



HOW TO PLAN AND MANAGE CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN A SOCIAL WORLD

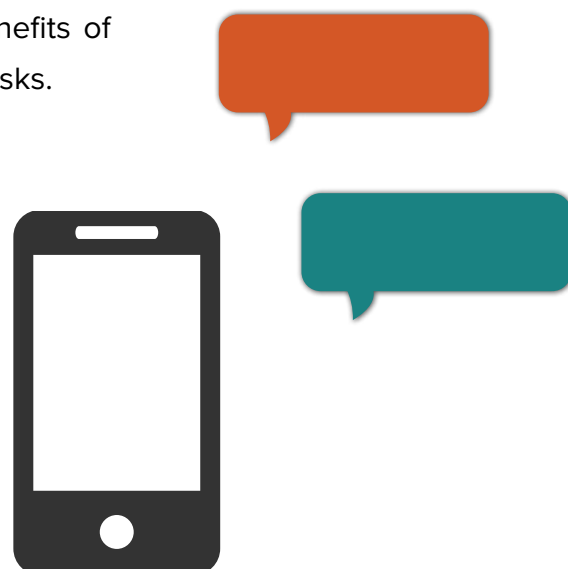
Crisis communication is a critical component of any PR program. But social and mobile have changed how that piece operates. Offline crises spread online and vice versa. The digital divide does not exist.

A press conference or release alone doesn't suffice in today's always connected, on-the-go world where 30 percent of company crises spread internationally within an hour. PR practitioners have to be not only where a crisis is happening, but also where their audiences are. And that means being present off and online

Digital and social are playing an ever-larger role in that presence. The two can instigate and amplify a crisis in a matter of seconds. They can extinguish it just as quickly.

Continuity Insight's annual study, "Crisis Communications 2014: Social Media & Notification Systems," offers insight:

- **Over half** of surveyed respondents (52 percent) say the benefits of social media as a crisis communication toolset outweigh the risks.
- **Nearly 62** percent of respondents plan to use social media to gather information during a crisis, up from 52 percent in 2012.
- **Over half** (58 percent) rate mobile technologies as absolutely vital in carrying out crisis communication plans, up 5 percentage points since 2013.
- **Forty percent** of organizations have a specific strategy for social during a disaster; 60 percent have no such plan.



But the 60 percent isn't your story. Increase effectiveness with crisis communication by building and implementing a plan. Integrate social and mobile into it. You'll soon be shaping the narrative while building brand and engaging stakeholders.



Crisis Communication Plans Are for Everyone

Crises happen to every brand, be it B2B, B2C or nonprofit. There are no exceptions. They can take place anytime, anywhere, online or off.

What is a crisis communication plan and why is it needed? According to Justin Saia, manager of corporate communications at Nissan North America:

“The crisis communications plan is designed to help the company protect the safety and well-being of employees, customers and other stakeholders, as well as the reputation of the company and its brands. The plan establishes a framework for responsive and accurate communication with stakeholders, including employees, communities, media, vendors, suppliers, investors and analysts. It’s intended to complement a broader crisis management plan.” [1]

Some brands weather crises better than others. Learn from their successes. Study their mistakes, too. Knowing what to do and what not to do are both important.

Let’s look at a few examples. Some are shining stars. Others fail to meet the mark. Each is accompanied by a takeaway that can be incorporated into your crisis communications plan and day-to-day social media management.

Review Before Responding

A leading automobile maker faced a more complex issue: a recall of 1.6 million small cars to fix faulty ignition switches. This company went the route of responsibility and transparency. Its CEO spoke frankly with reporters about the issue, pledged to fix the switches, and followed through on that promise.



Takeaway: Natural inclination is often to be defensive in order to protect the brand.

Don’t fire off the first words that come to mind. Cool off. Then, write a response and have an objective party review it before issuing it to the media or other audiences.

Communicate Proactively

Often a crisis breaks before brands have all the information. How can you engage with stakeholders while the story is still unfolding?

The most successful brands at mitigating crises channel their communication through a single spokesperson, usually an executive or other high-ranking employee. Reassuring communication from leadership shows the issue is a priority.



Takeaway: How you convey information is important. Think about spokespeople and communication channels. Which ones will strike the right tone and reassure the audience, even when no new information is available?

Open Lines of Communication

Crises are not the time to shut down your Twitter account. Communicating quickly and engaging with the issue can prevent it from getting worse.

In 2013, CEO of ING Canada Bank (Tangerine) Peter Aceto responded in real time to comments regarding an ad the company ran depicting a man struggling with his taxes who was in apparent distress to promote its tax services. Critics found it disrespectful to those living with mental illness. Aceto's quick apology, removal of the ad, and engagement with the media put the fire out before it began to burn, protecting his brand's reputation.



Takeaway: Listen, act and respond in the open. The appearance of inaction can be more damaging than the initial offense. Take steps to communicate with legitimate detractors and be prepared to speak about it with the media.

Navigating the three stages of a crisis

A crisis communication plan has three parts: pre-crisis, mid-crisis and post-crisis. All three pieces are essential to developing an effective and successful response plan. Common crisis communication strategies are set up in a worksheet format and broken down by scenario.

Pre-Crisis

You can't control how, when or where a crisis happens. You can only control the response. Be proactive and develop a plan while there are no fires to put out. Burson-Marsteller, a global public relations and communications firm, says:

“A company that invests in crisis preparedness is more likely to recover faster—and the cost to the business is less—than those companies that have not prepared.”

1. Conduct a vulnerability audit.

It's hard to prepare for what you don't know. Breeanna Straessle, director of corporate communication at Cision, says to brainstorm “everything that can go wrong. You need to first understand the universe of possibilities in order to know what to plan for.” [2]

When conducting the audit, determine the risk level of each scenario and the escalation points, Straessle adds. Identify what is preventable, and take steps to avoid those situations.



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2. Pick battles wisely.

Not every negative review, tweet or failed press conference is a crisis. Which ones are? Sit down with stakeholders and categorize scenarios as *issues* or *crises*. An issue causes waves, but has no long-term impact on a brand. A crisis can permanently damage your brand and potentially lead to profit loss. Understanding the difference will lead to a stronger plan and a better allocation of resources when or if a crisis does occur.

3. Know where audiences are and how to reach them.

Always be where the crisis is taking place, but don't forget to share information in strategic locations, i.e. the places where your audiences are. The existing community is essential to getting your message to spread.

4. Identify key spokespeople.

Identify team members with the right skills. Some people are great on social or can glad-hand a crowd but freeze during a one-on-one interview. That's fine, but know that upfront. Have someone else run point for interviews.



5. Prepare holding statements.

Holding statements are prepared responses for a variety of emergencies that can be used when Twitter blows up at 2 a.m., for example. They're part of any crisis communication plan, but they're especially important with social—you need to be able to respond quickly, no matter the time of day.

Releasing a holding statement is almost always the first step in any crisis communication situation, so preparing responses during the planning phase is essential. With this strategy, you'll only need to tweak your statement when a crisis hits.

Holding statements should be short and to the point. State that the company is aware of the issue and looking into it. Add that you will provide another update at a specific time.

6. Provide ongoing training.

Offer training for both social and traditional media crises. Each platform has nuances, and it's good to brush up skills regularly. Says John Bernstein of Bernstein Crisis Management:

“Spokesperson training teaches you to be prepared, to be ready to respond in a way that optimizes the response of all stakeholders.”

7. Simulate crises.

Simulations are fire drills. They show just how prepared you are to handle an incident. It can be helpful to work with an external vendor like Polpeo, Firebell, and Social Simulator; their entire job is to simulate brand crises and help corporations plan for, manage and recover from them.



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8. Keep a pulse on public sentiment.

Use social media listening tools like [Cision Social Edition](#). Set up alerts. And keep an eye on analytics and other metrics. Numbers can indicate something is about to bubble to the surface before it actually does.

Mid-Crisis

The most important rule: don't panic. While you need to move quickly, you don't have to respond in the next three seconds.

Step away from the desktop or mobile phone. Collect your thoughts. Revisit the plan and prepared responses. Now, respond.

When a crisis hits, make sure to have a checklist. It's your guidepost. Immediately stop all marketing and promotions, and begin monitoring everything.

Start where the fire is happening. If the crisis is happening on Twitter, focus on Twitter. Link to a published statement there, then share the message elsewhere. Respond even if all the facts aren't known. Noelle Hawton, contributing writer for The Business Journal, says:

“Lack of communication allows others to shape the story and can make the brand seem disengaged, unprepared and uncaring.”

Silence in the face of a developing crisis is not your friend.

1. Provide a place to vent.

If you can, control where communication happens. People need a place to vent, but you need to be able to monitor the conversation and respond.

2. Use plain English.

You're after credibility. Normal, everyday speech is credible. Corporate speak is not.

3. Adapt existing communication.

You don't need to reinvent the wheel every time a crisis happens. Use the holding statements. Customize them for the situation at hand. Add other responses, e.g. Instagram or Snapchat, as needed.

Messages need to be tailored for the audience and platform to have the greatest effect.



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4. Keep the message simple.

You should have, at most, three main messages, Bernstein, who recommended crisis training earlier, says:

“*[Your] team already knows, categorically, what type of information its stakeholders are looking for. What should those stakeholders know about this crisis? Keep it simple.*”

The simpler the message is, the better. It's less likely to be misunderstood and more likely to gain a public groundswell of support.

5. Integrate the message across all channels.

The implementation ought to change according to the platform, but the message itself should align with the brand narrative.



6. Take the crisis offline.

Traditional modes of communication are still valuable. If a press conference or interview is the best and fastest way to resolve a crisis, do it.

7. Monitor impact.

Messaging should not be left to its own devices during a crisis. Monitor and measure its impact.

Which messages resonate? Which ones cause additional complaints? Increase one and decrease the other.

Test other channels and platforms as necessary. By studying the nuances of stakeholder reaction with human analysts like the Cision Global Insights team, companies can refine a message strategy in real time.



Post-Crisis

Post-crisis practices are just as important as the ones that happen before and during a crisis. They keep you on alert; identify what did and didn't work; and lead to informed best practices and increased community engagement and loyalty.



1. Follow words with action.

Words by themselves read as damage control.

A good deed or change in operations done in private doesn't do any good for brand recovery when the crisis is public. Words and deeds go hand-in-hand. Share them both, and share them often.

2. Review the metrics.

PR is a data-driven business. Let the numbers tell the story, not gut feelings. Use them when reporting outcomes to stakeholders. Also use them to inform updates to the crisis communication plan and overarching PR program.

3. Regularly review the response plan.

According to Saia, "A crisis communications plan is only beneficial when it is treated as a fluid document that is actively maintained, frequently reviewed, and rehearsed. [...] Continuous benchmarking is an essential tool to stay on top of industry best practices and new strategies." [3]

Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your communication plan after a crisis to prepare for the next one.

4. Share the updated plan.

A revised plan is only of benefit when it's shared. Saia advises companies to keep an updated digital copy on the company intranet and provide a hard copy to all communication personnel. The digital version is of no use when the Internet fails or other technology issues arise.

Overcome PR Crises With Prep and Planning

Communication crises can happen to anyone—even you. Fortunately, you can prepare for them. Create a plan. Identify key personnel. Write a script that can be used for a variety of situations. Know where your audiences are and the best ways to reach them.

Use all the communication tools at your disposal to prevent, manage and recover from crises. When you do, your brand won't just survive a crisis. It'll thrive.

[1] Saia, Justin. Interview. 18 May 2015.

[2] Straessle, Breeanna. Interview. 15 May 2015.

[3] Saia, Justin. Interview. 18 May 2015.

