

Communications as a Risk Management Strategy

Taped Zoom Discussion

Introduction

[CHRIS KENYON]

Good afternoon, this is Chris Kenyon with M3 Insurance. I'm the managing director of our senior living and social services practice group. This certainly has been challenging times...and I hope you are all doing well. Today we wanted to talk to you about Communication as a Risk Management Strategy

Chris Halverson, M3's Risk Management Sales Director, joins me for this discussion along with Kimberly Kane, president and CEO of Kane Communications Group.

Chris, Kimberly - thanks for being part of this very timely conversation.

[SLIDE] [CHRIS KENYON]

Communication has always been an integral part of risk management strategies. During this pandemic it is even more critical.

Group homes, assisted living and skilled facilities are taking care of some of our most vulnerable in congregate settings. The spotlight is on. Facilities will need to consider what they will communicate to residents, families of the residents and other stakeholders if a resident in their building tests positive. CMS is requiring disclosure for skilled facilities – but could they and other provider types use this opportunity as a part of your communication strategy to highlight the good work that they and their teams have been doing?

I think it's also important that you consider some best practices in communication from our experts today to support you during the pandemic.



And as many of us are doing – thinking about post pandemic. Yes, as with all things there is beginning, a middle and an end.

And at the end of the discussion, you'll understand:

- **What a crisis communications response team**
- **Why communicating is so important even when you don't have answers**
- **Communications best practices during a crisis**
- **Why a strong brand is critical to protecting your reputation - and the components of a strong brand**
- **And how to work with the media**

What you learn as it relates to communication and how you use this will support your recovery efforts and boost consumer confidence.

I invite you to learn from Chris Halverson, Risk Management Sales Director at M3, and Kimberly Kane, president and CEO of Kane Communication, as they discuss Communication as a Risk Management Strategy.

[CHRIS HALVERSON]

Kimberly, reputation risk management is an area your firm specializes in and a topic you've spoken about to international audiences.

[KIMBERLY]

Chris - a company's reputation is its most valuable asset.

- Your reputation is the most critical piece of your brand.
- It's the reason customers come to you, it's why employees want to work for you and it's why your customers and employees stay with you.

When a group home, assisted living or skilled care facility's reputation takes a hit, they're at risk of residents, families, employees and other important stakeholders going somewhere else.

- They can lose business and have a hard time holding on to top employees.



- **Conversely, when facilities are prepared and proactive with their reputation management efforts, their brands can come out on the other side of a crisis stronger than before.**

In either situation, **an impact on your brand - negatively or positively - can have a lasting effect that will continue for years after the pandemic subsides.**

[SLIDE] KIMBERLY

Traditional risk management hasn't focused on reputation. When most companies spend money on risk management - they spend it on safety, training and compliance. Not on protecting their reputations.

COVID-19 has put all companies in a spotlight we never expected. New research is beginning to show that the way companies are responding during this pandemic has a direct impact on their brands.

[CHRIS]

What are the fundamentals of good communication and some actionable steps our clients can take today to protect themselves, especially during a difficult time like this?

[KIMBERLY]

There are two important areas to focus on - one is immediate, the other will take more time, but offers the most protection to your brand.

In the immediate - **organizations should create a crisis communications response team.**

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- This doesn't have to be a large team, but **the key charge of this team is to manage, prioritize and get information out.**
- This team should include a member of your leadership team, HR, and marketing or communications - key functions in your organization.
 - Have no more than 5 people.
- This team should **meet at a scheduled time.** In the beginning they should meet **every day** to monitor the situation and update communications. This



pandemic is - unfortunately - an evolving crisis. Your team's meetings should be spaced out, even to weekly, to provide time to get work done and manage burn out.

- They also need to ensure **consistency in messaging**. Consider asking...
 - Who is our audience?
 - What is our position?
 - What do we need people to do with this information?
 - How do we need them to feel?
- Make sure you identify one person to lead the team, and have someone who can respond to media.

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Part of the charge for this team is to ensure **you communicate often**. This is a must when you're in crisis and especially during this prolonged period of uncertainty.

- A lot of business communication, especially in small to mid-sized organizations is organic.
 - Crisis may be managed on a need-to-know basis. In some cases, leaders wait to communicate with the hope the crisis blows over.
- Waiting to communicate is never a good idea when you're dealing with a crisis ... especially this one.
- Not communicating creates tremendous risk.
- Even if there is no new information, organizations need to get comfortable communicating.

[CHRIS]

What are some best practices on communicating with stakeholders - your employees, residents, families, community and funders?

[KIMBERLY]

Chris - you've listed some important audiences. Most organizations know who their stakeholders are, but many have not documented them and they don't know how these stakeholders like to receive information or will react best to it. For example - your staff may respond better to getting updates during meetings with their supervisors than through an unscheduled email. Family members might enjoy



getting information through a newsletter from you or a video. You need to know this information.

[SLIDE]

- **Document your target audiences groups.** These include your employees, your residents, their families, your contractors. They may also include elected officials or other specific groups.
- **Document all the communication channels you use to communicate with these audiences and how you use these channels.** If you can, ASK them how they prefer to receive information from you. Make sure you have the cell phones of all your employees.
- Develop **key messages that are flexible**, but can be used over and over.
 - For example: We are taking measures to protect the health and safety of our employees, residents and stakeholders.
 - Then, add in details about steps you are taking.
 - These messages will need to evolve. You can also do some storytelling around these to show how you are activating these messages.
- And **create a crisis communication plan** that's essentially a roadmap for how you will communicate with each audience, how often, what information they need to receive and any calls to action or ways you want them to respond to the information. You have a crisis management plan. This crisis communications plan should align with that plan and activate your communications.

[CHRIS]

What are some of the fundamentals about how to communicate so that we are sharing information in ways that also minimize risk to the brand?

[KIMBERLY]

Consistency is key. People need to know they can count on you for consistent information.

But this isn't enough.



[SLIDE]

- **What you say and how you say it matter.**
- Leaders today have tough, seemingly impossible decisions on their shoulders. The decisions you make today are not just about your business, they are about your employees, your stakeholders and their lives. In highly regulated environments - you can be in compliance by just doing what the regulations tell you to do. But I'm telling you that's not enough. In a world driven by technology and consumer expectations to get information when they want it - information, misinformation, misunderstanding and an absence of information all create immediate impressions. Those impressions can spread quickly. Today, your reputation can rise and fall as a result of a single tweet.
- **Be there** - for your employees, residents and their families, and stakeholders.
- **Be authentic, honest, transparent and empathetic.** Put yourself in the shoes of your stakeholders. Think about how they feel, not just about what you want them to know.
 - Remember you're communicating with people who may feel fear. Put yourself in their shoes to understand their anxiety. **Feel empathy. Show empathy.**
 - **Be as transparent as possible**, even when you have difficult news. Most of us are accepting that life is not as it used to be - and we need real information, facts, to accept change and to make decisions.
- **Don't be afraid to ask your team, employees, and residents for patience** during this changing time.
- **Make communication a two-way street.** Do more than share information - meet people where they're at. Invite feedback and questions and encourage discussions.
- **Use technology to bridge the gap** - Social media, Google Hangouts, Zoom and other systems make communications more personal and give people the chance to participate right away using commenting and chat functions.
- **Thank people for their feedback.** Acknowledging an individual goes a long way to building trust.
- **Commit to following up.** Don't leave any question hanging, even if your follow-up is to say it may be a while before we can answer that question.



- You need to **communicate often throughout a crisis**. Even if you're still trying to understand how changes will impact your company, employees and stakeholders. People basically want to know one thing - what does this mean to me? Leaders may not always have that answer, but you need to demonstrate that getting answers and providing information about what you *do* know is a top priority.

One other point I can't emphasize enough is the importance of having a well-defined brand platform from which all of these tools and plans are developed.. This is where many organizations get in trouble and it's the most important part of your crisis communications plan.

[SLIDE] KIMBERLY

Your brand platform is not a logo or a tag line. It's your **promise to your stakeholders**.

It begins with your **mission, vision and core values**; and includes important information about your organization's personality, audiences, key messages and position.

It is **based in truth, is believable** and is **actively used across your organization in your communications and your resident and employment experience**. With this in place, communication plans, crisis plans and other marketing move from being tactical or activity based to being rooted in who you are as an organization. This is when communication provides the most value in protecting your reputation.

Defining, developing and activating a strong brand is an investment. But this is one of the most important investments an organization can make to reduce risk to their reputations.

[CHRIS]

So let's say our clients take that step and they invest in building out that strong brand and activating it. Will communications plans they develop today have to change?



[KIMBERLY]

Yes. Your communication plan should align with your brand platform. While that brand platform stays constant, your communications plan is a living document, and you should expect it to change.

- Every communication plan should be designed to solve a problem or create an outcome.
- We always ask our clients - what does success look like?
- In a pandemic like this one, you want to define success for your communications and make sure the steps you're taking get you there.

Messaging will change, your stakeholders' needs may change. This is where that crisis communications team is so important.

[CHRIS]

Last question, and I know this is top of mind for lots of our clients. Dealing with the media. You worked as a health care reporter for a TV station in Milwaukee. How should our clients respond if they get a call from media, or if media show up outside of their facility?

[KIMBERLY]

You bet. I spent 15 years as a television news reporter and anchor and spent lots of time reporting on health care.

[SLIDE]

- On your communications response team, have a **point of contact for the media**.
 - Your president or executive director should NEVER be that point of contact. This person could be in marketing, even an executive assistant. The point of contact is not your spokesperson, they take the call from media.
- You should **have a media policy in place** that everyone knows and understands. If anyone gets a call from media or sees media, they know exactly what to do.
- Also recognize that media aren't the bad guys. They have a job to do. If they call - **treat them with kindness**, this goes a long way. **Ask questions** - what information are they're looking for? What's their deadline? What's the best



way to get back to them? **Take this information to the communications response team** and make sure you follow up.

- Before talking with the media, **have a clear idea of what you want to say and what you don't want to say. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't have that information."**
- Also, identify your spokesperson. This person is rarely the president or CEO at the beginning of a crisis.

