

CSR: A new frontier for crisis communications

The events of 2020 have underscored the importance for companies to communicate their corporate social responsibility initiatives to the communities they serve—or crisis can follow.

By Lucy O'Brien

As the past year has made abundantly clear, the public is increasingly looking to companies and organizations to speak out on critical social, political and environmental issues.

The Black Lives Matter protests last summer showed how a thoughtful statement can go a long way, while remaining silent can turn out to be a statement in and of itself. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis reinforced the importance of community stewardship, with organizations of all kinds expected to be public-facing and compassionate as their stakeholders—be they customers, employees, vendors, donors or regulators—face moments of extraordinary hardship.

All of this demonstrates that having a plan in place to decide when and how to communicate company values and commitments is a matter of crisis communications risk management.

Such a policy fits well into the rapidly growing area of Corporate Social Responsibility, broadly defined as the way companies integrate social, environmental and economic concerns into their values, culture, strategy and operations.

As companies are increasingly recognized as members of the communities in which they operate, they must see that their long-term success depends on continued good relationships with these communities. It's not just about shareholder value and short-term profits anymore.

This doesn't mean simply releasing a one-time statement of company values in the face of societal tumult; rather, it's about backing up those statements with a "surround-sound" approach that infiltrates every mission statement, employee handbook, internal communication and external public relations campaign.

Words that aren't followed up with actions will be perceived as shallow virtue-signaling and can create a crisis all on their own.

For example, many pointed out that some of the large corporations releasing statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement had an astounding lack of diversity within their own workforce, especially in their leadership and boardrooms.

Statements can't be released on a whim but must instead be rooted in a sturdy foundation of company culture. Compa-

nies should adopt a CSR policy that serves as a framework for conduct and communication within the company and the many communities it serves.

An important new aspect of CSR is that the general public now looks to companies to speak out on social issues even when the issue does not directly relate to the company's business. This means that a company's values must be so deeply integrated into its culture that it can be absolutely sure of where it stands when a social issue is dominating front page news.

To those in the crisis communications field, this should sound very familiar. The core of any effective crisis communication program lies in anticipating possible crises and preparing a plan for an efficient, effective response so that a company can avoid having a situation grow out of control.

In the same way, a company should have a proper grasp on exactly where it stands on issues of community or societal concern, whether it should address an issue publicly, and how quickly—and through what platforms—it should reach out to its affected communities.

This isn't meant to be taken cynically; avoiding a crisis isn't the single most important reason to institute a CSR policy. In fact, many companies are already giving back within the communities they serve or have leadership that takes a firm position on issues of social justice. But when these actions and positions lack the firm foundation of a CSR policy, any response to current events may be delayed or haphazard.

Just like other areas of crisis communications planning, it's crucial to have a communications plan in place with an efficient approval process for statements and other media activity. Therefore, a CSR policy must not only make a company's values explicit and concrete, but also guide when and how the company speaks out when a social issue is grabbing headlines.

That means knowing the answers to these key questions ahead of time:

- Who decides when an issue has escalated to the point that a statement is needed?
- Who drafts the statement?
- Whose approval is needed before releasing the statement?

As with any good crisis communications plan, a CSR policy should be supported by representatives from many different ar-

reas of a company, from senior leadership to corporate communications to the legal team. This ensures that the policy will have the resources it needs to succeed and that the words in the policy are backed by substance.

Support from the CEO or other executive leadership will boost the credibility of a CSR policy—and therefore the principles guiding a company—in the eyes of employees and the general public. Continued action supporting CSR initiatives, whether through donations, volunteering or other community-building activities, further builds this credibility. This constant activity ensures that, if and when a company speaks out about a social issue, the words don't come off as hollow, cliché or virtue-signaling pablum.

Finally, as with a good crisis communications plan, a good CSR policy must be flexible and open to constant improvement. This means an ongoing cycle of assessing current CSR activities and identifying new targets and goals, creating a plan to efficiently and effectively improve and then evaluating to ensure that the policy is working.

Crisis communications plans are often in danger of being forgotten in a binder that collects dust on the shelf, leaving companies vulnerable to chaos and confusion when the inevitable crisis hits. Similarly, CSR policies that don't go beyond an empty mission statement drafted and forgotten will be weak and ineffective.

This past year has eliminated any doubt that having a sturdy CSR framework in place is a matter of risk mitigation. As the public looks to companies to speak on fast-paced current events, a streamlined crisis communications-style approach must be incorporated to make sure that companies say the right thing at the right time. If no such plan is in place, companies risk reputational damage for tone-deaf comments, empty statements or radio silence.

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