

BEST PRACTICES IN CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

A crisis can emerge at any time, leaving an organization unprepared and paralyzed by the fallout. These unforeseen internal and external events can easily drive an organization to assume a defensive stance and turn the most proactive business into a reactive entity as it moves to protect its employees and its reputation.

In times of crisis, an effective communications posture is invariably an essential component in the successful management or mitigation of that crisis.

Timely, accurate and credible communications activities ensure that the information necessary for the successful resolution of a crisis is effectively disseminated. Very often, this alone is sufficient to diffuse a situation. Even when it is a secondary priority over other essential actions, however, a sound communications approach ensures that stakeholders are kept properly informed, that the organization's position is properly communicated and that critical corporate and reputational objectives are advanced, even in the face of negative influences.

This guide sets out basic principles and direction for the development and ongoing management of a crisis communications plan.

PRINCIPLES

The following principles will help shape an organization's approach to developing a crisis communications and response plan.

Get out in front of an issue. Never allow the story arc of a crisis issue to be dictated by external actors, especially not those inclined to present the organization in an unfavourable light. Don't wait for an issue to break before addressing it; if the organization is aware of something coming down the pike, take the initiative and communicate as quickly and openly as possible to those stakeholders who will be affected.

If the organization is aware of bad news, communicate the bad news. While this makes obvious sense if the bad news is going to be revealed anyway, it also makes sense even when there is little or no potential that some other body will spill the beans. Communicating that the organization can identify a problem and resolve it swiftly and responsibly adds to the public perception that the company is in control of its operations and sensitive to the needs of its clients and other stakeholders.

The organization will be caring and compassionate in its crisis responses. Whether it's being sensitive to the human needs – counselling, overtime pay, food, special accommodations, child-care or other home-side issues – of employees involved in an extended or after-hours crisis response to the emotional needs of all those affected, the organization should do everything possible to look after people in a crisis situation.

Communicate with all stakeholders. While the most urgent and direct communications requirement will be with those most affected by the crisis, many other stakeholder groups will have communications needs. These include employees, board of directors, media, suppliers, partners, clients, federal government agencies and international bodies.



Speak honestly. Honesty is a foundational principle of all communications activities, but it is especially at a premium in the management of a crisis.

BEST PRACTICES

#1: Maintain an effective but simple monitoring and issues analysis service.

The sooner an organization becomes aware of an issue that may have a potential negative impact on any aspect of its organizational wellbeing, the better. Monitor an array of information sources such as media coverage including blogs and social media tools, contact with frontline staff, incoming calls and organizational partners. These sources should be calibrated so that issues can be detected as early as possible, preferably before they have had an operational or reputational impact. From there, an issues-analysis process determines the appropriate level of response.

#2: Put a risk-analysis and mitigation process in place.

The best crisis response is avoiding the crisis in the first place. Once an initial monitoring scan has been completed, initiate a risk-analysis process to identify and evaluate all known risks. Group all known risks into two categories, high or low probability, and evaluate each for their potential impact on business continuity, reputation or other critical factors. Rate the impact of each risk event as having either a high or low impact on the organization.

Any identified risk that has both a high probability *and* a high impact constitutes an immediate crisis for which an operational solution must be developed and implemented just as swiftly as possible. Crisis mitigation plans for remaining identified risks can then be developed, with priority given to those that have a low probability, but high potential business-interruption impact.

#3: Have a comprehensive crisis plan, not just a crisis communications plan.

An effective crisis response requires more than just a communications manual. While a proper manual is invaluable in setting out clear processes and responsibilities and can significantly reduce the time to respond by providing contact lists and communications document templates, training and testing will ensure that all employees understand their role in case of a crisis and that they can respond effectively even without access to a manual.

#4: A crisis communications manual is invaluable.

Notwithstanding the previous point, a good crisis communications manual is also invaluable. At minimum, by pre-fabricating call lists and communications document templates, it eliminates the need to devote what might be limited time and resources to these routine functions. As a consequence, it can lower stress levels and free up time for higher-value activities such as information gathering, analysis and decision making.

Among other elements, a good manual should contain the following:

- A summary of the organization's public relations policy and procedures and a statement of its mandate and values.
- A crisis communications action plan, including key people, roles, action sequences and scenarios.
- Useful, high-level information about the organization that can be disseminated to inform stakeholders.



- Summary pieces on major programs at the organization that can likewise be used if more detailed information is required.
- Reference files on crisis events identified during previous planning sessions.
- A list of key personnel, including work, home and mobile telephone numbers, email addresses and a short biography. This should cover senior management and board members where appropriate.
- A list of designated and trained company spokespersons.
- A list of designated media coordinators.
- An up-to-date media directory and contact list and a template media contact log to track activities.

#5: A crisis is not always a threat; sometimes it's an opportunity.

An issue that originally presents itself as a threat may gradually evolve into an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and accountability and to communicate key messaging through a forum – a the media – that otherwise might not have been interested. Even when the threat is real, the organization can emerge from it with its reputations and fortunes improved if the public and the media react well to its handling of the crisis response.

#6: Time is of the essence in a crisis.

Never has this been more true. In an age of around-the-clock media coverage and the ever-swelling phenomenon of publicly controlled communications tools such as blogs and Twitter, an organization's reputation can be shattered before it is even aware it has become a topic of discussion. The sooner an organization can start communicating its key messages around a crisis situation, the better chance it has of seeing a favourable resolution of that issue. Speed of response demonstrates credibility and leadership while getting accurate information to the public as soon as possible is the most effective inoculation against misinformation and misperception.

#7: Put the right people in the right roles.

There are three critical roles exist in the assessment of a crisis and the management of a response. (These roles are not distinctive; the same individual could fill more than one.)

1. Clearly identified assessors are responsible for evaluating the business-interruption impact of a crisis and for providing recommendations to the crisis management team. Depending on the specific crisis, there could be one or more assessors, and they could be drawn from human resources, operations, customer service, legal, communications or some other function within the organization. They may be able to identify, analyse and resolve a crisis on their own, especially if it is contained within their own departments, and merely have to report on it to complete the process. Or they may find themselves unable to resolve it individually or within their department and so must escalate it. Assessors should have their fingers on the pulse of the issue.
2. A crisis management team is made up of one or more senior executives whose role it is to receive the recommendations of the assessors, approve a response plan, and direct and be responsible for its implementation. Team members should have the broader organizational well-being as their key consideration. Consequently, assessors closely involved in the issue should not be team members unless they demonstrate the ability to be objective.
3. The third essential role is a dedicated person or team whose job it is to communicate both internally and, if indicated, externally.



#8: Debrief, learn and adjust.

In the wake of a crisis, when activity levels have returned to normal, conduct a post-mortem to deconstruct the crisis and the organization's response to it by answering the following questions:

- How well prepared was the organization for this particular crisis?
- Does the organization need to change or improve its monitoring and analysis systems?
- How did people perform in their assigned roles?
- Were they the right people for those roles and were they properly prepared?
- Were accurate and up-to-date contact lists for media and stakeholders available?
- Were the communications templates adequate?
- What can be learned from this crisis so the organization's response is more effective the next time round?

For more information on how these best practices can be leveraged to meet your organization's communications objectives, please contact Ingenium Communications at info@ingeniumcommunications.com or 613.729.1721.

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