

Crisis Management - Your Law Firm or Bar Association's Reputation is Its Largest Uninsured Asset



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Partnership splits, sexual misconduct, data theft, management transitions, accusations of mal- and misfeasance, mergers & acquisitions and layoffs are just a few of the situations today's managing partners and executive directors face.

It's been said that a bar association or law firm's reputation is its largest uninsured asset - an asset that can be seriously damaged with an ineffective crisis response.

Traditional media leap on stories like those listed above. And with the presence today of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, not to mention a 24/7 media environment, the reputation you've built up with years of good work can be shattered in an instant.

Today, your brand can face a significant reputational challenge in the time it takes to bang out a feverish 140-character tweet. When it comes to social media, in particular, law firm and bar leaders no longer have the luxury of gathering around a table to discuss strategy. There's simply no time.

Effective Crisis Response Is More Than An Emergency Plan

Often, law firms and bar associations will dutifully create an operational crisis plan, but lack a concomitant crisis communications strategy. So, what should your organization do?

The heart of crisis communications planning focuses on preparing for the most significant, gut-wrenching threats – both operational and reputational – that might affect your firm. To identify those threats, a “Vulnerabilities Audit” with top management (managing partner, CEO, CIO, CFO, CMO, GC, H.R.) will enable your team to assess the risks the firm faces, both in terms of their likelihood and the severity of the consequences they might have on the firm’s reputation or operations. The second part of the plan focuses on how your organization will communicate about those threats.

Having a crisis communication plan is an excellent first step. But a plan is no good gathering dust on a shelf. Many organizations next do crisis/media training to make certain they have trained executives who understand the needs and demands of today’s media, enabling the firm to deliver its messages clearly and with credibility.

The most-prepared organizations also do tabletop drills to test the plan and put their staff through the rigors of real-time crisis simulation, thereby improving the chances of responding effectively when the real thing hits.

Organizations that want to stay ahead of the curve also keep a sharp ear to the rail with a comprehensive monitoring program that closely watches news content delivery platforms — print, broadcast, web, mobile and social. And many progressive organizations have third-party crisis counsel audit their current plan as it evolves, to make certain there are no chinks in their armor.

What’s The Payback?

From a reputational perspective, how your firm or bar association communicates during a crisis will likely be just as important as how the incident is managed operationally. Good planning and training will mean:

- A more coordinated, consistent and authentic communications response.
- Improved communications with internal and external key stakeholders.
- Improved communications with legacy media and social media resulting in more accurate coverage.
- Better coordination among crisis team members, less redundancy and reduced stress.
- Enhanced ability to maintain normal operations while simultaneously managing the crisis event.
- Reduced damage to the organization’s reputation, with the possibility it may even be enhanced.

Your response to a crisis event must be rapid, strategic and authentic. Especially in today’s media landscape, where news breaks first on social media, “managing the message” is a necessary skill set for law firm and bar association executives (and not necessarily one of the skill sets that got you into the C-Suite).

When your organization’s reputation is on the line, so is your bottom line. Strategic crisis management and crisis communications planning is your brand’s most effective insurance policy.

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