



hurricanes in the South and Southeast. Not only did the hurricanes and subsequent storm surge and flooding result in the loss of life and property and major disruption of commerce, but the disturbing news reports and images of New Orleans in particular that were seen by the rest of the world significantly damaged the United States' reputation abroad. A study conducted by Echo Research in six global markets found that 84 percent

of international press comment in the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina was negative toward the U.S. A private task force, Business for Diplomatic Action, commissioned the study in order for businesses to learn how to communicate and respond in crisis situations.

Organizations around the world would do well to learn not only from the U.S. government's missteps after Hurricane Katrina, but also from the positive experiences of companies

that implemented crisis communication plans throughout 2005. The survey found that:

- **Sixty-nine percent** of organizations that had a crisis communication plan implemented it in response to events affecting their organizations.
- **Fifty-three percent** of organizations implemented some elements of their crisis communication plans, while 47 percent fully implemented their plans.
- **Of the organizations** that partially implemented their

## Internal communication during a crisis pays dividends by jimmy cagle

Keeping employees informed by being open and direct and by providing accurate, timely information is the foundation of good communication practice. Support from employees cannot be overvalued. They can be the company's best ambassadors, and this is particularly true when an organization faces a crisis.

If at all possible, employees should hear the bad news first. Providing them with information before the news is shared with external media helps them to understand—and appreciate the magnitude of—the situation. Individual employees may also be asked to respond to questions from media professionals. The better informed they are, the more apt they are to articulate the company's message. Their comments can help set the tone for the media coverage.

Keeping the communication flow open in difficult times has its own rewards, as the following company officials will affirm.

### Maintaining morale

Jerry Green was the production manager of

a 600-employee textile plant in northwest Tennessee when he was informed that his ownership group would have to move the enterprise to Latin America. That meant the plant would close within a year's time. He initiated a communication crusade with employees, meeting continually in large groups and in one-on-one sessions to answer their questions. His efforts paid off. Employees continued to meet orders for shipments even as the company started to downsize. Green is convinced that this was due to the ongoing dialogue with each individual in his workforce.

"I put everything else aside to work with our people and keep them updated as to how things were progressing," Green says. "It resulted in many long days for me. But I can't think of a thing that I would have done differently."

### Addressing rumors and concerns

Patrick McGinn is manager of midwest public affairs for ExxonMobil operations, based in Joliet, Illinois. Three years ago, a barge

exploded at the company's terminal in New York Harbor. Two people were killed, and another was seriously injured. The heavily damaged terminal was shut down for months for repairs. The scope of this tragic event expanded to include concerns about product availability to the company's thousands of retail outlets along the East Coast.

McGinn and his colleagues relied heavily on direct contacts and e-mail to get the word out quickly to employees around the world. While the company's PR staff was handling the flood of media calls, others worked to update employees with information from the scene of the accident and to assure everyone, including dealer and retail customers, that the supply of petroleum products would not be interrupted.

"I feel strongly that you should tell your people first what is going on," McGinn says. "You want them to hear it from you before they read about it in the newspaper or see it on TV that night. The more informed they are, the more they are able to carry

In the past year, 69 percent of organizations that had a crisis communication plan implemented it in response to events affecting their organizations.

plans, "communication with employees" was the most commonly implemented component (95 percent), followed by "coordination with other departments or units to determine appropriate communication responses" (93 percent) and "use of existing vehicles to communicate with various audiences" (91 percent).

• **Communicators** with crisis communication plans overwhelmingly feel the plans helped their organizations man-

age and respond to crises: 66 percent cited the plans as "very effective," and 33 percent felt they were "somewhat effective."

The results add further evidence of two trends: Communicators today are approaching their work with more business discipline, and internal communication is increasingly viewed as an important business function.

Communicators who seek a more strategic role in their

organizations often find it difficult to link their work with critical business functions. Organizational crises—not just natural disasters, but also leadership transitions and sudden market changes—provide opportunities for communicators to demonstrate their skills in planning as well as tactical execution.

### Not just nice to have

One of the authors of this article worked with a major organi-

the company's message to their families, friends and acquaintances."

#### Planning for the unexpected

On 1 February 2003, the NASA space shuttle Columbia exploded upon reentry, killing all seven crew members. As outlined in the NASA communication team's crisis plan, its public affairs personnel were stationed at the shuttle landing site, in the control rooms of the Lyndon B. Johnson and John F. Kennedy Space Centers, and at NASA headquarters, tuned in to internal live coverage of the mission.

"An event like this was anticipated, but certainly not expected," says Robert "Doc" Mirelson, NASA news chief. "We were staffed during the mission to handle unexpected events, so we did not have to improvise. We initiated our crisis plan, which included establishing shifts for initial round-the-clock operations, and our people stepped up to handle the multimedia communications challenges we faced.

"The keys to our successful internal and

external communications operations were planning, rehearsals, and everyone knowing their role in a crisis."

#### Taking care of your team

In 2005, FedEx faced a huge task in maintaining the flow of information to employees who were displaced in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

As is their practice in crisis situations, FedEx management brought together a team of representatives from several departments when Katrina hit to coordinate internal and external messages as well as relief and community outreach efforts. The team used e-mail, its nationwide internal satellite television network, external media releases, web pages and telephone hotlines to keep employees up-to-date and global operations running. A special hotline was set up to provide affected employees with much-needed information about how to use their benefits, get their paychecks cashed and plan their return to their homes. Relief supplies were

sent using the company's delivery network, and executive management teams visited the areas hit by the storm. The relief and response efforts were so successful that FedEx was the first cargo company to resume service to the area.

"FedEx has a strong internal communications team, and we are networked with all other departments," says Scott Fiedler, a communications adviser at FedEx Express who played a key role on the internal communication team. "Communicating major adjustments to our operation while finding and helping our people who had been displaced was a tremendous challenge. But working closely with people across the entire FedEx organization gave us the opportunity to keep the information flow going. Reputation starts with your employees, and that is on the line every time you have a crisis."

*Jimmy Cagle is manager of communications at the Goodyear tire plant in Union City, Tennessee.*

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