

# Planning Ahead

*Three Steps to Integrating Crisis Planning into Your Operations Plan*



By Joanna Schroeder

*Pink Slime. Meatless Mondays. Undercover videos. Cow farts and climate change. These have become popular tools for engaging the masses. They have been successful because they are catchy. They grab peoples' attention – but not in a positive way.*

“The more shocking the claim, the more it has the potential to attract attention,” explains Jeff Gaunt, communications advisor and trainer with Wixted & Company, which has helped clients develop crisis plans and activate those plans for 25 years. “Suddenly, people who didn’t even know your company existed the day before are asking tough questions and putting you on the defensive.”

These initiatives are by design, a means by agricultural opponents or animal rights activists to change how producers and farmers do their jobs. So how should you respond?

“When we think about an incident or a crisis, people who don’t generally follow your industry are looking

at you and your business during a moment in time,” says Gaunt, “It may be the worst moment in time. It’s important when managing a crisis that you put that moment in context. At Wixted & Company, we focus on helping our clients tell their whole story.”

## Get Started

The best time to plan for a crisis is when things are good. “We counsel our clients that when times are good, don’t sit on your laurels,” Gaunt says.

No matter how small your operation is, you should still have a crisis communication plan that is closely tied to your operations plan, counsels Gaunt.

One phenomenon the agriculture industry has seen is



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that if a crisis occurs at one farm in rural Missouri it has the potential to spread, becoming an issue for the entire cattle industry. For many years the industry has been on the defensive, but proactive dialogue from farmers about ag and things like production practices are beginning to turn things around. However, more still needs to be done before campaigns with strong visual and emotional appeal lose their strength.

In the meantime, media who want to localize the story will come out to your farm and start asking questions. And many of these reporters may never have stepped foot on a farm before. Gaunt stresses that a crisis plan will help you manage problems objectively, rather than emotionally, and ensure you have effective messages that help maintain trust in your operation.

Wixted & Company's principal and founder Eileen Wixted thinks about crisis planning for all clients in this way: "In today's highly connected technological environment in which we operate, having a crisis communications plan is just really smart business mitigation. Your reputation, your brand, your relationship with your customers, and your ability to continue to be successful can hinge on how people feel and what they believe about your company."

*“Trust and your reputation are built over years, but they can be lost in a matter of minutes.”* — Jeff Gaunt

There is no worse time to try to develop trust and credibility than during a crisis, Gaunt said. "You need to build trust with your neighbors, customers, community and media during good times. It's difficult to gain trust when something goes wrong if there is no basis for that trust to begin with."

## Three Step Plan

Gaunt says there are really three key steps when developing an effective crisis communications plan.

### **Step 1: Create a crisis plan and integrate it in to your operations plan.**

When creating the plan, it should include all the potential risks, or crises you can think of that may happen. Include a playbook of who is assigned what task based on the type of crisis. It should identify who the spokesperson(s) will be. It should include draft key messages customized to the situation.



*Local reporters may come to your operation to get a local perspective on an issue somewhere miles away.*

"We also recommend the plan include "owned" media, "earned" media and "paid" media elements," says Gaunt. Owned media is what you own. For example we recommend clients have communication pieces prepared for social media (your Twitter and/or Facebook accounts) your website or blog before a crisis happens that can be tweaked as events unfold.

Earned media is considered the media who show up on your doorstep to report the story or other media that take the story and run. Paid media is something your company pays to place such as an online or print ad or a public apology letter.

"The ultimate goal of the plan is to leave behind the net impression that you can fix the problem. Trust and your reputation are built over years but they can be lost in a matter of minutes," says Gaunt.

### **Step 2: Drill the plan.**

This is the time you test out whether your plan works in action. Gaunt says that this is also the time you are testing out your employees and testing yourself. During the plan and after the plan is completed several questions should be answered. For example, is this the right spokesperson? How are messages resonating with stakeholders, neighbors and media? Gaunt also suggests that having colleagues or friends play mock media is a critical part of the drill.

"Media is going to come calling no matter what. So your plan is going to need to identify some relationship with the media," says Gaunt. "We suggest you develop a relationship with your local and regional media during good times so when a crisis does occur, the reporter not



*Jeff Gaunt serves as communications advisor of Wixted & Company.*

only has a basic understanding of your operations, but they will be more likely to provide balanced reporting.”

Having “mock” media during the drill will help your operation get an idea of the types of assumptions a reporter may hold and questions they may ask and will help get you prepared to answer these questions.

And, Gaunt adds, “Plans are only as good as they play out and drills are only as effective as they are realistic.”

### **Step 3: Set the bar low enough that it forces you to use the plan semi-frequently.**

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While a crisis occurring may be a one in a million chance, it’s important that if and when it does happen, you are not implementing your plan for the first time.

“*If you don’t tell your story, someone else will.*”  
– Jeff Gaunt

Gaunt suggests that if something occurs on the farm that could have regulatory, financial or health implications, bring out the crisis plan and put it into action. Then should a real crisis occur, your team already understands the process.

Over time, says Gaunt, things like undercover videos, while still disturbing, will receive less media play and attention in social channels. But like life, cattle production is an ever revolving door and there will always be a chance a crisis can occur so Gaunt stresses that one of the most important elements in crisis planning is quick communication.

Gaunt concludes, “The ability to communicate quickly is really dependent on the level of preparation and planning you put in when things are going well. When you don’t communicate quickly, you can lose control of the narrative. If you don’t tell your story, someone else will.” ■