

# WHEN CRISIS HITS,

## Will Your Precast Plant be Ready to Handle it?

When reputation and revenue are on the line, precasters need **crisis management plans** that address a wide range of issues to prepare employees and managers.

By Bridget McCrea

It's the phone call that no precast manufacturer ever wants to get: an employee was working outside in a storm and got struck by lightning. Fortunately, the accident wasn't fatal and the worker – after being transported to the hospital and checked out by multiple physicians – was able to get back to his family and his normal day-to-day activities within a short timeframe.

But the story doesn't end there, at least not for Roman Stone Construction of Long Island, N.Y. In fact, it started a media frenzy the

precaster wasn't prepared to handle. And when the story details began to turn into the game of telephone we all played as children, Roman Stone Construction's problems exacerbated a bit more.

"This person was a very good worker who was outside and alone at the time," said Tom Montalbino, president. "He was telling people that he crawled back into the plant after the lightning strike, and we have cameras in the plant that all showed him walking back in."

When EMTs arrived on site that day, they first checked to see if the

worker's belt buckle or shoes had been melted by the lightning strike. An EMT himself, Montalbine said neither had happened, which meant internal injuries due to the lightning were unlikely.

"To be honest, he came in and sat down and our office employees called 911," said Montalbine, who added that this was his company's first go-round with a newsworthy accident or event outside of its press releases and the occasional county executive coming to tour the plant.

"As soon as the news was out that a man was hit by lightning, the media outlets grabbed onto it," he said.

## DEALING WITH A MEDIA FRENZY

Covered by numerous news outlets – including one that flew an aerial drone above Roman Stone's plant to get footage – the story quickly gained traction with the media. When Montalbine arrived back to the plant from a job site, the reporters had already gathered and were asking for his comments. He gave a press interview, telling the reporters that he hoped the employee was alright.

But when Montalbine saw six media vans had parked out in front of Roman Stone's plant, and that aerial drones were circling the plant, he knew the issue wasn't going to go away quickly.

"We have a problem here," he remembers saying to himself just before picking up the phone to call his company's attorney.

"He (the attorney) told me not to say anything to anyone, so we basically shut down communications at that point," Montalbine said.

Montalbine then gathered his team and instructed all employees not to say anything to anyone, knowing that the reporters were waiting for quitting time to come so they could interview workers as they walked to their cars. Even without additional input from Roman Stone, the news spread quickly. Montalbine fielded calls from a lot of people, including the chief of the ambulance company that he's an EMT for, and read about it months later in a Thanksgiving news article about "what we have to be thankful for."

## WHEN IT HITS THE FAN

Known as the guy to call during a crisis, Gerard Braud is all too familiar with the crisis that Roman Stone grappled with. An expert in crisis communications and author of "Don't Talk to the Media Until...," Braud said that for precasters, being prepared for the inevitable is important for two key reasons: reputation and revenue.

"It only takes one mismanaged act to destroy a lifetime of reputation and revenue for a company," Braud said. "Most business owners don't ever stop to think of how much financial damage will be done to their business if something hits the fan. Everybody is focused on selling more."

Sales are important, of course, along with good production levels and other business-related goals. But much like a football team can't win championships with only an offensive line, a defensive strategy is equally as critical.

"You need to take measures to ensure that one thing that hits the fan



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# 5 STEPS to Take Now

Maria Gonzalez, a senior partner at the Gonzberg Agency in San Francisco, often works with companies that need help dealing with PR crises. She tells precasters to take the following steps to prepare to deal with issues effectively when they rear their heads:

**1. FIRST, TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND CALM DOWN.** Then, when you can be objective, determine the extent to which this negative press could cause real damage to your company and brand, and how quickly.

"If the negative press will cause you more emotional turmoil than monetary damage and/or loss of goodwill, then let it go," Gonzalez said.

**2. GET IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT MODE.** Basically, you will need to keep a clear head and stay focused, in order to determine the right course(s) of action, plan and implement your next steps, manage media relations, and relay effectively to employees and customers how you are dealing with the situation.

**3. CREATE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.** Minimizing the damage requires creating a crisis communications plan, where you and anyone else involved take an active stance and do all three of the following: tell the whole story, get it out quickly and say the truth. Then, based on that plan, prepare a statement and talking points where you will:

- ▶ Admit that there is an issue. Even if you are not to blame, you need to get in front of this, and show that you and your company have the integrity to take this on and not hide.
- ▶ Explain that you handled it and how you handled it. Show, and/or tell, that you are doing what is needed to re-establish credibility and confidence. Your actions will speak louder than your words.
- ▶ Lay out how you will handle it, if it happens again. This shows that, more than anything else, you are putting your money where your mouth is.

**4. AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, GET THAT STATEMENT OUT TO THE MEDIA.** Then, do what you can to get coverage based on your actions and stance, and also rely on the core message for other necessary communications (e.g., people calling your company, social media responses, advertising, etc.)

"Also, make sure that anyone else involved in implementation or even on the periphery, but who has an association with you and your company is on board and brought up to speed," Gonzalez said.

**5. DON'T HIDE OR SAY, "NO COMMENT."** This will only make things worse. Also, know that if the coverage is based on falsehoods, don't expect a retraction of the negative press or an apology. And, no matter how much you're in the right, or even if you do get a retraction or some other positive outcome, chances are the negative story angle will generate more interest and will live forever online.

"Therefore, your primary goal should be minimizing both the short- and long-term damage from the negative news," Gonzalez said.

doesn't take your whole company down," said Braud, who points to social media as one very good reason why precasters can no longer afford to ignore this point. "Any plant visitor, employee or contractor can use his or her cellphone to snap a photo at any minute. That could mean videoing or photographing an actual crisis, or taking a picture that's later taken out of context, and that becomes a crisis.

"It frightens me to death to see good companies go out of business, or to experience serious reputational and revenue damage, because of one social media post."

## SOCIAL MEDIA AMPLIFICATION

Knowing that precasters don't have public relations departments, Braun said in most cases a member of the management team must step forward as a spokesperson when crisis strikes.

"Decide who that person is and who will serve as their backup," Braun advised. "That person also needs the tools that will help them perform a difficult task in the simplest way possible."

Other key steps precasters should take include conducting a vulnerability assessment (e.g., a list of all things that could impact your company's reputation and revenue), developing a crisis communications plan to put into action when something happens, and writing press releases that convey your company's position.

"If your audience is getting information and rumors from social media, then you have a problem," said Braun, who tells precasters to pre-write their press releases that will take just 10-15 minutes to complete and publish online.

Braud said precasters should also invest in media training for their spokespeople to ensure they add perspective, context and truth when speaking to the media.

"Using media training and conducting a crisis drill in advance both allow spokespeople to mess up in private so they do not mess up in person," Braun said.

## ADVICE FROM ONE WHO'S BEEN THERE

To other precasters who may not have experienced this type of media frenzy, or don't have a plan in place for dealing with such crises, Montalbine said to remember that any accident or potentially-fatal event can quickly turn into a news story.

"I was out in the field and got a microphone stuck in my face when I came back to the plant," Montalbine said. "That was the first time I'd dealt with that, and I said a couple of things that I probably shouldn't have said."

From the legal perspective, Montalbine tells all National Precast Concrete Association members to have a plan in place for dealing with a potential crisis – even if your plant has never experienced the kind of media frenzy his company did. Have written procedures in place, share those procedures with employees and have a lawyer on speed dial.

"The main thing is not to say anything that can be used against you and/or your company at a later point," Montalbine said. **PI**

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