

SHOULD YOU HAVE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

By Robin Brunet

Hans DeVisser, president of Coastland Wood Industries Ltd., remembers January 20, 2012, when a large explosion at the Babine Forest Products sawmill 220 kilometres west of Prince George destroyed the entire premises, killing two workers and injuring 20 others.

He says, “The media dug into this story and wouldn’t let go, and all sorts of rumours were spread, causing bad publicity for the mill’s owners.”

Several months later, DeVisser was at work at his Nanaimo-based plant when news came that two workers had died in an explosion at Prince George’s Lakeland Mills sawmill facility. “I expected another media circus and negative publicity from the kangaroo courts—but this time there was no endless speculation,” he says.

It wasn’t until several years later at a trade event that DeVisser learned why Lakeland had avoided ruinous public scrutiny. There, Cam McAlpine, principal at Earncliffe Strategy Group, recounted how he had been contacted by Lakeland management shortly after the explosion for guidance on how to effectively deal with employees, investigators, and the media.

DeVisser, who presides over 300-plus employees and has an emergency response plan for serious injuries or fatalities, realized his plan lacked a communications component. “In essence,

Cam said you have one chance to make a positive impression; if you don’t, then things can spin out of control very quickly,” he says. “So after he was done talking, I asked him to visit me in Nanaimo and help me develop a formal strategy.”

McAlpine, who has an extensive media background combined with broad communications experience at all three levels of government and in the private sector, believes a crisis communications plan should be an integral component of any emergency response plan, especially at a time when technology allows anyone with a smartphone to broadcast rumour and innuendo to the masses.

While the importance of clear and forthright communications may be a no-brainer, McAlpine points out that during an emergency, when adrenaline and emotions are running high, the fine points of how to interact with different parties can easily be overlooked. “A CEO preoccupied with determining why an accident occurred and ensuring the safety of his other employees can easily be daunted by the myriad outsiders descending on the accident scene,” he says. “So following a plan—even a cheat sheet—makes the ordeal a little easier and goes a long way in creating that all-important positive first impression.”

Gerard Messier, manager of program development for the BC Forest Safety

Council, agrees. “However, I think it’s fair to say that the majority of contractors don’t have a communications plan. Larger companies with HR support might, as might a firm that has had a bad experience—but for the latter, it may already be struggling to reverse damage to its reputation.”

Messier goes on to note, “During an emergency, a good communication plan not only helps with dealing with the media and minimizing damage to the company’s reputation, it is also critical in helping notify the appropriate organizations such as BC Ambulance and WorkSafeBC. Internally, it guides when and how to contact managers and supervisors who can help with the situation. Also, employees will be anxious and wanting information about the incident. A good communication plan also includes when and how to update employees.”

As to why so many contractors haven’t developed a formal communications strategy, Messier theorizes, “We’re in an industry where so many people are working full-tilt just to keep afloat and don’t have the spare time. Plus, smaller contractors may think they don’t need a plan. But unfortunately, saying ‘no comment’ in our era of social media and around the clock news coverage is the worst thing you can do, no matter how big or small you are.”

Messier can cite examples of negative outcomes arising from a contractor failing to take command of communications. “Imagine the impact on a family if they learn second hand through Facebook or Twitter that a loved one has died in a workplace incident,” he says. “That kind of damage can’t be undone.”

Although the BC Forest Safety Council continues to develop training focused on worker health and safety as well as emergency response (motivated by the fact that 10 people have died on the job every year in the province’s forestry sector for the past three years), it too is concerned with clear communication. In August it unveiled the Serious Incident and Fatality Investigation online course, intended to better prepare companies to manage situations where a serious injury or fatality occurs on their worksite. “It covers how best to work with the authorities that will arrive to investigate, as well as how to complete their own investigation into these very challenging incidents,” says Messier. “There is also a section on how to handle internal and external communications after an incident.”

On a most basic level, such a communications plan should include a list of people to phone and their contact information, and advice on what to say (sticking to the facts and avoiding the temptation to speculate is essential). Other elements could include a provision after an incident to clearly state not only what happened but what will happen in the near term and why; and ensuring that communication team members will be present in multiple locations (if warranted by the company’s size and operations).

Messier says, “some emergency plans and communications strategies are better than others. On one end of the scale it can be bare bones and lacking in detail, but equally bad is one that is so cluttered with information and protocols that the user can’t find essential phone numbers in a hurry.

“Some of the more effective emergency response plans I’ve seen contain clearly-defined procedures that have been boiled down and printed on stickers that can be placed in logging trucks and other machinery. There is also a more detailed emergency plan on-site that can be referred to to make sure that all the proper steps have been taken.”

The more Messier discusses communications, the more it becomes clear that it is inextricably intertwined with emergency response. “For example, including geographical coordinates for a worksite in a plan for the benefit of quick helicopter access, or driving directions for fire crews and ambulances,

are examples of effective emergency response as well as communications elements,” says Messier.

The communication strategies McAlpine develops for clients emphasize being consistent in frequency of communications and providing updates whenever news regarding a crisis



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becomes available. “Of course, disseminating the plan among managers and regularly updating it is crucial to its success,” he adds.

The communications plan that McAlpine developed for Hans DeVisser took only a few weeks to formulate, is 22 pages long, and has been disseminated to Coastland’s dozen-odd managers. “I told Cam to give me a book like a paint by numbers that I could open up and go through step by step,” says DeVisser. “Outsiders reading it may regard the information as obvious, but I hate the idea of having to think on my feet when talking to strangers—so this is a great aid.”

McAlpine also opened a Twitter account on Coastland’s behalf, on the strength of the truism that while companies may be at the mercy of social media during crisis, they can also use it to their advantage.

While DeVisser hopes he never has to use his communications manual or report bad news via social media, the knowledge he is able to do so allows him to sleep easier at night. “I feel like all the components of my business are in line,” he says. “It’s yet another way I can protect my people and the business we’ve worked so hard to build.”

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