It could also be a competitor.

Research shows that this is vital. It shows that a crisis itself rarely affects a business negatively. What does cause problems is how the crisis is handled. While no businessman can eliminate the possibility of a crisis, if he takes control quickly, responds professionally and communicates well, his business is likely to prosper.

For these reasons, all businesses must have someone trained to communicate with the media, preferably the boss.

This is not only to handle crises, but also other more positive situations. If your business is ever contacted by the media for some other purpose, it would be disappointing not to have the skills to make the most of the opportunity.



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In their words

... reactions to the Government's land package

"The government has set in place a process as to how individual home and property owners make their decisions and it will then be over to individuals and their insurers to reach agreement."
Insurance Council chief executive Chris Ryan

"Full land repair in these (red zone) areas may mean that every house would need to be removed, regardless of its degree of present building damage. The resulting ongoing social dislocation would have major impacts on schooling, transport and employment for whole communities. Giving people the ability to relocate on land where they can rebuild immediately is the best option we have."
Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee

"We need to find out how many residents in the red zone were without insurance and what their situation is. Many of these residents could be left homeless and destitute."
Green Party earthquake recovery spokesperson Dr Kennedy Graham

"There has been much comment about whether we have enough property to satisfy people looking to move from the red zone to other parts of the city. And the answer is yes."
Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker

Keeping time on your side

By Megan Alexander, general manager at Robert Half New Zealand

Most professionals we deal with have experienced "time regret"—that feeling of frustration over yet another day passing by without having made a significant dent in the 'to do' list.

Work is easily derailed by time-eaters such as meetings, ad hoc requests and the distractions enabled by technology—including email and mobile phones. Difficulty in meeting job productivity goals is a common problem at all levels in the workplace, even the highest. The situation can be improved however, by making some simple adjustments to the way you work.

The real secret to time management—and accomplishing objectives—is better self-management. Here are six tips that can help you take control of your day.

1 Analyse your schedule

Where does your time really go? For the next week, write down what you do and when during the work day. Examining how you spend a typical day at the office will help you to identify when you are most productive, how often you sort through emails, make phone calls or engage in meetings and in what ways (or by whom), you are most often interrupted or distracted. In addition, you will learn which projects take the most time and can decide whether they deserve such a large portion of your attention.

2 Create 'time windows'

After you've determined what can be changed, develop an action plan. Think about setting aside "time windows" for specific tasks, such as reviewing emails, making and returning phone calls, or catching up on articles in industry publications. Also, create a regular schedule that takes advantage of your body clock—if you are sharpest before lunchtime, schedule more difficult tasks for completion in the morning hours.

3 Let messages wait

Keeping a constant vigil on your email and voicemail can distract you from more demanding tasks. Unless your role requires it, try to avoid reading and responding every time a new message arrives. Instead, schedule times throughout the day when you focus exclusively on messages. You'll cut down on ongoing anxiety while making your responses less hasty and more useful.

4 Rediscover single-tasking

You can't solve a technical challenge while talking on the phone, filing paperwork and planning for an upcoming meeting. When working on a crucial assignment, give the issue at hand your undivided attention so you do it right the first time. Fight the urge to multi-task, which often impedes real productivity by leading to oversights and errors.

5 Give yourself permission to 'check out'

If unnecessary interruptions tend to prevent you from completing important tasks, don't

be afraid to close the door, or advise your colleagues that you are off limits for the next few hours, so you can focus on your work.

6 Reward yourself

Keeping to a schedule, no matter how personalised or flexible, is challenging because it takes discipline. Give yourself credit for adhering to your agenda and accomplishing all "must-do-today" items. Be realistic too—some days you will be more productive than others, so don't worry if you get off track temporarily. Ensure you also create a balanced schedule that makes the most effective use of your time while

allowing you to do things for yourself, such as a daily coffee or a lunchtime walk. Making more effective use of your time while at work requires commitment and good communication with managers and colleagues.

By creating a flexible yet realistic plan that also takes into account how you work best, you'll be able to keep your "to do" list from snowballing. Before long you'll find yourself spending less time scrambling to get things done and more time enjoying a sense of accomplishment.

