Crisis Communications Planning

AAPA Emergency Preparation and Response Seminar

Portland, Oregon

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What is a Crisis Communications Plan… and why do I need one?
A Crisis Communications Plan is not an Emergency Operations Plan.

- Our mission is to communicate with our employees, tenants, customers, stakeholders and the public.

- The dissemination of accurate, timely information is our method of ensuring public safety and preserving the port’s hard-earned reputation.

- A successful Emergency Operations Plan greatly enhances the effectiveness of the Crisis Communications Plan.
Crisis Time

• In a crisis, the media wants to know what happened, why and who may be responsible for allowing/causing the crisis to occur.

• If you can’t convince them you’re the best source for this information, they’ll look “elsewhere.”

• “Elsewhere” is often where reporters find rumor and speculation.
How to prepare?
Face Your Worst Fears!

• Natural Disaster
• Industrial or Maritime Accident
• Terrorism
• Criminal activity
• Death of senior staff member
• Embezzlement
• Embarrassing behavior or revelation
• Administrative Miscue
Consider the Ridiculous

What do we do if a **terrorist detonates a dirty bomb** inside a container as winds and seas are picking up in anticipation of a **Category 4 hurricane**, causing a docked petroleum barge to **capsize and spill oil** while all of the Coast Guard’s recovery vessels are tied up with the storm?
Plan The Work,
Then Work The Plan
In a Nutshell…

“While not every crisis can be predicted, an established routine of information gathering, examination and dissemination is crucial to a favorable outcome.”

- Port Manatee Crisis Communications Manual (2006)
“Procedures & Guidelines”

• Establish the responsibility for information gathering. Someone has to get as close as safely possible, and they have to be able to communicate with decision makers.

• Know in advance who needs to be contacted, and have their information ready at a moment’s notice. (Keep elected officials informed!)

• Know where media members will be gathered and who will be in charge of accommodating their needs.

(HINT: Have background information ready and identify an off-site location in case evacuation is necessary.)
“Key Messages”

- A handful of “key messages” can be crafted in anticipation of a crisis.
- At the very least, these generic statements serve to get us thinking in the right direction during the chaos of a crisis.
- Ex: “All efforts are being made to ensure safety and security, first and foremost.”
- Ex: “We are committed to investigate fully the circumstances surrounding this incident. Until those answers are known, it is unwise for us to speculate.”
And most importantly.....
The port needs a spokesperson… one spokesperson only, please.

- Reporters need a point of contact, a source of timely and reliable information.

- This person needs to be accessible at ALL times. Reporters are bombarded with rumors from editors, bystanders and “experts.” We need to be ready to address everything with a thoughtful answer, or a promise to find out the RIGHT answer, as soon as possible.

- A correctly managed crisis will mitigate the damage, and can actually *enhance* a port’s reputation.
Developing Your Plan

• Consider potential natural disasters unique to your geographic area.
• Be sure to cover the more predictable types of crisis:
  – Major accidents (collisions, spills, injuries)
  – Personnel Crisis (deaths, ethics and morals)
  – Terrorism/Criminal (arson, threats, theft)
  – Legal/Confrontational (illegal activity, protests)
Finally, get the word out!

• Train your front-line employees - receptionists, security guards, etc.
• Schedule times to do tabletop exercises and walkthroughs
• Don’t let the plan get stale