



**Henry DeLozier**, a principal in the Global Golf Advisors consultancy. DeLozier joined Global Golf Advisors in 2008 after nine years as the vice president of golf of Pulte Homes. He is a past president of the National Golf Course Owners Association's board of directors and serves on the PGA of America's Employers Advisory Council.

## CRISIS WAITS FOR NO ONE

**W**hat do Herman Cain, Penn State University, Netflix, Bank of America, Carnival Cruise Lines and the Susan G. Komen Foundation have in common?

They've all been in the news recently for reasons they would not have chosen.

What's more, they all probably wish they had been better prepared for the communications crisis that dropped abruptly into their laps. But, if we know anything about crises capable of wrecking a brand, a business or an individual, we know they enter unannounced and seldom follow a script.

You think nothing like that could happen to you, a golf course superintendent, owner or operator? So floods, fires, tornadoes, lightning and hurricanes all stop at your property line? You're immune to chemical and gasoline spills, acts of violence and moral transgressions by employees? And your computer systems are so absolutely fail-safe no one could infiltrate a program and steal members' and guests' personal credit card information?

Maybe you won't attract national media attention, but a golf course is no more unlikely a spot for a crisis than many other places. So as politicians, banks and major universities have discovered, you need a plan.

**PREPLANNING.** And as anyone who has experienced a crisis of any magnitude knows, if you wait for the crisis to arrive, it's too late to plan. There are three key steps in preemptive crisis planning:

**Identify all of the potential crisis situations.** Start with the ones with the greatest potential, including on-site deaths or injuries, fire and property damage. But don't forget arson, terrorism, domestic conflict, environmental disasters and computer-related hacking.

**Determine how you will respond to each circumstance.** Which agencies, officials and professionals should be contacted? In which order? Who will make the contacts? Who will serve as back-up if the primary contact is unavailable or – worse yet – a part of the crisis? Who speaks for the club?

**Develop a communications checklist.** Keep the list of actions and the order in which they should happen immediately available to those designated to act in these situations. Maintain accurate contact information in a consistent place for immediate action.

**ESSENTIAL TOOLS.** Responding to the demands of a 24-hour news cycle, which includes the media, your

members and customers connected via social networks, requires five essential tools:

**Backgrounder file.** Be prepared to distribute background information concerning the club via electronic and hard-copy formats. Among the items that will be required and/or requested by media outlets and others are a map of the club, photographs of the club, descriptions of the mission and vision of the club and a brief description of the club and its history. Do not issue names of members, contact information and secure

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information about the club, such as finances and internal issues. Being prepared to respond immediately to requests shows media covering the story that the club is professionally managed and accountable.

**Scripted remarks.** In a crisis situation, precision is critical. Even the most experienced spokespersons can misspeak, so key message points should be crafted long before the crisis hits. Scripting also helps the club spokespersons say what should be said, not what comes to mind in the heat of the moment.

**Locations for interviews and broadcast communications.** Most clubs are private property and are, therefore, protected from trespass. But a crisis is not the time to bar the media from your property; doing so only heightens the sense that something is being hidden. Plan ahead and consider backdrops that neutralize the story. For example, if the club is being accused of a chemical spill that polluted a local stream, don't hold the news conference in the maintenance facility in front of pesticide containers. If circumstances have damaged or destroyed the primary locations, have back-up locations selected nearby that align with the club's brand standards.

While in times of crisis a plan is essential, the process that a facility goes through to arrive at the plan – carefully considering every possibility and every response – is equally valuable.

As General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." **GCI**