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Crisis Communications

Crisis Communications Planning Literature Review

Introduction

Many experts believe crisis communications planning is essential to effective crisis communications. When a crisis occurs, stress levels are increased, and there may be many uncertainties. Therefore, planning for a crisis can alleviate some of the stress and extra work by putting in the work upfront. This literature review on crisis communications planning will dive into three crisis communications experts' writings on planning for the crisis. It will explore what they say are the most important steps in crisis communications planning and how they believe organizations and companies should go about creating crisis communications plans. Then, this review will analyze each source and compare each author's discussion of crisis communications planning to one another. According to the authors, crisis communications planning is necessary to manage crises smoothly and effectively.

Timothy Coombs

Dr. Coombs, a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Eastern Illinois University, discusses the importance of prevention and preparation of crises in the article "Crisis Management and Communication." Organizations that have a crisis plans, practice them annually and have pre-drafted messages are better able to manage crises than organizations that do not have the plans in place (Coombs 3). Coombs says that a crisis plan is only to be referenced, not followed exactly because situations will never be exactly how they are planned to

be. Crisis plans save time by assigning tasks beforehand, collecting data and information beforehand and serving as a reference for people to follow during a crisis (Coombs 4).

A crisis management team should be put together and a spokesperson or some spokespeople should be assigned and identified during the crisis communications planning process. The crisis management team should consist of public relations personnel, legal personnel, security personnel, operations personnel, finance personnel and human resources personnel. After everyone is identified, each person should be assigned a task in the plan. The spokesperson or spokespeople identified in the plan should be media trained to avoid gaffes and relay the key messages the company wants to portray during the crisis. The spokesperson should be comfortable being interviewed and should be trained for trick questions (Coombs 4).

Finally, there should be pre-drafted messages within the plan. These messages include statements, news releases and websites that can be pre-approved by legal and be customizable due to the blanks left in them for key information pertaining to the specific crisis at hand. Coombs recommends the use of websites and intranets during crises; however, he says they should be set up before the crisis begins as part of communications crisis planning. He says to create an unpublished website with information that can easily be changed according to the crisis to make live quickly in the event of the crisis. Additionally, he mentioned the use of intranet resources in the same manner to plan to communicate with employees (Coombs 5). Overall, Coombs suggests one of the biggest benefits of crisis communications planning is to do as much work ahead of time to save time during the crisis and get information out as quickly as possible to the public.

Jonathan Bernstein

Jonathan Bernstein, an agency owner who specializes in crisis communications, highlights the importance of crisis communications planning in his “The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications.” He says if an organization does not have a good communications plan tailored to a crisis in place in advance, dealing with the crisis will be harder and inevitably, people will be left out in communication. The first seven of ten steps are focused on pre-crisis planning.

The first step is anticipating the crisis by gathering the crisis communications team and deciding what crises are most likely. By doing this, the team can determine which crises are preventable and which crises need a crisis communications plan built around them. The second step is to identify the crisis communications team that would be assisting in the crisis. This includes senior executives, preferably including the CEO, top public relations official and legal counsel. Some additional members could be subject matter experts. Thirdly, while crisis communications planning, an organization should identify and train spokespeople. These spokespeople need to have the right skills, the right position and the right training. If the CEO is not an effective speaker, then that person may not be the best person for the spokesperson job. Next, Bernstein says spokesperson training is particularly important in crisis communications planning. Spokesperson training involves giving the spokespeople key messages to highlight the main points the company wants to relay. Fifth in crisis planning is establishing notification and monitoring systems. Before a crisis, companies should have a way of reaching stakeholders. This can be through email, phone, text, social media, etc. Bernstein warns against trying to reach publics with only one method of communication, and regardless of what method it chooses, it needs to have a system set up to reach each of the stakeholders. Additionally, monitoring what is

being said about the company can provide feedback to adapt the crisis communications plan. Next, Bernstein says to identify and know the stakeholders who need to be reached during the crisis to make sure they get the information directly from the company. Finally, the last thing to do when making a crisis communications plan is to develop holding statements. Holding statements are statements that are prepared in advance to essentially tell its publics that it is looking into the crisis situation and doing what it can at the moment.

All of these crisis communications planning steps are part of what Bernstein says should go into a crisis communications plan. Crises should always be anticipated, and there should be a plan in place, even if a company believes it will never happen (Bernstein).

Kathleen Fearn-Banks

According to Kathleen Fearn-Banks, the first step in crisis communications planning is to determine what is the most likely crisis to happen to the organization or company. This allows companies to prioritize crises, as a crisis plan that most aligns with the actual crisis is most effective (Fearn-Banks 353). By tapping into all people who work at the organization to create a list of potential crises, it allows all employees to feel like they are involved and provide more insight than just one department could produce. Additionally, identifying potential crises may prevent the crises (Fearn-Banks 354-355). Crises should be prioritized based on how likely they are and how devastating they are, ranking and graphing them to compare them. By making a crisis plan, even if it does not totally relate to the crisis at hand, companies are more equipped to deal with the crisis (Fearn-Banks 355-357).

A crisis communications plan could be a stand-alone document or part of a larger crisis management plan. The crisis communications plan should be short and easy enough to read during a crisis and be very well organized, perhaps through a table of contents. It should include

the following sections in the order that works the best for the company: cover page, introduction, acknowledgements, rehearsal dates, purpose and objectives, list of key publics, notifying publics, identifying the crisis communications team, crisis directory, identifying the media spokesperson, list of emergency personnel and local officials, list of key media, spokespersons for related organizations, crisis communications control center, equipment and supplies, regathered information, key messages, website, blogs and social media, trick questions, list of prodromes, list of related Internet URLs and evaluation form (Fearn-Banks 358-359). Many of these sections may seem repetitive or unnecessary; however, the more information gathered and prepared at the moment of a crisis when the stakes and stress levels are high, the better the crisis response will be.

Each section of the crisis plan is purposeful, such as the introduction, which is usually written by the CEO explaining how important it is to follow the crisis plan (Fearn-Banks 359). When writing the purpose and objectives, they should be clear, stating the policies toward the public and realistic goals for getting through the crisis. A comprehensive list of all publics, in order, to notify and how to notify each of the publics will streamline the communications process during the crisis, so nobody is forgotten (Fearn-Banks 360-361). Having a detailed list of who is on the crisis communications team, what they are doing and all their contact information will serve as a one-stop shop for who to contact and how to contact key communicators during the crisis. Media spokespeople are extremely important, as the public views people as the company itself. Oftentimes it is the CEO and experts, but there should always be backup spokespeople in case the CEO is not available (Fearn-Banks 362-364). Spokespeople and communicators should be equipped with key messages and regathered information to make sure what the company wants to be said is said, and to make sure information can go out as quickly and correctly as

possible (Fearn-Banks 365-367). During a crisis, emergency personnel and alternate workspaces may be needed, and contact information and details should all be spelled out in the crisis communications plan. Another key group of people to have contact information for are the media, who Fearn-Banks says are the most important people to notify after the key executives (364).

On top of communicating with other people, the company should use their websites and social media accounts, where they should already be engaging with the public, to relay vital information and acknowledge the crisis. Resources for the spokespeople and other people working on the crisis, such as URLs, prodromes and lists of trick questions will help prepare them for the crisis. When it is all said and done, there should be an evaluation form at the end for key people to fill out about how the company handled the crisis (Fearn-Banks 368-370). Overall, Fearn-Banks suggests a crisis communications plan be thorough yet manageable, so it can serve as a guide, not a step-by-step manual, to dealing with a crisis as effectively as possible.

Synthesis

Coombs, Bernstein and Fearn-Banks each discuss crisis communications planning as an essential part of crisis management and planning as a whole. Fearn-Banks mentions that a crisis communications plan can be a stand-alone document, while the other two sources discussed crisis communications planning in the context of a larger plan involving the whole organization. Regardless, all three sources discussed crisis communications planning as a benefit that organizations should do to avoid a larger catastrophe if a crisis occurs.

A crisis communications plan is a roadmap, or a guide, rather than a blueprint for exactly what to do during a crisis. The truth of the matter is that no organization will be able to hit the nail on the head of exactly what crisis could occur; however, it can use people all throughout the

organization, as Fearn-Banks says, or at the very least, the crisis communications team, as Bernstein suggests, to come up with possible crises the organization may face and rank them based on how likely and how devastating they are. After coming up with the crises for the plans, the organizations can move forward with the content of the plans, as well as the training involved in the plans. All three sources highlight having a crisis communications team, along with each individual member's contact information and assignments, spelled out in the plan. Additionally, they all mention the importance of having a designated spokesperson, or designated spokespeople, to head the public communications efforts. This person or these people should represent the company, be well spoken and be trained to avoid trick questions and other gaffes. Each source also mentioned putting messaging and templates into the plan as well, as they can save time during the crisis, provide a clear sense of what the overall communications message is during the crisis and be pre-approved by the legal team.

Bernstein and Fearn-Banks go into the importance of contacting key publics. Whether this be the media, stakeholders or internal publics, Fearn-Banks suggests writing out a list, in order of every possible person or entity the company needs to contact and writing out extended contact information for key members of the public and the media, while Bernstein suggests contacting people via multiple mediums to make sure everyone gets the message.

Bernstein and Coombs do not go into the nitty-gritty construction of the crisis communications plan, but Fearn-Banks does. Fearn-Banks discusses the need for organization, clarity and succinctness of a crisis communications plan, so it can be easily read and followed in an emergency. All three sources provide clarity as to what goes into crisis communications planning while also providing insight into what works well in crisis planning and how to actually construct the plan.

Conclusion

All three sources discussed the importance of crisis communication planning, stating that determining what crises may occur may prevent the crisis altogether, or at the very least, by doing the work early on before the crisis, the negative effects of the crisis will be mitigated. Each source has a similar yet slightly different approach as to what are the most important aspects of crisis communications. In Fearn-Banks, the focus is on creating a well-drawn out communications plan, in Bernstein, the focus is on the seven most important steps in preparing for a crisis and in Coombs, the focus is on doing as much work as possible before the crisis so when the crisis occurs, the response is as quick and accurate as possible. Overall, crisis communications planning is essential for communicators to spend the time to do, as a well-written and well-practiced plan can save a company from failure due to the court of public opinion after being unprepared for a crisis.

Bibliography

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Fearn-Banks, Kathleen. *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*. Routledge, 2017.

ExxonMobil Crisis Communications Plan

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I. Introduction

Dear ExxonMobil Employees,

Crises are scary and unpredictable times for all people and entities involved. Although we all like to believe we handle stress well, even the most composed and level-headed people can crack under pressure. This is why following a crisis communications plan during a crisis is essential. The crises outlined in this plan have been selected by a group of people representing all facets of this company and represent various different scenarios that could happen. These crises were then graphed to show how likely and how dangerous each of these crises are. Needless to say, a lot of work and careful thought was put into even selecting these crises. Each of the plans for these crises were also planned out with careful thought.

Nobody wants to be in a crisis situation. Having a crisis communications plan makes it easier. Much of the hard work and initial planning is done for you in these plans. Therefore, following these plans is advantageous. Additionally, your job, your co-worker's job and everyone at ExxonMobil's jobs and futures are in jeopardy when these plans are not followed during a crisis. If a crisis is so bad and loses the court of public opinion, it could shut down the company for good. That is the worst-case scenario. By following these plans when dealing with a crisis, we are hoping for a best-case scenario.

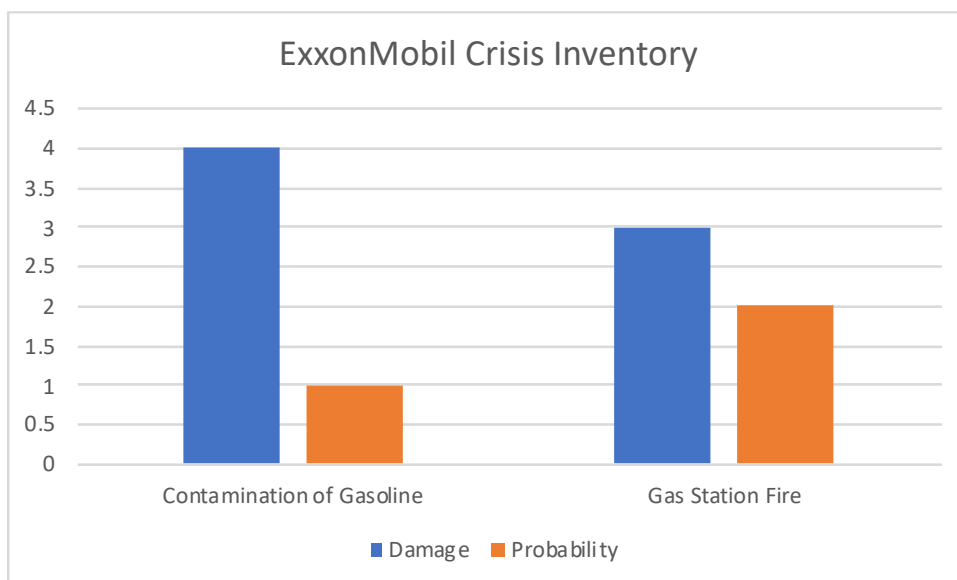
Please feel free to contact me personally with any questions about this crisis plan, as understanding it fully is key to the success of a managing a crisis.

Regards,

Daren Woods, CEO

II. Contamination of Gasoline

The likelihood of this crisis occurring is a 1, meaning it is nearly impossible. ExxonMobil does stringent testing on gasoline products; however, it may get contaminated after testing. The damage this can do is a 4, meaning it would cause considerable damage, as depending on the amount of contamination, many cars could be damaged by the contamination, possibly causing people to not trust in the company's gasoline.



a. Crisis Communications Team

The crisis communications team will consist of at least three main personnel, the public relations lead and two other public relations professionals. The PR lead will be Suzanne McCarron, the vice president of public and government affairs at ExxonMobil. She will notify the public relations department as to who are the main people in charge of the crisis and who will be providing extra support, preparing statements and briefing executives. The second public relations person will gather documents and facts and relay messages to internal publics. The third public relations person will field media requests and employee requests while tying up other

loose ends. Finally, additional support will come from other people within the communications office.

b. Media Spokespeople

The key media spokesperson is Daren Woods, CEO of ExxonMobil. He will address all publics and give all media responses, except for technical responses. All technical responses will be answered by subject matter expert Efterpi Vasiliadou, a Senior Scientist at Exxon Mobil.

c. Prodromes

The prodromes for this crisis are the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 and the Druzhba Oil Pipeline Contamination Crisis in 2019. The Exxon Valdez oil spill showed a lack of quick response and cohesion. There was no plan in place for that spill, but we can learn from not having a plan to follow this plan during a crisis. The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill caused contamination in the Gulf of Mexico, hurting many living things and industries. Communication was not handled well, weighing down on the public perception of BP. ExxonMobil can learn from this incident how to effectively communicate with the public. The [Druzhba Oil Pipeline](#) Contamination Crisis involved millions of tons of oil being stuck in a pipeline due to contamination caused by organochlorine. The levels of organochlorine were much higher than they were supposed to be because of human error. Communication from Transneft, the Russian-owned company that owned the clogged part of the pipeline, was not good, as it did not make a public statement until 11 days after the clog began. ExxonMobil can learn to monitor its employees and operations more closely to reduce the risk of similar contamination and communicate more quickly and appropriately in the wake of a similar crisis. These all serve as great prodromes to what could happen when neither anticipating oil contamination nor communicating about the contamination well.

d. Key Media

Key media are the local news outlets to the headquarters of ExxonMobil in Irving, Texas, which are Fox 4, NBC DFW, CBS DFW, the Texas Tribune and the Dallas Morning News. National news outlets include CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CNBC, ABC, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. Both local and national news sources should be contacted with the pre-prepared statement and/or news release of the crisis. All questions should be directed to the key spokespeople.

e. Key Publics

The key publics consist of all the people and entities who need to be informed about this crisis. In parentheses will be how to best contact each public.

1. The C-Suite: CEO Darren Woods, ExxonMobil Fuels and Lubricants President Bryan Milton, Senior Vice President Andrew Swinger, Senior Vice President Neil Chapman and Senior Vice President Jack Williams (Phone Call and Email)
2. Board & Advisors (Phone Call and Email)
3. Employees (Email and Intranet)
4. Key Stakeholders and Stockholders (Email)
5. Local Dallas Media (Email)
6. National Media (Email)
7. Loyalty Members (Email and Social Media)
8. Corporate and Local Partners (Email)

f. Key Messages

1. Exxon Mobil is committed to the safety and quality of our products.
2. All gasoline products are randomly selected to be tested for quality before being sent to gas stations.

g. Social Media and Blogs

Social media used to relay crises situations will primarily be Facebook and Twitter.

These two social media websites are more text-heavy, allowing for a statement to be the focus of the post. For Twitter, premade statements will be provided in the crisis plan. The blanks will need to be filled in with the appropriate information and approved by the PR lead before posting on Twitter. Twitter allows a 280-character limit. On Facebook, messages can be longer. An initial Facebook message should be easily sharable and not only contain the statement but also lay out some of the key messages and answers to commonly asked questions. The goals of the Facebook post are to inform the public about the incident and mitigate any negative responses. An initial statement on both Twitter and Facebook should be sent out only after all internal publics have been notified. All replies to comments should be constructive, empathetic and direct the person to the website for more information.

During this crisis, the most important thing to do with blog posts is monitor what other bloggers have to say. If necessary, reach out to the bloggers to provide comment and discuss the messages of the company with them. However, blog posts originating from ExxonMobil are also important. Because the blog for ExxonMobil is more technical, posts relating to the crisis should include the processes involved and what ExxonMobil does in those processes. Blog posts should answer questions about the crisis and follow key messages and also have an empathetic side to them. Blog post templates will also be available in the crisis communications plan.

h. Trick Questions

Trick questions can stump or trip up even the most prepared spokespeople. These questions may be worded where if answered how the journalist asks, could dig the spokesperson into a hole or cause him or her to say something he or she did not mean to say. When answering trick questions, speak in complete thoughts so your words are not used out of context, and stick to the key messages. The following are two trick questions to be prepared for when discussing the crisis:

1. Question: Is it true that ExxonMobil does not test all of its gasoline and ships the untested gasoline without knowledge of its quality?

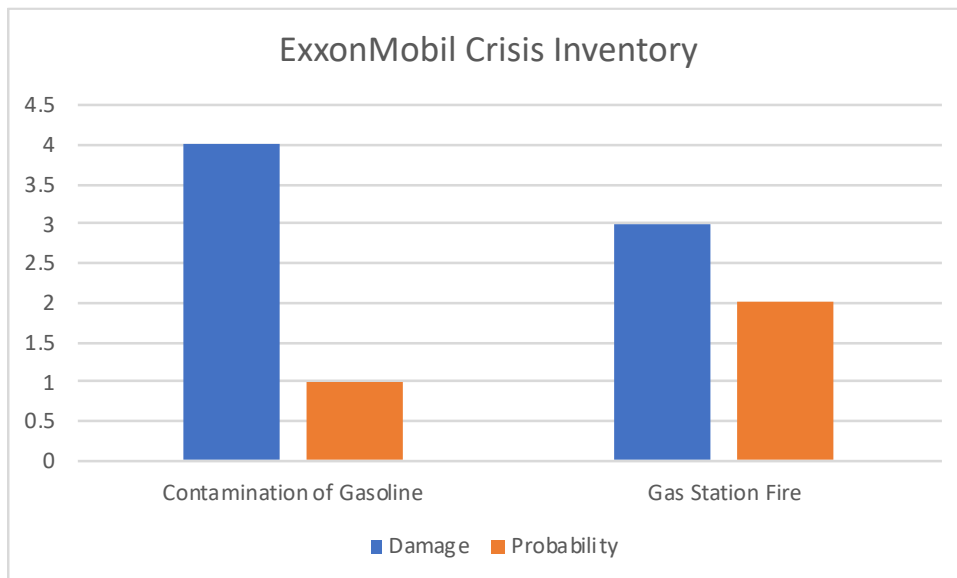
Answer: ExxonMobil uses the industry-standard process to test gasoline for quality.

2. Question: With ExxonMobil focusing on sustainability and the environment, gasoline for the everyday consumer takes the back seat, correct?

Answer: All of our projects receive great attention and have dedicated teams working on them.

III. Gas Station Fire with Deaths and Damage

The likelihood of a gas station fire resulting in deaths occurring is 2, which means it is remotely possible. Gas station fires can occur due to many reasons, and sometimes they result in deaths, which can be devastating to not only communities and families but also the reputation of the company. The damage a gas station fire with deaths would do to ExxonMobil would be 3, which means it could cause considerable damage.



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The crisis communications team will consist of at least three main personnel, the public relations lead and two other public relations professionals. The PR lead will be Suzanne McCarron, the vice president of public and government affairs at ExxonMobil. She will notify the public relations department as to who are the main people in charge of the crisis and who will be providing extra support, preparing statements and briefing executives. The second public relations person will gather documents and facts, relay messages to internal publics and have direct contact with the gas station and the manager of the region where the fire occurred. The

third public relations person will field media requests and employee requests and make arrangements with local first responders. Finally, additional support will come from other people within the communications office.

b. Media Spokespeople

The key media spokesperson is Daren Woods, CEO of ExxonMobil. He will address all publics and give all media responses, except for local responses. All local responses will be addressed by the regional head to the area where the gas station exploded with casualties.

c. Prodromes

Deadly gas station fires are somewhat rare; however, they are not impossible. Over the years there have been gas station fires that have led to explosions and deaths. In May 2019 in Rockbridge County, [Virginia](#), a gas station explosion and fire left three people dead, four people injured and the gas station destroyed. Or, in [New Jersey](#), a teenager was killed in a small gas station fire caused by static electricity at a BP station. Although these gas station fires differed in magnitude and damage to the gas station itself, they both led to deaths and could happen at any gas station. These fires are prodromes for ExxonMobil and serve as good warning signs as to what can happen to the company and the community in the wake of a fire. Some fires, like the one caused by static electricity, can also help ExxonMobil to plan to prevent the fire from happening in the first place. By knowing static electricity while pumping gas can lead to death, ExxonMobil can work on safety measures and safety campaigns to minimize the risk.

d. Key Media

1. Our first concern is the safety and quality of all of our products and we are continuing to monitor the effects of the contamination.

2. We thoroughly inspect randomly-selected batches of gasoline before they are sent out to individual gas stations.

- e. Key media are first and foremost the local news outlets in the area where the gas station fire occurred. The representative for that geographical area should be contacted to get in contact with those stations and outlets. The local news outlets to the headquarters of ExxonMobil in Irving, Texas should also be contacted. These are Fox 4, NBC DFW, CBS DFW, the Texas Tribune and the Dallas Morning News. National news outlets include CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CNBC, ABC, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. Both local and national news sources should be contacted with the pre-prepared statement and/or news release of the crisis. All questions should be directed to the key spokespeople.

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2. Board & Advisors (Phone Call and Email)
3. The Families of the Deceased (Phone Call)
4. Employees (Email and Intranet)
5. Key Stakeholders and Stockholders (Email)
6. Local Media (Email)

7. National Media (Email)
8. Local Dallas Media (Email)
9. Loyalty Members (Email and Social Media)
10. Corporate and Local Partners (Email)

g. Key Messages

1. ExxonMobil's primary concern is the safety of our customers and employees. We are heartbroken about the loss of these individuals.
2. We have safety protocols in place to help prevent occurrences such as this one and are working on finding the best ways to prevent this from happening again.

h. Social Media and Blogs

Social media used to relay crises situations will primarily be Facebook and Twitter.

These two social media websites are more text-heavy, allowing for a statement to be the focus of the post. For Twitter, premade statements will be provided in the crisis plan. The blanks will need to be filled in with the appropriate information and approved by the PR lead before posting on Twitter. Twitter allows a 280-character limit. On Facebook, messages can be longer. An initial Facebook message should be easily sharable and not only contain the statement but also lay out some of the key messages and answers to commonly asked questions. The goals of the Facebook post are to inform the public about the incident and mitigate any negative responses. An initial statement on both Twitter and Facebook should be sent out only after all internal publics have been notified. All replies to comments should be constructive, empathetic and direct the person to the website for more information.

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i. Trick Questions

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1. Question: Off the record, were you aware of the leaking gas line that ultimately caused the fire?

Answer: With use, gas lines can form leaks rather quickly. Ours are inspected monthly. Right now, our concern is about the safety and wellbeing of our customers and consumers.

2. Question: Employees inspect the gas lines monthly and know the proper way to stop a gas leak like the one that killed three people, correct?

Answer: All employees are trained to diligently inspect gas lines.