



ERMC presents...

# INCIDENTALS *quarterly news letter*

Winter 2007-2008



## Crisis Communications

*We often ask for submissions of articles on topics related to emergency response or business continuity. In this edition, we are pleased to share with you a submission from Mr. John Larsen, who is the Principal at Corpen Group, a firm specializing in Crisis Communications consulting.*

*ERMC has worked with Corpen Group in integrating crisis communications plans into ERPs and we think the article that John has put together pretty well says it all.....certainly better than we could.*

### **Perception is reality**

Successful emergency response management necessitates effective crisis communications, pure and simple. In fact, the degree to which how well communications are conducted often becomes the public perception litmus test of how well a critical incident was handled. We all remember the Tylenol tampering crisis as the case book example of a successful response, and the reaction to the Exxon Valdez oil spill stands as the low-water mark (pun intended) of an emergency response that didn't go as planned. But neither of these impressions have much to do with the actual emergency management processes themselves; they have everything to do with how the company 'positioned' itself around the crisis – how well it communicated.

The personality of an organization is revealed in times of crisis, and its success in relaying messages with timeliness, conviction and competence serves to enhance stakeholder trust. As such, it is critically important for emergency response managers to understand how effective communications can support their efforts. Four key ingredients are needed for communications to support and advance the larger set of emergency response actions.

### **Weave, don't bolt**

First – the organization needs to recognize the importance of effective communications as an integral, versus an optional, component of the overall ERP. Put simply, the crisis communications process needs to be woven into the larger crisis management approach, not simply bolted on. Although it may be necessary to build a separate crisis communications plan that outlines the details of various media and stakeholder outreach responsibilities, the key components of the communications approach also need to be firmly rooted in the operational ERP. This will be an iterative process that will require understanding, coordination, and agreement on the capacities of operations managers to undertake various communications roles (i.e. select media appearances, employee communications, etc)

### **Write it into policy**

Second - if crisis communications is to work at all it needs to be actively considered in advance and the approaches codified into policy. Who speaks on behalf of the organization, at head office and in the field? How quickly will the organization respond? Who is the information approving authority? When and how is legal / HR involved in communications?

You can't be a "wing-it" on these points, there isn't the time, and there won't be measured discussion or agreement. A key principal to any effective crisis management is to streamline responses as much as possible; by writing out the communications policies, everyone gets on the same page and expectations are clearly understood.

### Designate responsibilities

Third – crisis communications tactics need to clearly outline who will do what when an incident occurs. This may seem obvious, but the point to be made here is that these decisions need to include more than the traditional PR folks. In times of crisis, and given the importance of the communications function, non-PR folks need to be clearly brought in to support the communications effort. They need to understand the importance of their new roles, and how those are to be performed. This could be the main receptionist who will take the initial media calls; it may be the field manager who needs to serve as an initial media contact; it may be the corporate accountant who will be tasked with setting up a room for a press conference. Your communications officer can't be everywhere at once; the operational planning process needs to effectively diffuse secondary public relations functions.

### Tell 'em and test it

Fourth - lastly, make sure that once the plan has been conceptualized, designed and approved, that it is thoroughly tested. But, even before going to that step, efforts must be made to introduce staff to the new plan and its increased scope of responsibilities, its points of operational integration, and its trigger points. Ideally this can be done on three levels: first, familiarize participants on the new plan in an open, iterative and constructive environment. This step is particularly important for the non-PR folks who'll be supporting the communications effort, and might take a couple of hours. Second, once understanding of the plan is set through effective familiarization sessions, then move to a communications-

centric table-top exercise. This is where the communications function is exercised in stop-time, where corrections are made and clarifications outlined, and this might take half a day. Third, run an operationally integrated real-time joint exercise where communications is specifically tested. With de-briefings, this might take a full day.

These are some core suggestions. The bottom line is that in times of crisis the operational ERP manager might need to change their thinking about the importance of communication. It is not merely a series of checklist items for 'the PR' guy to do; it is core to mobilizing an effective crisis response that builds reputational value.

*John Larsen is the Principal of Corpen Group, Inc, a leading consultancy specializing in issues management, crisis and risk communications.*

### Disaster Forum Update

Well the speakers are all confirmed and this year, the line up looks to be as good as or better than the last 2 years! Disaster Forum is back at the Banff Centre, **APRIL 21 – 24, 2008.**



Keynote speakers include **Andrew Clancy** from New Scotland Yard speaking on the London Terrorist Bombings and Counter Terrorism – he is even doing a Pre conference workshop! We also have **Mr. Mark Ackerman**, who is Vice President at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, which is just

a few blocks away from the World Trade Centre site in New York. He will speak on their experiences through 9/11.

On the last morning, we are pleased to confirm that we will have an expert panel discussion featuring:

**Dr. Eric Newell**, Chancellor of the University of Alberta - (Past CEO Syncrude), **Mr. Ralph Dunham**, Sr. Vice President and Business Continuity Practice Leader, Marsh Risk Consulting and

**Mr. Mark Egner**, President, PRIMUS, member Alberta Environmental Protection Commission.

They will be discussing their views on their vision on what societal changes they see coming and the implications of those changes on Emergency Preparedness. The challenge to our delegates will be to identify how to bridge the gap from where we are today to what society will demand of us in the future.

They will be preceded by a presentation from Dr. Geoffrey Hale from the University of Lethbridge who has done primary research on the current state of preparedness throughout Alberta.

The list of break our speakers is too long to list here but we have an outstanding group. Some examples include: **Mr. Garth Rowan** – Crisis Communications, **Mr. Bill Isaacs** – Union Gas Ontario - Incident Reviews, **Mr. Raymond Lafond** - Psychological and Social Response to Disasters, **Chief Dan Bouchard** – Elie Manitoba Fire Service – Experiences with an F5 Tornado, **Dr. Doug McCutcheon** – University of Alberta – Risk Management and **Dr. Vanessa Maclean** – Medical Officer of Health – Lethbridge. PLUS 13 other great break out sessions.

Check out the complete list of sessions at:  
[www.disasterforum.ca](http://www.disasterforum.ca).

You can register online right through the web site.

### The ERMC Team



In this issue, we are pleased to introduce Jarrod Ushkowski, as part of the ERMC consulting team. Jarrod joined us not quite a year ago after spending 16 years with DOW Chemical as an Operator and part of their Emergency

Response Team. Jarrod brings hands - on incident management expertise to us.

Jarrod's experience and certifications includes: Fire Fighting, Incident Command, Hazardous Material, High Angle/Rope rescue, Sprinkler System Certification, Plume dispersion software and security software for sites.

His input has shown tremendous value in planning and managing exercises. He has also been active in performing plan reviews, response audits, delivering training, mutual aid structuring within municipal frameworks and exercise evaluation. He recently returned from an exercise out of province where, due to his background, he was utilized by a client as a Safety Officer for their exercise involving hazardous materials transfer.

Jarrod and his family live in Lamont AB where he is an avid hockey player, coach, and yes, pickup truck tinkerer.



## ERMC – TIPS

In each issue of Incidentals, we try to pass along a few tips that might be of benefit to readers. For this issue, we thought we would try to stay consistent with our guest columnist and pose a few questions about communications.

1. If you had a high profile emergency event occur right now – while you were reading this newsletter, and the media called your switchboard/receptionist. How would they answer the questions posed to them? Are you sure you know the answers they would give? (We suggest pre-printed laminated answers situated right by the phone so that consistent messages can be provided – even if a temp is in the position that day.)
2. Same event - how long will it take you to get your communications spokespeople up to speed in terms of the emergency events and your internal processes. Can you reach them? How long till they get to your office? What will you do with the media personnel in the interim? How are they going to be kept up to date with what is going at the emergency site?
3. Who is speaking for your organization at the site? How much training have they had and how much practice have they had in this field? What are they saying – do you know?
4. This event is going to last longer than 8 to 12 hours. Who is the relief person for communications and are you comfortable that they will be able to manage this section of the emergency management system?
5. Can you access the contact information of your employees and their families if you needed to call? How long will that take to access and what privacy controls are in place to ensure

*confidentiality is maintained? How would you handle this aspect during a week end or on a statutory holiday?*

*Crisis communications is an all encompassing area that is an integral part of your Emergency Management system. A Crisis Communications plan is critical to your organizations' ability to manage the response to an emergency.*

*CONTENT SUGGESTIONS: ERMC is always looking for content ideas or articles to include in our newsletters. If you have any suggestions or contributions, we would be pleased to hear from you! Just drop us a line at [info@ru-ready.com](mailto:info@ru-ready.com)!*



**Emergency Response**  
Management Consulting

ERMC is a leader in emergency preparedness and planning. We work right across Canada for some of the largest companies in industry and in all sectors of the economy.

### Upcoming Newsletters...

ERMC provides the Incidentals newsletters on a quarterly basis. If you have any comments or suggestions as to content, topic or layout, we would like to hear from you. Please feel free to send us your thoughts at: [info@ru-ready.com](mailto:info@ru-ready.com) or, at the contact phone number/address below.

For more information visit

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