

Crisis Communications Fundamentals



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Definition of a crisis:

Let's start with what's meant by a "crisis" as it applies to communications:

(Definition:) "A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your organization, usually brought on by adverse or negative media attention."

How do you know when you have a crisis on your hands?

- Wide scope
- High intensity
- Threatens to last a long time
- Organizational cost must be substantial

So, a crisis is not a negative comment on a blog; a crisis is 100 negative comments from important people undermining the very credibility of your organization. Or a lie that is so damaging (think Swift Boat for John Kerry) that it threatens the very foundation of your brand.

On the upside, if you do have a bona fide crisis, it can be an opportunity to reposition yourself, get out your messages, and create allies. Tell the story you want to tell - don't let the media or your opponents set the terms of the debate by being defensive and keeping the story in the opposition's frame.

Use the media opportunity to remind key audiences who you are and the good work that you do.

A Step-by-Step Plan to Guide You Through a Crisis

- 1. Delegate a person to handle the phones.** They won't be able to give out information, but they can take down names and numbers for getting back to people, while you work out your plan. If the media is calling you, find out what their assumptions are (often they will tell you out right), and tell them that you're working on the situation, and will get back to them. And do get back to them soon, or they will leave you out as a source for the story.
- 2. Get the facts.** Find out what really happened, and get the information from first-hand sources.
 - **Ask:** What is the primary concern here; is it real or perceived?
- 3. Assemble your team.** Get everyone involved talking to each other. This can include your on-the-ground crew, your communications officer, board member, executives and legal department.

- 4. Prioritize your audiences.**
 - **Ask:** Who needs to know what when?
 - **Ask:** Who is the most important audience to keep on our side?
- 5. Develop your plan with next steps, messages, messengers, outreach and evaluation.**

Determine your immediate next steps

- **Ask:** How do you want to respond--directly, refer to another, respond indirectly, ignore, etc.?

Develop your message – and practice using it

- **Ask:** What's the problem or threat? / What values are at stake? / What's the solution?
- **Ask:** What can and can't be said?

Designate and train messenger(s). Utilize people that can handle difficult questions from reporters.

- **Ask:** Who is the most credible person to speak for us to our key audience?

Determine how your response should be communicated.

- **Ask:** How will increased attention to the issue help or hurt our cause?
- **Ask:** Do we want a direct response (media interview) or indirect (post information on social media or website)?

- 6. Keep Updated.** Regularly monitor public statements on your issue, and send out updates to your key audiences on an hourly, daily or weekly basis.



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Rules to Live By

RULE #1: BE PREPARED

Consider all the options and think of a list of questions the media or community members may ask of you. Especially in a crisis situation, no one likes to think that things aren't being handled in the right way.

RULE #2: TELL THE TRUTH

Never ignore the situation, be evasive, or deny involvement. You already know that, and probably never do that, but just a cautionary reminder – remember Bill Clinton and “I never had sexual relations with that woman”? We rest our case.

RULE #3: STAY ON MESSAGE

Communicating during a crisis is about demonstrating responsiveness and taking responsibility - but it is also an opportunity to get your message out. Here's a tip to help stay on message: Keep your talking points memo next to the phone – or if you are at a public meeting, carry them with you on a 3x5 card and sneak a glance before the Q&A session.

RULE #4: CONTROL THE FLOW OF INFORMATION

That doesn't mean don't communicate. It means saying the right things at the right time in the right way to the right people.



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