

Avian Flu Threat Tests Corporate Crisis Communications Preparation

By **George Felcyn**

Regardless of what form the H5N1 virus takes – whether it continues to be a limited threat or makes the jump to a global pandemic – the hard lessons learned from previous crises apply today to private and public sector actors alike: Plan for the worst and hope it never happens. As crisis situations from the Exxon Valdez oil spill and the Bhopal Union Carbide plant explosion to the recent Sago mine disaster have taught us, a company’s reputation can be quickly defined by a cascade of events that unfold in a matter of minutes.

Unfortunately, corporate managers often fail to appreciate the complexities and nuances of crisis communications until they find themselves thrown into the middle of it out of necessity. At this point, they may well be handling a critical function without experience, practice, internal infrastructure, and even internal support. The financial costs of preparation – at which managers often balk – pale compared to the cost in lost business and reputation that their company may suffer as a result.

A good crisis communications strategy centers on knowing risks and exposures well ahead of time. It is pre-emptive reputation management. Once the media and rumor whirlpool start, there is no turning back; your stakeholders will be immediately affected. Those who are prepared if and when Avian Flu hits U.S. shores will have a tremendous advantage over competitors in maintaining the trust and confidence of customers, suppliers, employees and others.

In the event of an outbreak, the situation may well unfold in two fundamental phases colored by different dynamics: the first marked by uncertainty, as people scramble to overcome the challenge of piecing together an accurate picture of unfolding events; and a second, longer-term phase potentially marked by supply-chain and service disruptions, employee absences and marketplace uncertainty in which planning for the long term is the key.

In the first stage, the primary objective will be to shape order from amidst a chaotic information stream packed with rumor and half-truths. Good internal communication will be key: be certain that your organization knows well ahead of time what sources will be used to collect information (specific media outlets, government resources, etc.) and that your stakeholders know where to go, and what channels of communication will be used, for updates. This process may entail establishing a central clearinghouse for information, staffed with a core team that has conducted practice drills together, as well as establishing a hotline that employees can use for regular updates. This “command center” can be ramped up in stages as the crisis evolves to a 24/7 operation with full response capabilities to news media, government agencies and other stakeholders.

Once information becomes widely available and the scope of the crisis becomes clear, the initial stage of uncertainty will give way to longer-term challenges. At this juncture, the focus shifts to implementing your external communications plan in order to reassure your client-base of the health of your company and the availability of services and supplies, or to rapidly and accurately disseminate facts regarding any disruptions or hurdles that impact your organization’s capabilities.

The consequences for companies that fail to plan for crisis situations can be devastating in terms of employee safety, the financial health of their employers, and a loss of reputation with stakeholders that packs corrosive long-term consequences. Effective crisis planning is a management function, and should involve every employee in the company. An organization’s crisis plan is not just a document that sits on a manager’s shelf and gathers dust; it is a plan in which every employee knows their role during a crisis as a result of regular drills and training.

Templates must be in place to help rapidly craft statements that incorporate previously agreed messages applicable to an array of circumstances, as well as spokespeople who are well versed regarding the roles they are expected to play. Effective messaging during a prolonged period of uncertainty will depend on streamlining the amount of work – and debate – that goes into releasing new information; sufficient preparation in this area is crucial. Equally important is the willingness and ability to constantly evaluate risk and exposures, which will change as the situation evolves. An unflinching assessment of your organization’s greatest weaknesses is key to adapting the right public posture.

Effective contingency plans should also take into account the strong possibility that your organization may face severe staffing

shortages during the height of the pandemic. Absences could be caused by employees contracting the illness, staying home to care for family, or even from fear of leaving their homes. Staff should be familiar with the variety of functions fulfilled by colleagues, and ideally trained to step in to help out – or even fill in – where needed. To the extent possible, a variety of cross-fertilization exercises among employees should be implemented to help build inter-departmental understanding. Finally, take steps to facilitate the ability of employees to telecommute to help minimize staffing disruptions should the crisis continue for a long period of time.

Even the fear of an outbreak of an Avian Flu pandemic could result in a potentially devastating loss of customers, revenue, and employee morale. Responsible planning and a well-thought out crisis communications action plan can protect your company, your employees and your customers. How your company will fare in such a crisis depends on the steps you take now to prepare for the worst.

About the Author

George Felcyn is Senior Account Manager at The PBN Company, a strategic public affairs and crisis communications firm based in Washington, DC, with offices in Moscow, Kiev, Riga and London.

Email: george.felcyn@pbuco.com



West Coast Office:
1673A SW Montgomery Drive
Portland, OR 97201
USA
Phone: (503) 248-2233

East Coast Office:
279 Veleros Court
Coral Gables, FL 33143
USA
Phone: (305) 205-5042

email: info@crisissimulations.com
web: www.crisissimulations.com