



Case 4

The client: Belgium-based multinational chemical company, market leader for several of its main products.

The challenge: Drawing up of a crisis communication plan in order to be ready when faced with any kind of crisis. It was a good thing that the company saw the relevance of having such a plan at hand. As always, the job was complicated by the simple fact that crises can erupt at any possible time, seven days a week, with a preference for the weekend and can take many forms, from an explosion or a sensational and negative newspaper story about the company or one of its products, or an unexpected and sharp drop of the company's shares.

Our approach: Our plan comprised 5 steps. The first thing we did was draw up a crisis plan. It was an outsider, in fact a Blue Turtle Staff member who took the lead, in order to avoid any kind of hierarchical pressures. This plan simply and plainly listed the *do's* and *don'ts* to be considered for any kind of crisis that might occur.

The second step, was the creation of a team of (internal) specialists. Together with a corporate communications staff member, they worked out a large number of key messages, Questions and Answers catalogues, and filing cards with an accurate description of characteristics and possible effects of all relevant chemical substances. Blue Turtle paid extra attention to the clarity of the key messages and Q&As.

As a third step, we discussed the creation of a crisis management team with the company management. Leader of such a team, though not necessarily its spokesperson, usually is a leading executive. The spokesman of the crisis management team previously had participated in a few media training sessions. Each crisis management team member then was given a well-defined responsibility. A rotation system was created by which two team members were supposed to be permanently (i.e. day and night) reachable by phone or mobile for two consecutive weeks.

A crisis room was equipped with PCs, phones, printers, faxing machines and all relevant documents, from which the crisis team could work efficiently and somewhat protected from external pressures.

As a fourth step a warning procedure was worked out (who should warn whom and at what time exactly, etc). The document also held a detailed list of names, addresses and phone numbers (to be regularly updated). A procedure was established on how to deal with incoming phone calls from anxious relatives, inquisitive journalists and other stakeholders. The fifth and possibly the main step was a crisis communication exercise at an unexpected and preferably inconvenient moment. For the sake of realism, professional journalists were hired to put pressure on the crisis team members, by calling them and asking for information at regular (progressively shorter) intervals. Independent witnesses (among whom a psychologist) were called in as observers. When it was all over, all participants valued the debriefing session about the many things that went wrong during the exercise and insisted that such exercises be repeated.

The result: Provided the company regularly updates its crisis plan and gives a good training to its crisis team members, by organising unannounced crisis exercises (for example twice a year), it stands a good chance of overcoming possible crises unharmed.

Do you have further questions, or would you like to exchange views with one of our team? Please feel free to contact us. We will be delighted to meet you.