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Putting violence in the past: A business hit by a high-profile shooting must quickly and candidly address its workers' concerns.

By Helen Huntley, Times Personal Finance Editor

A workplace shooting that claims the lives of an employee and a customer would be a nightmare for any company. For a retailer dependent on public perception, it's a crisis that demands careful handling.

RadioShack put its employee communication and counseling plan into action Friday morning as newspaper headlines told the story of Thursday night's mayhem. A young man walked into the company's Gateway Mall store in St. Petersburg and shot three people, killing two of them, before turning the gun on himself.

The company sent e-mail reports of what happened to its 7,000 stores nationwide, said Charles Hodges, RadioShack's director of media relations.

"You never want your employees in a situation where they're having to speculate about what happened to their co-workers," he said. "We're completely up-front with trying to get information out as soon as we get the facts."

Hodges said RadioShack is offering counseling to employees of the Gateway store and the families of victims. He said he did not know when the store will reopen, but that employees will not lose any pay because of the closing.

Supporting employees in the wake of a tragedy is crucial to company morale, said Tom Barritt, senior vice president of global issues and crisis management for Ketchum, a New York public relations firm.

"Bringing in professional counselors who can allow employees time to talk and time to grieve can help them move ahead," he said. "Over the long term, the company needs to monitor how employees are feeling about the situation and what other things might help address their needs."

Barritt said he has advised several companies dealing with workplace violence and others that have created crisis preparedness plans. Those skills are in demand because murder in the workplace has become distressingly common. Last year, 631 American workers died in on-the-job homicides; 487 of them shot to death, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. While not routine, shootings are no longer unusual, particularly for restaurants, bars, grocery and convenience stores.

Many cases involve disgruntled employees or former employees. Just last week a former Outback Steakhouse employee was found guilty of killing three of his former bosses at the Texarkana, Tex. restaurant in 2003.

The number of name-brands that have been linked to such horror is long and includes some of the most well-known in American business, such as McDonald's and Starbucks. The Tampa Bay area has had its own instances, as well, including a employee's shooting spree at the Radisson Bay Harbor Hotel in Tampa in 1999 in which three people died. Three others were killed at a Fireman's Fund Insurance office in Tampa in 1993 by a former employee who later killed himself.

Many killings at retail businesses are robberies, such as the 1998 shooting of a 25-year-old clerk at a Subway sandwich shop in South Pasadena. One of the most difficult decisions companies face is whether or how quickly to reopen the building where a murder occurred, Barritt said.

"You need to talk to employees, community leaders and even religious leaders to determine what the impact would be of shutting down," he said. "It affects economics."

Luby's Cafeteria closed a restaurant in Killeen, Tex. after a gunman killed 23 people and himself in 1991, but reopened five months later after getting requests from the community. McDonald's closed a restaurant in San Ysidro, Calif., where a gunman killed 21 people in 1984, but has kept open many other restaurants where shootings have occurred.

Barritt said sometimes it can be helpful to change the appearance of a facility to break with the past.

He said companies also need to decide what they want to communicate to the public, including helping employees know what to say to customers who ask about an incident.

"The employees are the face of the company to the community," he said. "It's important to give them something to work with, not to just (have them) say 'I can't talk about it.' . . . If they are making changes to security, they need to communicate those changes to the public."

RadioShack says it expects employees will talk to customers about the incident, but doesn't plan any changes in security.

"We wouldn't encourage them to bring it up to customers, but if a customer were to bring it up or to ask how they were doing, we wouldn't discourage them from discussing it," spokesman Hodges said. "There is no way you can secure yourself against a random gunman walking in your door and opening fire. When we're open for business, we want customers to be able to freely walk in our doors."

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