

Crisis Communications for J.M. Brennan

CHALLENGE

To manage immediate crisis communications and ongoing communication around resulting litigation for J.M. Brennan, a 78- year-old family-owned mechanical contracting company in Milwaukee, after a propane gas explosion at a customer site.

TARGET

Company employees, customers, news media, U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the general public.

SOLUTION

J.M. Brennan employees were on site observing a routine annual maintenance check of a customer's propane-based back-up power system when an underground pipe that fed the system exploded. Three customer employees were killed and 46 injured. Our team provided an immediate communications strategy, including four days of intensive on-site media coordination to manage the hundreds of resulting media inquiries. We also served as a company spokesperson and developed an internal communication system to keep all J.M. Brennan employees informed. We created talking points for the owners to use in meetings with employees and customers, and coordinated all activities with the legal team. Following the explosion, J.M. Brennan was accused of improperly installing the underground propane pipe, and subsequently was sued by the customer and the families of the victims. Our team was actively engaged in the litigation and discovery process, working with the legal team to unearth information that was used to counter the aggressive media relations campaign designed to blame J.M. Brennan for the tragic accident. We maintained a consistent message, based on truth and fact, throughout the personal injury trials and customer lawsuit. We shared discovery documents with the media to back up our claims. In coordination with the legal team, we managed all the communication around each personal injury lawsuit, and the trial between J.M. Brennan and the customer. Ultimately, J.M. Brennan settled the personal injury lawsuits and was found not liable in the trial.

Immediately following the explosion, our team helped J.M. Brennan quickly get organized and create a sense of order, calm and stability in an extremely volatile and evolving situation. Our experience in crisis situations allowed us to give J.M. Brennan perspective on what to expect in the first two, 12 and 36 hours following the explosion. In addition, with Our team handling media coordination and primary internal communications, company executives were able to focus on continuing to serve other customers.

OUTCOME

The ensuing lawsuits not only preserved J.M. Brennan's reputation, but enhanced it. The messages we used in the media were the same as the ones used in court and were consistent from the very beginning. Most importantly, they were not overly aggressive or attacking — they were based on fact and truth, and were verified and validated through the legal process. All the values that people had come to associate with J.M. Brennan over the years — honesty, and fairness — were reinforced. Ultimately, the company also preserved its 60+ year relationship with the customer.