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## Managing a Retail Crisis

THURSDAY, 13 JANUARY 2011 00:00 TERRI HOWARD CURRENT NEWS

Today's news seems to contain a rising number of stories about violence or disruption at our malls, retail centers, and shopping chains. Crisis can take many different forms in a retail environment—from an altercation between employees or an irate customer to full-out crowd incidents.

Too often, businesses assume 'It can't happen here.' It can! That's why it's so important for retail leaders to understand basic crisis management principles.

### Identify the risks

Conducting a proactive assessment of your company's risk areas provides a good starting point for mapping the most appropriate prevention and response measures. This exercise should take into account multiple types of crises, including crime, natural disasters, infrastructure failure, and mass events such as terrorism. Retail employees are particularly vulnerable to incidents of workplace violence due to their close interactions with the public.

During your assessment, you should:

**Establish detailed audits of your company's physical locations and their inherent risks.** A retail center in California, for example, is more prone to earthquakes than one in the Midwest

**Categorize employee roles and responsibilities with regard to risks they face.** A cashier or other front-line employee will face different risks than an employee working in the stockroom

**Consider the impact of social media.** Sites like Twitter and Facebook not only offer a platform for organizing crowd actions, they also provide insights on how a situation might morph and develop. It's important to take this into account when analyzing your company's risk.

### Develop a crisis plan to address the risks

Once you have a better understanding of the risks, draft a formal crisis plan that details your specific response, as well as appropriate resources and roles for each staff position. The plan should incorporate step-by-step violence response protocols. This becomes your blueprint for action during a crisis, and, as simple as it sounds, it's always comforting to have a written plan amid chaos.

### Practice the plan

Your preparation efforts shouldn't end with plan development. One of the most important steps in retail crisis management is regular training. In our experience, the best preparation must occur at the enterprise level. You can't just graft on a security approach and expect it to work.

All your employees and on-site vendors must be familiar with your plan. This does not mean simply reviewing a piece of paper, but rather practicing through load testing, exercises, and drills.

Employees need to be made aware of what they are expected to do when an individual becomes physical or when weapons are involved, for example. These procedures need to be simple and specific:

- Disengage from the violent individual
- Keep yourself safe—leave the area if necessary
- Call police, and seek help immediately

We've found that most violent incidents follow typical patterns of escalation. Being aware of these patterns can help reduce natural panic when a facing a real-life situation. We often compare this to fire drills: you become familiar with what to do when there is no fire so you can respond via muscle memory if a fire occurs.

### What if a crisis does occur?

After enacting your crisis plan, it's important to implement post-incident assistance programs that provide support and counseling for those affected. Remember, crisis events occur within communities, and the long-term effects, like ripples in a pond, may continue to emerge for weeks or months. Ongoing stress counseling for employees or customers can be one of most essential aspects of a comprehensive crisis management plan.

Through thoughtful, diligent preparation, you can offer your employees and customers a safer environment in light of potential crises.


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