

PREPARING FOR DISASTER: What Happens When the TV Crews Show Up

Why establishing crisis protocols will save your company and reputation



BY GARRETT SULLIVAN

We've all seen the news stories. A flustered contractor tries to fend off reporters at his jobsite after a worker is injured. He's nervous and unprepared. Rumors about poor safety begin to fly. Within 24 hours, this contractor's reputation and livelihood is in serious jeopardy. In this day of cell phone cameras and social media, a negative event can take on a life of its own in the blink of an eye.

It's no wonder that contractors shudder at the thought of a crisis. While many savvy contractors have crisis plans in place, most are simply outdated ideas in old three-ring binders buried somewhere no one can find them.

Construction is a risky business and calamity does strike. The problem is, failing to prepare for a crisis is like failing to buy insurance – you might get away with it in the short term, but sooner or later you'll be glad it's there. This "pay me now or pay me later" truism applies to far more scenarios than worksite accidents. Below are some very real image-damaging situations that every Hawaii contractor should consider.

Reality Check

To gauge your company's current competency, surprise your managers by starting your next meeting by throwing the following scenarios at them. That's how a crisis will occur – by surprise. If you have a crisis plan, take out your stopwatch and see how long it takes them to find it. Then, ask them what their roles and responsibilities should be in these scenarios. Their responses may be a real wake-up call.

- community concern — strong community opposition to your project, picketing by environmental or other groups, uncovering iwi at a jobsite, noise/dust complaints or lawsuits

- safety — severe injury or death, juveniles sneaking onto the jobsite, cell phone video of workers being unsafe
- workmanship — structural collapse/instability, dangerous or sub-par materials used.
- finances — significant layoffs, inability to complete project, inability to pay employees/vendors
- security — computer breach releasing employee/customer data, workplace violence
- scandal — overbilling for work, sexual harassment/scandal, illegal dumping, bribing politicians; remember, you may have ethical integrity, but good companies can hire bad people.

Wise Preparation

During the past few years there has been a growing trend in risk management toward "Zero Disruptions." This is where contractors prepare a list of plausible disruptions and establish proactive measures to mitigate them. Similar to how firefighters have moved from fire-fighting to fire prevention, best-in-class contractors are progressing from crisis management to prevention. Many in the insurance industry refer to this as "crisis readiness" or "sleep insurance."

At a minimum, every contractor should take the following steps:

1. Create or update a crisis plan in which your management team agrees to "Zero Disruptions" protocols. Ensure that every manager has a copy and create an online repository (a password-protected portion of your website is recommended) where the plan can be accessed from anywhere in the world, 24/7.
2. Best-of-class contractors will invest in media training for their company spokesperson (I do not recommend using an outsider

as your spokesperson). Short of that, every contractor should vet communication experts upon whom they can immediately call should a crisis arise. Look for firms or consultants who have a track record of success in crisis management (and have earned awards in this area). Inquire about fees, ensure they would have no conflict of interest in taking you as a client, and ask how long it would take for them to go on the clock for you. At least three options should be included in your crisis plan. It will save you the time and aggravation of searching for an expert in the middle of a situation.

3. Establish criteria in which to enact a "communication lockdown," which requires employees not only to refer all questions (not just from the media) to the company spokesperson, but prohibits them from discussing the issue with outsiders. Why? Many small incidents get blown out of proportion because someone carelessly or unknowingly leaks information (regardless if it's true). For instance, employees discussing the issue at a local restaurant can be overheard and/or misunderstood by others (who can tell others, post comments on social media, etc.). This launches a game of "telephone" in the community and puts you on the defensive.

As I close, I remind you of the image at the very start of this article – the unprepared contractor being interviewed on television. Don't let that be you. Regardless of whether you've made preparations in the past, now is the time to review and update your crisis plan. Revise and rehearse at least annually – a move that you will never live to regret. **BI**

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