

First step to crisis communications: Be prepared

by Natalie Johnson - Tuesday, January 06, 2009

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/1595/first-step-to-crisis-communications-be-prepared/>

The military disseminates news of an overseas conflict.

A business informs stockholders about a bankruptcy.

A university shares the facts during a budget crunch.

No matter the message or the messenger, communicating through a crisis follows a predictable lifecycle.

That's the message two University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Integrated Marketing and Communications (IMC) experts shared during a recent presentation at a Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) conference in Chicago.

"Crisis or issues management plays an integral role in any integrated marketing strategy," said IMC Executive Director Jeanette DeDiemar. "Whether it's a government agency, a business or a university, operating transparently and proactively while moving through the lifecycle of the issue provides a more effective resolution."

DeDiemar and Jaime Hunt, IMC's associate director, news and public information, presented "Budget ... What Budget? Communicating Through a Budget Crisis," at CASE District V's 34th-annual conference Dec. 14-16.

The pair imparted best practices in issues management communication and lessons learned from their case study of the 2008 budget stalemate in the Wisconsin legislature.

DeDiemar has researched issues management in a number of settings. Her dissertation considered "The Role of Media Specialists in the Crisis Management of Violence within School Districts," while her master's thesis covered "Media Relations, Controversy and Issues Management by the United States Army: The First Infantry Division at Fort Riley from Land Expansion to Desert Storm."

During a typical issues management model, the level of awareness about an issue starts off low among various constituent groups, increases over time to a peak and then subsides. While DeDiemar has found that different crises or issues often follow the same cycle, the pace at which an issue reaches resolution varies depending on the organization or the industry.

"The preparation for a business, a government agency or a university starts long before an issue ever arises," she said. "Integrated communications managers must constantly monitor trends in government, technology, society and the media."

For issues management to be successful, commitment is needed across an organization to be agile in

responding throughout the lifecycle of the crisis, she added.

DeDiemar and Hunt offered the following best practices for dealing with a communications issue:

- Anticipate issues and identify spokespersons ahead of time.
- Prepare to talk openly, but strategically.
- Explain problems and changes quickly.
- Cooperate with the media.
- Recognize internal audiences (employees or victims) as high priorities.
- Respect and seek to work with stakeholders and constituents.
- Consider a variety of communications tools, including editorial visits, updates to internal constituents, endorsement letters, blogs and news releases.

DeDiemar said government agencies and organizations in recent years have begun to recognize the importance of integrated marketing as a key feature in their infrastructure and are responding more quickly and transparently as crises arise.

“Each crisis or issue offers the opportunity to review and enhance your plan,” she said.

To learn more about crisis communication on the UW Oshkosh campus, visit www.uwosh.edu/imc/media-relations/crisis-communications.

Related story:

- [UW Oshkosh Today, IMC earn industry awards](#)