Crisis Management and Communications

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As mankind and Mother Nature conspire to bring us one crisis after another – be it war, plague, weather or the movements of our planet’s restless crust – news, comments, fact and fiction are flying fast and furious, and we are reminded how important the management of crises has become in our world of instantaneously transmitted information and misinformation.

For example, as I am writing this article, many in our Hawai‘i headquarters are keeping a close eye on Tropical Storm Ana, which is passing close to our properties along the Kona Coast of the Big Island and perhaps heading next for Honolulu. A much larger part of the world is trying to deal with a new, deadly virus, Ebola, which is spreading from West Africa to distant continents. In the Middle East, a range of long-simmering conflicts has boiled over into war, terror and massacres whose victims now number around 200,000 in Syria alone. In Hong Kong, people are in the streets protesting China’s authoritarian rule. And in the seas between China and nearby Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, warships and military aircraft – including U.S. ships and planes – are sparring for control over several rocky outcrops, the oil-rich ocean floor and some of the world’s busiest sealanes.

How these situations are managed and communicated about in our digital world can affect not only each situation’s ultimate outcome but also the very survival of individuals, companies and even nations. (“Nations?” you may wonder. Absolutely, serious people are discussing the possible breakup of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon into new ethno-geographically organized states, perhaps including a free Kurdistan.)

According to TOP2%, a British firm specializing in security issues and crisis management, the September 11, 2001, attack on New York City is an excellent example of how preparation for a crisis can improve the chances for a good outcome and even survival. TOP2% reports 150 of the 350 companies in the World Trade Center on 9/11 failed to survive. Those that did survive generally had well-documented and -practiced business continuity plans. Many were back in business within days.

In my early days in the hospitality business, long before the advent of high-tech, cellular phones and social media programs such as Facebook and Twitter, and yes, even before the common use of facsimile transmission over copper telephone wires had arrived, I found myself handling a couple of newsworthy events by seat-of-the-pants intuition. On more than one occasion, I was standing in a crowded lobby next to a news reporter who thrust a microphone at me, asking, “Dr. Kelley, why did you …?” I was lucky the first few times this happened and managed not to say anything that would come back to bite me or our company. Later I had some excellent professional help, so we survived and grew.

Today, under the leadership of CEO David Carey, Outrigger is much better prepared. Jerry Dolak (Security) and Neal Nakashima (Risk Management) have prepared detailed manuals of what to do and what to expect in a wide variety of crisis situations. The section on a disease outbreak is currently being updated from the “Bird Flu” era. Similar things are occurring in our Thailand office to apply specifically to our operations from Mauritius to Australia.

In all cases, the No.1 concern in our crisis planning is always the safety of our guests. This is not only a moral and humanitarian imperative for us, but also the best way to run a business in times of crisis. After all, guests who emerge unscathed after a hurricane or cyclone blows through an Outrigger Resort are likely to say good things about our company.

So in these perilous times, we should all remember the words of Warren Buffett: “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”