

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST FOR MARKETERS

There's never going to be a good time for a crisis to hit your company. Has your organization considered potential scenarios of 'what ifs' when it comes to a crisis? Perhaps it's a customer service issue making noise on social media, a false accusation or a data breach that could pose a threat. If a brand crisis hits, it's imperative that those within your organization know how to communicate effectively, to whom and when.

The following checklist outlines what to do in advance of a crisis, ensuring your organization can skillfully and effectively navigate potentially rocky territory.



Does your company have a crisis communications plan? To ensure your brand's reputation will remain intact should the unfathomable occur, no company, big or small, should be caught off guard without a plan that guides a response team through crisis management.



Have you reviewed your crisis plan recently? Things change rapidly. A plan written a year ago will need a good hard look to ensure vulnerabilities are identified and all data is correct so when it has to be put into action, communications are not stalled. We recommend revisiting your plan during regularly scheduled crisis team meetings throughout the year to ensure all plan components are accurate.



Do you have a crisis communications team? And, are they up to speed? As the saying goes, "You can't win if nobody catches the ball. You're only as good as the team you have behind you." Does your team understand their responsibilities? And, are they committed to being ready to fulfill those responsibilities during a critical time? Also, do you have a designated crisis team lead to ensure all plans are ushered from the very beginning to closure? The best-laid plans fail when there isn't a captain steering the ship. Don't hesitate to test your crisis team throughout the year by holding mock drills to see what kind of grade they'd receive amid a crisis. After a drill (or a real crisis), always hold a post-mortem with the crisis team to document results, review policies and improve performance.



Do you have a designated spokesperson or spokespeople? Who from your executive team will serve as the key spokesperson during a crisis? Most companies automatically choose their CEO as their spokesperson, but it's important that your designated representative has the right skills, personality and demeanor to serve as the face of the company. After all, who you choose to communicate during a crisis tells the public a lot about how you're handling it. You'll also want to make sure that they have been media trained, with refresher exercises held throughout the year.



Are you planning ahead? Pre-planning is critical to mitigating, and sometimes preventing, crises. Gather your crisis team, as well as specific subject matter experts (SMEs), to look for potential vulnerabilities/threats (or other potential sources of crises), evaluate the risks, and put plans in place to counteract these risks. Scenarios to consider:

- Customer issues
- Natural disasters
- Technical breakdowns
- Organizational misdeeds
- Rumors
- Workplace accidents or violence
- Legal, cultural, environmental and political changes



Are you positioning your company as a thought leader? Facing a crisis for any company can be tough, but it's especially challenging if no one knows who you are. After all, credibility is your most important asset for building trust with your current/future customers, the general public, employees and the media. This can be done through effective public relations programs aimed at:

- Developing and publishing thought leadership content (blogs, speaking engagements, awards, white papers, case studies).
- Securing positive media coverage on your company.
- Establishing a digital/social strategy to share your brand's vision and values. Join the conversation and offer solutions that solve problems to industry and/or community issues.



Do you have the right tools and people in place? Setting up the right tools ahead of time, can really prevent headaches during a crisis. Consider the assets you'll need for getting your story out:

- **Social media** – Social media has changed how information is spread, and therefore, it has changed crisis management not only for communicating news, but for listening. Does your company monitor social media channels to see what is being said about your company? If so, who's responsible for keeping their eye on the chatter? And, most importantly, do they know the immediate steps to take, and who to contact, when they notice negative comments or posts? And who is responsible for how to respond on social media?

- **Website** – It's important to ensure you have a website point person who is not only fully versed with how to make changes to your site, but who is also committed to being available at the drop of the hat to make updates (i.e. messages from your CEO) during a crisis.
- **Video** – You're not going to think about this while in the middle of an event, but having a videographer on hand who can record crisis messages immediately will prove invaluable. No one has time during a crisis to find a vendor to record a video within an hour, so planning ahead could prevent the added stress.
- **eNewsletter** – Are your email lists up to date? Would you be able to quickly reach customers with important messages and updates throughout a crisis?
- **Customer Service/Sales Teams** – Your customer service representatives and sales teams are on the front line, and oftentimes, will be the first to hear about a potential issue. Now is the time to train them on what to look for and ensure they know they need to communicate any potential issues immediately and to whom. It's also important to let them know that you have experts on hand to deal with any issues, and that they should pass these issues on to them, and not try to handle themselves.



Have you developed critical paths, or scenarios, for potential crises, and have you crafted template responses? Crises come in all shapes and sizes – from natural disasters to technical issues, such as data breaches. There are certainly several scenarios relevant to your company and industry that you know could have detrimental effects. Map out these scenarios by threat level – green (contained within your company), yellow (spread past your company walls, either locally or regionally), and red (national attention and widespread social coverage). You'll also want to include your key audiences (customers, employees, partners, investors, the media) and determine how and with what tools you'll rely on to respond. Finally, develop "standby" statements for each scenario and audience so that you'll have a running start should a crisis occur.



Have you empowered your employees to speak up? Many a crisis has spiraled out of control because someone sat on it and didn't communicate it to the right people. It's imperative that you empower your employees to speak up and share any potential risks that they may see or hear from your customers. And, again, they also need to know who to go to.



And, finally, are you communicating your plans with your key stakeholders? Do your employees, board members, partners, etc. know that you have firm plans in place, and that you're ready should the unthinkable occur? Nothing makes employees or board members more uncomfortable than reading about a major crisis and thinking to themselves, "Hmmm, I wonder how we would handle something like that? Do we even have a plan if it did happen? We do have a plan, right? RIGHT??"

Henry Kissinger once said, "There cannot be a crisis today. My schedule is already full." We're pretty certain that applies to today's corporate leaders. Preparation is key, and remember -- how you handle the challenge will determine your future.

Keep calm, carry on, and get to planning. Interested in learning more about a crisis communications plan for your organization?

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