

## Healthcare Marketing

### Managing the media during a crisis

Hospitals and other organizations involved in delivering patient care have detailed plans and procedures for responding to the healthcare needs in a crisis situation - a major accident, epidemic, or natural disaster, for example. Should one of these situations occur, the coordination of information to the news media and to other key audiences such as employees, patients, shareholders, regulators, and the community is also a major priority and must be part of the plan.

However, there are a number of other situations that could create a crisis environment for the organization and its reputation, not only for those delivering services to patients but for any company engaged in business in the healthcare arena. The resources of the information age have, paradoxically, created new potential crisis as well as resources for disseminating information to the news media and to the public.

#### What is a crisis?

A crisis is defined as a situation that may result in negative publicity for the organization. These situations can include:

- Lawsuits
- Negative news about the organization's operations or financial results, or negative news about a parent or subsidiary
- Political, disciplinary or potential legislative action by regulatory bodies
- Patient care crisis in which a patient did not receive care, received poor care, was harmed due to a medication or equipment error, etc.
- Informational or operational systems failures that delay patients from receiving care or medications
- Violation of privacy of medical data, whether from systems failure or "hacking" the information system, or from employee violation of confidential information
- Audits, surveys, or "hatchet jobs"
- A fire, burglary, earthquake or other natural disaster, which may interfere with the company's operations or with patients obtaining needed patient care, medications or supplies

#### The crisis communication team

Every organization should have a written crisis communication plan to activate immediately in the event of a crisis. Part of that plan should be the identification of a crisis team that will serve as the "steering committee" for analyzing and responding to a crisis, including the communication components of the response. While the composition of the crisis team will vary according to the nature of the business, the team should include representatives from the public relations department, executives representing the CEO's office, operations, and legal or regulatory affairs. Other members of management can be added to the team depending on the nature of the

event.

### **Identification of a crisis**

The sooner a potential crisis is identified, the better prepared the organization will be to handle it. Everyone in the company needs to understand that they have a responsibility to inform their supervisor about any news or information they hear or become aware of concerning the initiation of any of these situations. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to contact a member of the crisis team immediately with this information.

Once a member of the crisis team is notified of, or becomes aware of, a potential situation, he or she should immediately notify the other members of the crisis communication team so that they can immediately address the following action steps:

1. The facts of the situation
2. The degree of potential damage (major or minor), in terms of danger to the public or individuals, negative publicity, loss of business, and potential legal or regulatory action
3. What actions should be taken to manage the crisis
4. What communication needs to occur with each audience
5. Who will be responsible for executing each aspect of the plan
6. Who will be the media contact and who will be the media spokesperson

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