



# **Crisis Communications**

## Steps For Managing A Media Crisis

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# Crisis Communications

## 17 Steps For Managing A Media Crisis

This morning as you prepared to leave for work, you saw an amazing thing. There on the morning news was your business being “slammed” by some person you don’t even know. Most of what was being said was not even true, nor did you know the issue being discussed was a problem. Suddenly it’s all over the news! What are you going to do? Call the reporter and read her the riot act? Call your lawyer and sue the TV station? Pretend it didn’t happen? What will you do?

Regardless of the size of your business or practice, you should have a crisis communications plan. Having such a plan will prevent you from wasting precious time trying to decide how to communicate internally and externally. This plan can be very simple or elaborate depending on your company’s size, number of employees and specific need. The plan comes into effect when any situation threatens the reputation of your business usually brought about by adverse or overtly negative media attention.

If an issue turns negative, and the media has the story – you have a crisis communications problem.

Typical crisis situations usually involve some type of legal issue, public relations misstep or damage / disaster brought on by your company. A crisis communications situation can also be some negative, unusual or even patently false accusations or public attention centering on an issue you feel is vital to your business.

### Examples of crisis communications situations:

Classic situations involve an inappropriate response to an issue that has now gained some media attention. Here some well-meaning people or company representatives can make a simple situation very bad very fast. This can occur by ignoring a simple fact, strictly adhering to legal

or company policy in the face of a common sense alternative, or by simply making a natural mistake and trying to cover it up.

Another example of a crisis communications situation would involve an emotional or controversial issue where “the other side” has over stated their position in the public media and created the need for your response.

A serious case of a corporate crisis would be a product or service that has caused harm to or even death of the public.

Other causes are unauthorized procedures, inadequate supervision, inadequate safety procedures, inadequate quality control, misuse of confidential information, errors in judgment, improper standard operating procedures, human error or simple mistakes.

The final result in a crisis communication problem depends on how it is handled and the net affect on your public reputation. Here is the essence of what you must know to tackle this problem:

### **Tell It All, Tell It Fast, Tell The Truth!**

Far too many individuals or companies dig themselves a very deep hole by not adhering to this one simple principle.

### **Before the Crisis**

Prior to any crisis communications issue you should establish who will make critical decisions in handling the situation. For a small company or practice, this may be a very simple decision. This small team would include the business owner, an office manager and perhaps some members of your technical support staff.

Develop a Crisis Communications Team in advance.

For larger companies the team should include the CEO, VP's, Senior Management, the head of the Public Relations Department or agency and any experts in the area that can add technical expertise. Optional participants would include in-house lawyers, company spokespersons, safety and security officers, and outside consultants in a technical field or communications specialty.

The job of this team is to develop a plan of action to follow in the event of any media or situational issue that could be considered a crisis. The key here is to do this in **ADVANCE!** At the beginning of an actual crisis is not the time to organize a group and decide each person's responsibility. Having this meeting and formulating a simple plan now, while you are thinking clearly, will save you valuable time when you most need it.

Your crisis communications team should be ready to act at a moment's notice. Each member should be easy to reach anytime of the day or night and everyone should know what is expected of them. Therefore you need to construct a contact sheet with each member's name, work, home, cell, and pager numbers. Then formulate a specialty email list for mass notification.

Next, the team should decide a basic flow of action in the event of a crisis. It is recommended that you have some communications pre-written. These pre-written communications might include what will be said on the phone before your press conference and a basic press release where you can simply fill in specifics and release it quickly. These preliminary communications only take care of the "who, what, when, where" issues.

Sample Script for Phone Operators: *“The facts are still being collected and we are planning a press conference this afternoon. If I can get your name and phone number, I would be happy to call you back with the exact time.”*

Sample Press Release Template:

A (what happened) at (where) involving (who) occurred at (when). The incident is currently under investigation and we are gathering all the facts as quickly as we can. More information will be forthcoming.

Some known details may be included but they must be facts and not speculation. Be sure to verify everything you say as this will help your future credibility. You may also include the time for your press conference or next news release.

### **When a Crisis Happens**

After a crisis is identified, immediately assemble the team and begin making decisions.

### **Here are the 17 steps you should follow:**

- 1) Bring the situation under control and protect people and property.
- 2) Decide if the situation is truly newsworthy. Some situations may seem like a crisis to you, but would have little or no interest to the media. In this case you should certainly not create a media crisis by jumping the gun.
- 3) Assess severity, length of issue and media life. If you believe this is a very small “flash in the pan” it may be best to not make public statements for 24-48 hours and see how quickly the issue goes away.

- 4) Quickly gather all the facts you can. Don't speculate.
- 5) Decide on your primary positioning or main message that addresses the situation. Do the right thing by putting the public's interest ahead of your organization's interest.
- 6) Develop a list of message points dealing with the issue. Anticipate questions you will receive. Craft answers to each. Include the tough "hot seat" questions.
- 7) Confirm or change your pre-assigned spokesperson, back up spokesperson and technical support persons. Remind your spokesperson that money estimates, insurance coverages, speculation as to the cause, and placing of blame are not to be discussed. Also, remind everyone that no statements from anyone are "off the record".
- 8) Establish a phone message. Have phone operators strictly adhere to the message – no ad-libbing and also remind them that nothing is "off the record".

Good examples are;

*"We've just learned of the situation and we are gathering all the facts now. We will have a press conference in a few hours".*

*"We are working hard to bring the situation under control now, so we can't speculate on that. We will have more information later today."*

A log of all incoming telephone media contacts should be established. This will let you make sure no media outlet is missed when call backs are required and will help in the post-crisis analysis.

- 9) Distribute a press release stating only the known basic facts and do not speculate. Give a time for a press conference if deemed necessary. In this initial communication, show concern for the public and your employees. Many times a mental impression is all an audience is left with and the impression you should establish is one of concern and compassion.
- 10) Share some information with your employees. If your employees don't feel like insiders, they will act like outsiders. That could cause you to lose control of the information flow.
- 11) Rehearse all media message points and expected questions. This is essential and must be done, even in a rush situation. Your spokesperson team must get in a quiet private space and practice delivering the answers everyone has agreed upon. One member of the team should think like a reporter and role play by asking all spokespersons all questions. Spokespersons should practice staying on message. All expected difficult questions should be rehearsed many times and asked many different ways. Do not skip this vital rehearsal!
- 12) Give the media all the information you can (even the bad news) so you are the source and you are in control of the release of bad news. In a crisis communications situation you should always attempt to control the flow of information. Be confident, tough and prepared.
- 13) Be honest. Tell the media you are being honest and you have nothing to hide. Tell them you have corrected the situation and are taking all proper follow-up steps. When you have done the right thing and have taken all the right steps, it is easy to be honest with the media and your statements will come across as sincere. Do not volunteer any information other than the question at hand and your prepared message points.

- 14) Be prepared to answer all the “hot seat” questions and then bridge to a positive position or message point. Don’t get caught in a question and answer session because all the questions will be about the crisis. Take the opportunity to bridge to the positive aspects of what you do, what you have done and what will be done to prevent this from happening in the future.
- 15) If it is not too contrived, perform some act of goodwill either during or immediately after a crisis. This takes the “sting” out of bad press and proves you have gone the extra mile to help the situation or damaged parties.
- 16) Follow-up. Make sure all media receives any promised detailed information as quickly as possible. Correct any problems with those affected by the crisis and do whatever is required to restore your company’s reputation and your consumer’s confidence.
- 17) Make some changes. Actively correct policies or problems that will prevent a repeat of the crisis situation. Revise your crisis communications plan based on your experience.

If a mistake is made, admit it and begin the process of re-establishing your credibility.

The governing rule in crisis communications is to “Tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth”. If a mistake has been made, it’s almost always best to admit that up front and immediately begin doing everything to re-establish your credibility and consumer confidence.

This is a very difficult step for the lawyers. Their job is to keep all legal options open and minimize liability and costs. However, crisis management case studies have proven that admitting a mistake and moving forward with positive steps that establish credibility and confidence are almost always the best and least costly steps. If the lawyers have too much to say about this initial process



without the influence of common sense and honest admissions, it will look like stalling tactics. That will only hurt you and the situation will quickly get worse. If you appear to be stalling, the company will stand to lose credibility, customers and its honest image. In situations like this, I recommend you carefully consider legal input, but do not let the lawyers make the communications decisions.

## **Your Spokesperson**

Who you choose to be your spokesperson is a critical decision. In some cases the spokesperson should be a high ranking company representative. In large organizations a designated or professional spokesperson may also be used. A spokesperson must have a variety of unique qualities and experience levels.

### Qualities of the ideal spokesperson:

- Be comfortable in front of a TV camera and with reporters
- Be skilled in answering media questions and redirecting questions as needed
- Must be able to stay on message
- Should speak without using your industry's jargon
- Understands the role of the reporters
- Should have a good understanding of the crisis
- Must establish credibility with the media
- Project confidence to the audience
- Be well spoken
- Have a pleasing, trusting appearance
- Be sincere, straightforward and believable
- Be accessible to the media
- Remain calm in stressful situations

In addition to your designated spokesperson, you should have a back-up. Also prepare any technical experts you may need for adding detailed facts if necessary. If you

can anticipate who the other parties involved in the crisis will designate as a spokesperson, use this information to help craft your style of response.

## **Establish a Media Policy**

Designate a media room. Escort media there, don't make them feel isolated or hidden from the action.

A room in your company's offices should be designated as the media room. This is your controlled staging area for reporters and where you can give your press briefings. This room should be in a completely different part of your office complex from where your crisis communications team, spokesperson, executive and emergency operations are located. You do not want the media wandering into one of these offices because of a simple wrong turn. At the same time, don't make the media feel isolated or hidden. This location is something the team should decide in advance.

It should be required that members of the media are to be escorted to the media room. Escorts should be chosen in advance and should be pleasant but not offer any information. Reporters may ask to speak to someone other than the designated spokesperson, but that should not be allowed. The spokesperson, back-up spokesperson and technical experts should be the only persons from your organization that give interviews or discuss the issue with reporters. Controlling the flow of information is a key element in managing a crisis!

In the process of a press briefing do your best to answer the media's questions and provide them with the resources you have offered. If a reporter wants an unusual angle or has a special request for the story, consider it carefully. However, be careful not to show any special treatment to any one reporter.

All calls from the media to your front office should be sent to the public relations department, or to your designated spokesperson. Your receptionist should absolutely adhere to this rule.

### **Immediately Issue a Prepared Statement**

By communicating immediately you establish yourself as prepared, honest and ready to handle the situation. It proves you are also in control of the information flow. The best way to issue immediate communications is with a prepared statement. Your first news release should include a minimum of facts including the who, what, when and where of the situation. If you have facts that you can confirm include those as well. At this point your role as a communicator is limited to this. Do not make the mistake of exceeding that role. Include in your prepared statement your concern for all involved, for your employees and for your customers. A consumer audience will remember the first and the last thing they hear. Therefore at the beginning of a crisis you need to make sure the first communications from you are the facts, genuine concern and a resolve to get answers or solve the problem.

As things progress and more information becomes known, then develop prepared statements including these new facts and have your spokesperson read this statement at the press conference and before taking questions from reporters. Such prepared statements can be used over the phone for reporters who were not at the briefing and they can be faxed or emailed upon request.

### **Modified Media Kits**

A media kit is a tool box for the media to construct their story. If you give them the tool box, give them your approved information, your position statement and your assessment of the situation. Many times this keeps

reporters busy for the initial story and you may have averted unnecessary investigations. If there is time, modify your company's media kit to include your prepared statements and news releases about the crisis and fact sheets on the company, brochures and other pertinent information like safety data and research studies.

In cases of highly technical issues, it may be necessary to create some helpful sheets easily explaining research or complicated systems and point out where the problem or breakdown occurred. This can be a key action to limit what reporters will misinterpret. You do not want reporters interpreting anything!

If you have a visual prop like a photograph, video or drawing, include that and point out where the problem occurred. This type of information goes a long way toward proving your honesty and prevents journalists from seeking out much of this on their own – where you are out of control.

### **Helpful Tips For Press Conference Delivery**

- For prepared statements, use large type for easy reading
- Leave wide margins for making your notes
- Practice from your typed script so you are familiar with the notes you made
- Practice aloud and with a team member
- Never “wing it”....Never “wing it”!
- Have a team member make sure the media room is ready including; lights, microphone, visuals, releases and media kits
- Be confident and sincere in your delivery
- Be compassionate and understanding
- Have a time limit and stay within that time
- Do not get into a confrontation – remain calm
- Stay with the issue at hand and your message points

- Feel free to say “I don’t know, but I can find out for you”
- Don’t let one reporter dominate the questioning
- Don’t make jokes
- Be sure to bridge to positive points
- If you are asked two or more questions at once, answer the one you want to and move on.
- Know who will be attending in advance
- Don’t speculate on “what if” questions
- Beware of the “A” or “B” dilemma – the answer may be neither
- Dress conservatively and professionally
- Avoid technical expressions or jargon

## **Internet Crisis Management**

Rumors, true or not, spread faster than a wild fire on the Internet. A disgruntled customer or client armed with a computer and a chat room can plant a lie or propagate a rumor about you or your company. Traveling at light speed this can hurt your reputation or bring down a product overnight.

Very soon after such “chat” and rumors spread, news organizations can have the story. Gone are the days when most news people took the time to fact check or multi-source their story to prove its accuracy. Internet news is even worse. Not only do they distribute news the instant they get it, but they are rewarded when they do so.

So how do you control Internet rumors and maintain your company’s public image? Here are 10 proven guidelines for surviving an Internet communications crisis.

- 1) It’s not personal, it’s business. It’s hard to shut down the emotions when someone is overtly doing you wrong, but you need to think logically at this time and emotions will not help you do that. Try to think like a consumer or client seeing or hearing this

information. How would you like to see your favorite company react?

- 2) Alert the crisis communications team you have prepared in advance and gather your facts.
- 3) Be honest and up front with all reporters – even the cyber reporters via email.
- 4) Have your prepared statements and press releases ready to hit the email distribution list as soon as you have your company position and message points established.
- 5) Don't email anything that you do not want to see in print. You may have a leak or unhappy employee and inter-office emails will be on a reporter's desk in minutes.
- 6) Be completely accessible to the media for as long as the crisis exists. For small companies with voice mail, make sure you have a method for reporters to reach your spokesperson immediately.
- 7) Have your crisis team visit the chat rooms and message boards and see what is being said. Use this information to craft your position points and responses. Resist the temptation to get into the chat and defend your position.
- 8) Use both on-line and off-line clipping services to see what is being said about your company. Internet rumors are very fluid and your responses and message points may need to be fluid as well.
- 9) Remember that anytime, anywhere you are speaking with a reporter, you are being interviewed – even online.

- 10) Place press releases and position statements on your web site and in your press room. Be proactive and positive in your statements. Do not be defensive or reactionary.

Internet crisis situations can happen and grow at lightening speed. While much of the management techniques are the same, handling an Internet crisis requires a few unique angles and cyber-savvy to contain.

In summary, in the midst of a crisis of communications, the best policy is to tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth! Remember if you control the flow of information you are miles ahead in controlling the crisis. To be effective you must be willing to balance legal and public relations issues. Being honest, compassionate and forthright will many times be what an audience remembers about the situation.