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Crisis Communication in Libraries: Opportunity for New Roles in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

Among the many roles librarians embrace, managing outreach, marketing, and communication are increasingly important. This is especially true during a natural disaster or other crisis situation that might occur in a library. Media and public relations are often the last aspects of crisis management that libraries consider when they complete emergency preparations. When a disaster or crisis occurs, communication to the public and to media outlets is imperative to reduce rumors and misinformation. Immediate communication is also known to maintain a “credible” reputation for the organization that is proactive in communicating facts about the crisis (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). The literature provides excellent advice for communicating during a crisis. However, theory is frequently different than putting this theory into practice. A description of a case study in one university library demonstrates implementation of the theory of crisis communication to achieve results of community engagement and trust.

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INTRODUCTION

“As Marconi (1992) observed, bad things happen to even good organizations” (Coombs, 1999, p. 1). “No community and no organization, public or private, is immune from crises” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011, p. 2). Libraries, no matter how well run, are no exception. Problems in libraries such as inappropriate behavior; infrastructure breakdowns; and, in at least one instance, pests occur from time to time. Deciding when, what, and to whom to communicate information about such problems is an essential part of the recovery process and can make the difference between acceptance and fear. Communication about any difficult situation in an academic library can be based on principles similar to those used in managing bad news in a corporate environment (Scudder, 2011, p. 1). For example, one common principle of media relations is to bring the story to the media rather than having the media come to you. Transparency and honesty are also cornerstones to turning a bad situation into one that elicits the public’s compassion and trust (Scudder, 2011). One academic research library, in consultation with the University’s Marketing and Communications team (UMC), made the decision to communicate quickly and openly with library staff, patrons, and the media about our experience with a bed bug infestation.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN LIBRARIES

Although it is very easy to find a book or article about crisis management, it is not so easy to find a standard definition (Coombs, 1999, p. 2). “Some sample definitions from seminal crisis management books include the following:

- ‘turning point for better or worse’ (Fink, 1986, p. 15);
- ‘a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name’ (Fearn-Banks, 1996, p. 1);
- ‘a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results....’ (Barton, 1993, p. 2)” (as cited in Coombs, 1999, p. 2).

Coombs concludes by stating, “A crisis can be defined as an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly” (Coombs, 1999, p. 2).

Ulmer et al. (2011) based their definition of “crisis” on a classic study by Hermann (1963) who identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences: “A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time” (p. 5). Furthermore, they go on to divide crises into two kinds: intentional and unintentional, which is useful in crisis planning. They list “disease outbreaks” as a type of unintentional crisis, which comes closest to a bed bug infestation (p. 11). For additional discussion on the definition of “crisis” see Jaques, 2007, and Pearson & Clair, 1998.

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E.W. Brody (1991) draws a distinction between a crisis, a disaster, and an emergency. “A crisis is a turning point in a developing state of affairs. A disaster is an unfortunate sudden and unexpected event of any origin. An emergency is an unforeseen occurrence requiring urgent action” (p. 197). Thenell (2004) defines crisis as “...an emergency that has intensified. A crisis interferes with normal business, triggers close media attention, and can jeopardize an organization's reputation” (p. 4). But whatever the definition of “crisis,” and they are all similar, “crisis management is designed to ward off or reduce the threats by providing guidelines for properly handling crises” (Coombs, 1999, p. 3).

Coombs (1999) states that crisis management seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization (p. 4). He continues by outlining the historical “staged” approaches to crisis management. According to Coombs (1999), the three most influential staged approaches are Fink's (1986) four-staged model: (a) prodromal, (b) crisis breakout or acute, (c) chronic, and (d) resolution; Mitroff's (1994) five-staged model: (a) signal detection, (b) probing and prevention, (c) damage containment, (d) recovery, and (e) learning; and a more common three-stage model with no clearly identifiable creator, in which crisis management is divided into three macrostages: precrisis, crisis, and post crisis (as cited in Coombs, 1999, pp. 10–13).

Finally, Cos Mallozzi (1994) describes four phases of crisis communication and management: “1) crisis preparedness, 2) initial response, 3) maintain ongoing corrective actions and reactions during the course of the crisis, and 4) evaluation and follow-up” (p. 34). This model was especially useful to the Marriott Library in managing the situation and communicating at different stages to its stakeholders and the press.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN LIBRARIES

Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller, and Miller, provide us with a simple and helpful definition of crisis communication:

“Crisis communication is mainly concerned with providing correct and consistent information to the public and enhancing the image of the organization or industry sector faced with a crisis. An emphasis on communication and public relations is required to limit harm to an organization in an emergency that could ultimately create irreparable damage” (Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller, & Miller, 2003, p. 205).

While much of the literature on crisis communication and management focuses on the for-profit sector, Coombs reminds us “non-profits face similar issues with loss of clientele and donations. Donations are directly financial while loss of clientele can result in reductions in funding or the deletion of a program. There are financial bottom line issues for both profits and non-profits” (Coombs, 2002, p. 340).

Yang and Hsieh (2013) have an interesting take on crisis management. First, since each crisis will be different improvisation is imperative. “Improvisation relates to acting or making quick decisions under uncertainty, requiring managers to draw from organizational memory, experience or intuition to recombine and apply organizational routines and knowledge in creative ways” (p. 408). Second, the authors emphasize the importance of communication within the organization as well as enabling communication between important organizations within the community. They emphasize a reliance on “collaborative networks,” the “capability to engender efficient information flow...vertically and horizontally among crisis response organizations,” “exploiting strong ties,” and “information structural improvisation,” as the many ways to incorporate these two themes of communication and improvisation (p. 410–12).

Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) provide an excellent overview of crisis communication. For a novice in crisis communication, this article provides good insight into the basic concepts and reviews the research conducted by crisis communication experts. In particular, the article distinguishes between “crisis response strategies” and “crisis timing

strategies” (p. 84). Crisis response strategies are based on the degree of responsibility the organization had in making the crisis come about. For example, if there is a lack of adequate security in a library building that is open 24 h and a crisis takes place at 3:00 a.m., the degree of responsibility is greater than in another situation such as a hurricane, where the organization had no part in bringing on the disaster. In the former case, “crisis managers should use accommodating rebuild strategies (e.g. apology)” (p. 84). In the latter case, “managers can use defensive denial strategies (e.g. denial, scapegoat)” (p. 84). Coombs (2007) suggests in his article that when there is only a limited threat to the organization's reputation, “it is enough to provide stakeholders with only objective information about the crisis without adding an additional crisis response strategy” (p. 164).

The timing of the release of information about a crisis is as important as the content of the information itself and has been studied extensively (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Mauet, 2007; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993) (as cited by Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012, p. 85). Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) continue to describe additional research in this area:

A proactive release of information, often referred to as “stealing thunder” or “ex-ante crisis timing strategy,” was defined by Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) by stating, “When an organization steals thunder, it breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties” (p. 425). Research about this proactive approach suggests that there is reduced damage to the organization's reputation (Dolnik et al., 2003; Mauet, 2007), that it is perceived as more credible (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), and lawsuits have favored organizations using a proactive release of information (Williams et al., 1993).

Duke and Masland (2002) suggest a “failure to communicate” is the most significant mistake to make during a crisis since “speculation and rumor” are sure to surface and the “media will be forced to fill the void with speculation” (p. 31).

In her article, *A Selected Bibliography of Library Disaster Stories: Before, During, and After*, Jane Strudwick (2006) provides an excellent selection of articles about libraries' participation as part of their communities during and after disasters. The “disasters” described in these articles are primarily natural disasters, such as hurricanes, fires, and floods. They focus on the role of libraries in their communities during and after disasters and sometimes the effect of the disaster on library collections. The section of this bibliography most relevant to our situation is the section on “Planning: Before the Disaster” (p. 12). All of these articles are worth reading, but a couple of them (Grant, 2000, Thenell, 2004) stand out as especially useful for planning purposes.

Alison Grant's (2000) article is an outstanding case study of an unexpected power outage and the University of Auckland's libraries' response. She emphasizes the importance of planning ahead, which “can make the situation less disastrous and the resolution more expedient” (2000, p. 61). One of the most helpful aspects of their planning ahead included the availability of “an updated list of our staff members' home telephone numbers, in printed form” (2000, p. 66), which enabled a quick series of phone calls at the beginning of the emergency. It is also an excellent example of a “defensive denial strategy” described by Claeys and Cauberghe (2012, p. 84), placing the blame with the government, the Auckland Electric Power Board and the city of Auckland, “where important issues are talked about at length but where few decisions are made” (p. 62).

For those looking to follow the advice of libraries that have struggled through disasters (Grant, 2000; Lederer & Ernest, 2002) to create a crisis communication plan, Jan Thenell's (2004) book, “The Library's Crisis Communications Planner” is an excellent resource. This short, 66-page booklet provides a step-by-step guide to evaluating a library's risks and developing a communication plan that will work for a variety of

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