



## Crisis Communications Best Practices and Tips

**Crisis communication** is sometimes considered a sub-specialty of the public relations profession that is designed to protect and defend an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation. These challenges may come in the form of an investigation from a government agency, a criminal allegation, a media inquiry, a shareholders lawsuit, a violation of environmental regulations, or any of a number of other scenarios involving the legal, ethical, or financial standing of the entity.

Crisis communication professionals preach that an organization's reputation is often its most valuable asset. When that reputation comes under attack, protecting and defending it becomes the highest priority. This is particularly true in today's 24 hour news cycle, fueled by government investigations, Congressional or parliamentary hearings, lawsuits, and "gotcha journalism". When events like these happen, the media firestorm can quickly overwhelm the ability of the entity to effectively respond to the demands of the crisis. To emerge with its reputation intact, an organization must anticipate every move and respond immediately and with confidence. Companies facing such a threat will often bring in experienced crisis communications specialists to help prepare and guide them through the process.

Effectively responding to the challenges of a crisis requires more than the typical skills of the public relations professional, requiring instead experience such as mine.

Crisis communication can include crafting thorough and compelling statements, known as "messages," often tested by research and polling. A rapid response capability—pioneered by the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign operatives and refined during Bill Clinton's eight years under attack by his political adversaries while in the White House, has also become an essential element of crisis communication. Additional tactics may include proactive media outreach to get messages and context to the media, identifying and recruiting credible third-party allies who can attest to the company's side of the story, and striking first, not waiting to be hit.

Crisis communication is a part of larger process referred to as crisis management though it may well be a major tool of handling a crisis situation in government, organization or business.

Effective crisis communication strategies will typically consider achieving most, if not all, of the following objectives:

- Maintain connectivity
- Be readily accessible to the news media
- Show empathy for the people involved
- Allow distributed access
- Streamline communication processes
- Maintain information security
- Ensure uninterrupted audit trails
- Deliver high volume communications
- Support multi-channel communications
- Remove dependencies on paper based processes

By definition a crisis is an unexpected and detrimental situation or event. Crisis communication can play a significant role by transforming the unexpected into the anticipated and responding accordingly. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

### **Crisis Preparation Best Practices**

- Have a crisis management plan and update it at least annually.
- Have a designate crisis management team that is properly trained.
- Conduct exercise at least annually to test the crisis management plan and team.
- Pre-draft select crisis management messages including content for dark web sites and templates for crisis statements. Have the legal department review and pre-approve these messages.

### **Crisis Media Training Best Practices**

- Avoid the phrase “no comment” because people think it means the organization is guilty and trying to hide something
- Present information clearly by avoiding jargon or technical terms. Lack of clarity makes people think the organization is purposefully being confusing in order to hide something.
- Appear pleasant on camera by avoiding nervous habits that people interpret as deception. A spokesperson needs to have strong eye contact, limited disfluencies such as “uhms” or “uhs”, and avoid distracting nervous gestures such as fidgeting or pacing. There have been reports on research that documents how people will be perceived as deceptive if they lack eye contact, have a lot of disfluencies, or display obvious nervous gestures.
- Brief all potential spokespersons on the latest crisis information and the key message points the organization is trying to convey to stakeholders.

### **Crisis Communication Channel Preparation Best Practices**

- Be prepared to use a unique web site or part of your current web site to address crisis concerns.
- Be prepared to use the Intranet as one of the channels for reaching employees and any other stakeholders than may have access to your Intranet.
- Be prepared to utilize a mass notification system for reaching employees and other key stakeholders during a crisis

## **Initial Crisis Response Best Practices**

- Be quick and try to have initial response within the first hour.
- Be accurate by carefully checking all facts.
- Be consistent by keeping spokespeople informed of crisis events and key message points.
- Make public safety the number one priority.
- Use all of the available communication channels including the Internet, Intranet, and mass notification systems.
- Provide some expression of concern/sympathy for victims
- Remember to include employees in the initial response.
- Be ready to provide stress and trauma counseling to victims of the crisis and their families, including employees.

## **Post-Crisis Phase Best Practices**

- Deliver all information promised to stakeholders as soon as that information is known.
- Keep stakeholders updated on the progression of recovery efforts including any corrective measures being taken and the progress of investigations.
- Analyze the crisis management effort for lessons and integrate those lessons in to the organization's crisis management system.