Crisis management planning and the threat of bioterrorism

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Abstract

With acts of bioterrorism increasingly garnering attention worldwide, the subject of crisis preparedness for organizations takes on added meaning. This study of 72 of Michigan's largest corporations found that 70% of those surveyed had crisis management plans in place, but only 12% had plans that specifically dealt with bioterrorism. Awareness of bioterrorism, perceived seriousness and controllability, and perceived susceptibility were significant and positive predictors of willingness to develop a crisis management plan. This snapshot of crisis communication preparedness was taken during a critical time in American history—immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and during the first reports of a death in the United States from an anthrax attack.
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1. Introduction

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States reminded citizens and communications professionals alike that crisis preparedness needs to be of high priority for organizations of all types. Subsequent incidents involving anthrax bacteria only served to heighten the sense of urgency. Government officials rushed to reassure publics that the situation, while serious, was being addressed. Undoubtedly, in many corporations and other organizations around the country, discussions were hastily convened on grimly realistic topics that heretofore had been considered little more than science fiction.

The current study of crisis preparedness for bioterrorism incidents was readied for the field prior to the September 11th incidents. Pretests were conducted September 10th and actual data

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collection was to begin the morning of September 11th (but was intentionally embargoed until two days later). The original purpose of this study was to determine predictors of corporate crisis management planning in general. But given the timing of the study, a second purpose of this study is to provide a snapshot of corporate crisis preparedness during a critical period of time in American history when bioterrorism moved from the realm of science fiction to the reality of everyday life.

2. Literature review

2.1. Crisis communications

It is well known that the Chinese character for crisis means both danger and opportunity, and this inherent duality has influenced attempts to define crises and management's corresponding preparation and/or responses. Fink[1] borrowed Webster's definition to conceptualize a crisis as "a turning point for better or worse," and "a decisive or crucial time, stage, or event." He argued that a crisis starts from any prodromal (precursory) situation, heats up, draws attention to the organization, causes disruption to daily business, and threatens organizational reputation and financial viability.[2] Numerous other definitions have been advanced, with most focusing on three core concepts: disruption,[3] threat[4] and negative potential consequences for an organization.[5] Although crises can occur in a seemingly endless multitude of sizes and shapes, they can be organized in terms of four general types: (1) accidents: unintentional and internal; (2) transgressions: intentional and internal; (3) faux pas: unintentional and external; and (4) terrorism: intentional and external.[6]

The combined scholarly and professional literatures of public relations are replete with anecdotes of unsuccessful and, to a lesser degree, successful organizational responses to crisis situations.[7] In an era of ever-increasing uncertainty and emerging social, economic and biological risks—to name only a few—crisis management has, in the words of one scholar, become a "booming industry."[8] Yet in spite of ample and ominous precedent that would appear to make a compelling and unambiguous case for the need to develop crisis management plans, not all organizations are, indeed, prepared.[9] Estimates of corporate preparedness tend to be all over the board, ranging from 40% for Fortune 1000 industrial companies[10] to 83% for for-profit organizations, based upon a national survey of PRSA and IABC members.[11] Although there is some conjecture that crisis management planning may be "overrated," especially if technical rather than conceptual in nature,[12] one management consultant implicitly speaks to the value of planning through his claim that some 80% of companies lacking a crisis plan "vanish" within two years of suffering a major disaster.[13]

What accounts for a lack of crisis management planning, particularly when stakes are potentially so high? Various scholars have proposed different answers to this question. Guth[14] focuses on a key structural variable, organizational size (measured in terms of number of employees). Although the relationship was not entirely clear-cut, Guth found that organizations with large numbers of employees tend to have high levels of crisis experience and, as a result, are more likely to have written crisis management plans in place. He concludes that