

IRFAN KHAN'S VIEWS ON CRISIS RESPONSE PLANNING

*Shorten the Crises
Transparency Speed*

When a fire broke out at one of the Oberoi hotels, the Public Relations Manager asked advice from HLL. The PR Manager was advised to follow the golden rule in Crises Management - Shorten the crises by informing the Press on the day the crises occurs. It is the best day to give out news. Better to confront the crises than to wish it away. As communicators it is vitally important to be very fast and transparent.

*Communicating at
the right time*

The emphasis on communicating at the right time can be seen from the way in which HLL dealt with SEBI's accusation of insider trading. At the Board Meeting in Bangalore, Chairman Dadiseth was advised on the urgency of contacting the press right away. The Press were willing to listen to the facts disclosed by HLL in that nothing illegal had been done by the Company.

*Speed (Club with Ist
issue on top of page)*

In 1986 HLL had taken over Brooke Bond's 7 tea gardens in Assam. The State was experiencing ULFA problems and a crises erupted with 110 lives at stake. HLL was asked for Rs. 5 lakh per garden - in total a sum of Rs. 35 lakh. Assessing the situation rightly. The Unilever Director flew into Bombay while the crises team left for Assam. They received help from Gen. Brar who allowed them the use of a military airfield close to the gardens. The issue was dealt with successfully because the event was contained in a small time frame.

*Organisation to be
viewed as having
done everything
possible*

A fire at the HLL factory in Mumbai resulted in injury to some workers. The patients were visited immediately to enquire about the extent of their injuries and to arrange for the best medical care. An interesting aspect cropped up with one of the seriously burned patients who urgently needed blood - this man was a follower of the Jehovah's witness Sect who refused to take blood as it was against the teaching's of the Sect. The Press were informed immediately of all the facts pertaining to the fire and front page news. HLL shortened media interest in the event by showing that they had done everything possible.

*The more negative
an incident, the
more news working
it becomes.*

*Shorten media
interest*

*Critical issues to
plan for
Pay attention to
details*

It pays to have a very elaborate system of issue management by looking at critical issues such as

- who will inform employees/relatives?
- who is the backup?
- who will deal with media?
- which agencies need to be informed?
- How to brief your telephone operator to answer calls

regarding the incident

Education of Shopkeepers

Once this system is in place, an organisation needs to form its crises management team. The core team will consist of legal, finance, PR, technical & personnel and this will be supplement depending on the crises. Role clarity should be clearly defined before a crises occurs.

Questions & Answers

A delegate asked Mr. Khan to comment on HLL's experience with rural marketing and how to deal with it effectively. Mr. Khan pointed out that at HLL all complaints were directed to the Chairman. He related two cases where complaints came in regarding shaving cream that had become hard. On investigation it was found that certain shopkeepers had displayed them in an area of their shops.... to sunlight. Causing the cream to harder. They had to be educated to keep these products away from sunlight.

Consumer satisfaction

In another incident, an IIT student complaints over the interc....stle of a hard toothbrush, being packed in a box that Head `soft'. HLL office in Calcutta was immediately constructed to send 5 or 6 soft brushes to the aggrieved consumer. This action impressed the young man who had made his complaint in the morning and received a satisfactory solution in the afternoon.

HLL is launching Operation Bharat in 1999 for rural areas.

Production goof-ups

A delegate commented on how employees were asked to cover up production goof-ups and to pass it onto the consumer. Mr. Khan used the example of contamination in HLL's Rath and Dalda to illustrate this point. IE had reported the contamination of Rath and Dalda. HLL respond by being present at the testing process at Lady Irvine College and also presented the case to the Bureau of Standards who cleared then. IE apologised for the article.

Question of Press Conference, Press release or one-on-one interviews

A delegate asked Mr. Khan on the general rules to be followed in deciding whether to hold a PC, send out a Press release or hold one-on-one interviews during a crises, Mr. Khan reiterated that if the organisation had nothing to hide such as in the case of SEBI's insider trading accusation, then it should speak up. In this instance, a PC was held in Mumbai as HLL felt it was necessary to educate the Mumbai press therefore the news would then filter to the rest of the country.

*Changing -ve
coverage to +ve*

A delegate commented on negative press coverage with the intent to cause problems. Mr. Khan said that the media is generally very negative and that HLL do received plenty of -ve articles. The trick was to try and change these into +ve ones by being open and transparent with the press.

*(Excerpted from the presentation made by Irfan Khan, General Manager
Corporate Communications, Hindustan Lever Limited, at PR Pundit's workshop -
Emerging Constituencies, held in New Delhi on September 18, 1998)*