

# Leadership and planning go a long way in a PR crisis

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When **Apple Inc.** issued a cease and desist order to **Podcast Ready**, claiming its company name violated its “pod” trademark, it was a potentially crippling crisis for the startup.

“It could have been decimating for the company if they had needed to pull back from the use of that term,” says **Tony Sapienza**, a principal at Woburn-based **Topaz Partners**, the startup’s public relations firm.

Instead, Topaz helped Podcast Ready use blogs and other social media to quickly get in front of the story. The move not only helped tilt public opinion in the firm’s favor by mobilizing the bloggers and podcasters who use the company’s products, but helped raise awareness of the firm in the process.

“The podcasting community rose up in opposition and created a lot of buzz that this was just not right,” Sapienza says. “It turned a crisis that could have put a lock on the company’s growth into an opportunity to open the company’s visibility up to a larger audience.”

At some point, nearly every company faces a public relations crisis of some scale. How a business handles those situations can often determine whether it emerges stronger than ever or irreparably harmed. While the rise of so-

## UNDER PRESSURE

- Do not hide your head in the sand when a PR crisis arises. Have a plan and team in place to address the crisis.
- Monitor the news for feedback analysis to judge how well your message is getting out during a crisis.
- Step back and honestly assess your PR risks. Then prepare.

cial media such as blogs presents new challenges and opportunities alike, the basic rules for handling crises haven’t changed.

“The single best way to survive a crisis is to prepare for one,” said **Hugh Drummond**, vice president at **O’Neill and Associates**. “This includes identifying a crisis team, centralizing crisis decision making, training employees and practicing your plan.”

If anything, says **Colleen Beauregard**, general manager of the Boston office of communications firm **Waggener Edstrom Worldwide**, the shorter news cycle makes planning ahead for a crisis even more critical.

“It used to be that in crisis communications you had 24 hours to start to see how a story was playing and now you

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have 24 seconds,” she says. Crisis planning, often done with an outside communications firm, can help put a basic framework in place so that a business is ready to act regardless of the specific issue that arises. “There really aren’t any new public relations problems, so if a company is honest and steps back and assesses its risks, it can be pretty well prepared.”

The shorter news cycle not only requires faster responses but also a sophisticated way to monitor how news is portrayed. A business can use feedback analysis to judge how well its message is getting out and look for ways to improve how it’s responding as well.

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In many ways, a public relations crisis — even a perceived crisis — can be more damaging than some physical threats, says **Fern Reis**, CEO of Newton-based branding and communications firm **Expertizing**.

“A company can often recover more easily from a physical emergency like a hard drive crash or a fire,” she says.

The reason some small issues spin out of control is that “public relations emergencies are seldom considered until they’ve happened and by then it’s usually too late for a business to do an effective job of planning for them and dealing strategically with them,” Reis says.

Planning ahead also gives a business more of a chance to turn a crisis positive. Beauregard says as with crisis management in general, crisis communications often comes down to leadership. Though it’s a nearly two decades old example, the way the makers of Tylenol reacted when tainted product began to show up on the shelves — by pulling millions of bottles of the medicine and taking a financial hit in the process — remains a textbook example of how to respond to a crisis, she adds.