

Crisis Communications During a Security Incident Transcript

Part 1: Crisis Communication Planning and Response

Stephanie Losi: Welcome to the CERT Podcast Series, Security for Business Leaders. The CERT Program is part of the Software Engineering Institute, a federally funded research and development center at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You can find out more about us at cert.org.

Show notes for today's conversation are available at the podcast website.

My name is Stephanie Losi. I am a journalist and graduate student at Carnegie Mellon working with the CERT Program. I'm pleased to introduce Kelly Kimberland, Manager of Public Relations for the SEI and CERT. Today we'll be discussing media relations and crisis communications during a major security breach. So, Kelly, I'd like to start by asking: When a major security event happens, what is your role?

Kelly Kimberland: My role as the Public Relations Manager at CERT is to facilitate and coordinate media interviews between the media and our experts and experts that might be available.

Stephanie Losi: And why is it important, do you think, to have a crisis communication strategy and process for when an incident does occur?

Kelly Kimberland: Oh, having a crisis communication strategy's important whether it's dealing with computer security, physical security, employee situations. That's just good standard practices for any organization to have.

In terms of computer security, to have a crisis plan in place, what it does is help to set expectations, reminders, key messages that you need to convey to the broader audience, and also a list of experts that might be available and their contact information. As a crisis is occurring, those deadlines are very tight, and we try to accommodate and satisfy the reporters the best we can when a crisis happens, but the information is coming in fast and furious and we need to balance between our spokespersons' availability and the actual technical work that they're doing to resolve a crisis situation.

Stephanie Losi: So what would you say are the roles that serve as the primary points of contact in the media, and why are these important?

Kelly Kimberland: Sometimes there's two situations that can occur when you're dealing with crisis and dealing with roles. Oftentimes we will get a call in from a member of the media with an inquiry about a major incident or a security situation, and from my standpoint that might be the first time that I've heard of that, so I need to go out and do my homework, and see if there is any information out there that we are able to share at the time that the reporter's calling.

The other situation is if we know of—and this happened a few years ago when the media was covering viruses and worms and other types of attacks—if we want to get information out, we have a general list somewhat like a news wire service that would go out to all reporters that we know, saying, "Hey, this is something that we feel we need to bring to your attention, and if you want to speak to us or talk about this more, we're available to speak with you on that." And I typically have a pretty extensive list of reporters that I would contact, or if not reporters, media outlets, so it might

not go to a reporter directly but to an editorial desk or an assignment desk that might get the information.

Stephanie Losi: And how do you choose those?

Kelly Kimberland: Because we are an international organization, but everybody wants to talk to us, we try to choose the news services that are going to have a very broad reach—news wire services, major newspaper outlets, major TV outlets. And that way we're able to broadcast the information and get the information out to a broader audience, and control, in a way, the situation of the media calls coming in.

Stephanie Losi: So what is the biggest challenge you would say that you face when dealing with a crisis situation?

Kelly Kimberland: I think the biggest challenge is coordinating and facilitating and logging the interviews as they're coming in. And it's managing the vast amount of phone calls that we take. I have two phone lines in my office. I have my direct line and I have my media line, and sometimes it's difficult to monitor those.

So I think that the hardest thing is trying to balance between the number of media that may be calling and the number of experts that might be available. We try to designate our spokespersons during a major event, and that could be one, depending on if it's a very small but significant event or a large crisis situation. But we only have a reserve of spokespeople available, so that's where the planning and the preparation and the process, and the relationships with the media, come into play too.

I respect all the members of the media that have called in to the CERT Coordination Center. Sometimes the questions are a bit difficult, but they are doing their job and they're trying to get the information out in the best possible way that they can. And I'm also trying to, you know, make sure that the messages that we're getting out are accurate so that it's not adding into—adding more, I guess, crisis into a crisis situation, not to make a situation appear worse than it is.

Part 2: Actions Business Leaders Can Take

Stephanie Losi: So what do you think business leaders can learn as they move forward and work to develop their own media relations and public relations functions? What can they learn from these experiences and take away from this topic?

Kelly Kimberland: I think the most important thing is that business leaders really involve their corporate communications or their public relations departments at the earliest time possible that they know of a situation occurring. Because media relations representatives, such as me, will be the first ones to get the phone call, and we want to be prepared and we want to be able to respond to the media and get them the information they need or explain reasons why we're not able to get the information.

Business leaders should always engage their public relations representatives, their media relations representatives. We are experienced professionals, we've chosen public relations because—at least I have, because I have a passion for this. I really, truly enjoy my job, and I love doing my job. But we help to do the key messages, we help prepare them to know how to make statements that convey truth and honesty and believability. So business leaders should meet with their public relations representatives not just during a crisis, but at periodic times. Some organizations may set it up that the PR person meets with top management once a month or once a quarter. As long

as that door is open to the public relations person to access senior management, we can help. You can't always avert crisis, but we can help the business leaders control crisis.

Stephanie Losi: Which is a good thing, I think we can all agree.

Kelly Kimberland: Right.

Stephanie Losi: Can you maybe talk about other additional steps the business leader should take to ensure that when a crisis happens they are prepared and they go right to their media relations person and the process works as envisioned?

Kelly Kimberland: I mean, if you work with your public relations person, help set the strategy in the crisis, we talked about, you know, how do you handle a crisis situation. So, you know, periodically reviewing the crisis communications manual, or major event manual, with your public relations person. Doing periodic training or exercises are always very good. Crisis isn't just limited to the external world. Business leaders also need to know how to manage and convey information to their internal audiences, because you want your employees to be informed of a situation that's occurring so that they are feeling confident about the organization as well. It's to the organization's interest to have these strategies in place and to make sure that everyone is on board and everybody has reviewed the strategy.

And I should say that a handbook is literally that—it's a handbook. Real life will throw you curves. And the handbook is there to at least let you know who you need to contact, who your major media outlets are, how to frame key messages, and possible next steps or alternative plans if you need to have alternative plans. It's a playbook. It's like a football game. You've got a playbook and your quarterback could go out there and they could have the perfect pass set up to get them into the end zone. But anything can happen on that field to change that play, and you need to adapt to that. And that's how I view crisis communications. You need to be flexible, you need to be able to adapt, but you need to have a process in place as a foundation to get you to that endpoint.

Stephanie Losi: So something goes wrong in your football playbook. Let's say, you know, a crisis is under way, everything seems to be going as planned. Suddenly something goes wrong. You're off the map, you're in uncharted territory, what do you do?

Kelly Kimberland: If you get off track, if you're thrown that curve, you need to regroup, you need to take a breath. The business leader needs to sit down with, you know, whomever is part of that crisis team and say, "I see this occurring. How do we need to deal with it? What are our proactive strategies that we need to put out there?"

Oftentimes you do find yourself in a reactive mode. You can be very proactive with a crisis situation. Sometimes you can see them developing and you get yourself ready. And more often than not you're able to at least put your voice out there and get your voice heard in a crisis situation. In terms of the CERT Coordination Center, it's proactive in: "These are the steps that you need to take to patch your computer. These are the steps that you need to do to prevent this attack from occurring." So proactive crisis communications is always more beneficial to a business leader than being in the reactive mode.

Stephanie Losi: I think that is great advice. Where can leaders learn more?

Kelly Kimberland: Well, I belong to the Public Relations Society of America, and on the PRSA website there is a lot of information. Now, it's geared to public relations professionals, but there is

a lot of good information in there that'll give little snippets or case scenarios of a crisis that's occurred, that's been reported on in the media and then getting the public relations take on that.

There's other organizations out there as well: the Institute for Public Relations, which is more of an academic institution but they have very, very valuable information, white papers. There's training that can occur, and you don't have to go to a public relations conference to get that. There's organizations out there that will do media relations training, crisis communications training, government relations training. They offer broad or very niche. And I would encourage all business leaders to go through a media relations or crisis communications training seminar or workshop at least once every two years. Because there's nothing like doing the role playing and getting those questions fired at you—

Stephanie Losi: Oh, I can imagine.

Kelly Kimberland: And realizing that just because you want a question asked doesn't mean that that question is going to be asked, and how to deal with tough questions and also how to hone your message a little bit better.

Stephanie Losi: All right, well thank you very much. It has been a pleasure having you here. I appreciate your time.

Kelly Kimberland: Thank you.