

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS.

Checklist 268

» INTRODUCTION

Whatever form a crisis takes, bad news has a tendency to travel incredibly fast; even more so today with the advent of social media. Rumour and speculation can abound, exaggerating the crisis and distorting the truth, so it's essential to be fully prepared to put your side of the story across. There will be little time to think once a crisis hits, but having a crisis communications plan in place before the crisis arises will put you in a better position to offer enquirers an immediate response.

Formulating a communications strategy for the event of a crisis, should form part of, and be integrated with an organisation's overall business continuity planning activities (See Related checklists below). Being properly prepared will make it easier for you to correct any misleading impressions which have been given and to reassure those affected that you have plans in place to deal with the situation effectively. This could help to save, or at least minimise damage to your company's operations and reputation, and to retain customer loyalty during the ensuing period of disturbance.

You will need to communicate clearly with stakeholders, outlining what the problem is and how you intend to resolve it. The crisis will be handled publically, especially if the media takes an active interest, so you must endeavour to avoid bad publicity by reassuring those concerned that you have the situation under control. The appointment of a dedicated spokesperson will ensure that the voice of the organisation can be heard by external audiences, but it is also vital to ensure that internal communication is coherent and consistent.

This checklist outlines how to prepare a crisis communications strategy, and the steps to take when delivering your message, particularly in the event of a major crisis, which cannot be dealt with privately without attracting media attention.

» DEFINITION

A crisis is any event or situation which has a negative impact on an organisation. Communicating with external and internal audiences at a time of crisis may involve the use of a wide range of media including the company intranet and website, the press, TV and radio broadcasts, and social media.

» ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Establish a crisis communications team

The size of the team will naturally depend on the size of the organisation. In a large company it should consist of senior managers representing the various organisational divisions, as well as those normally responsible for public relations such as the press officer. Typically headed by the CEO or Managing Director acting as the chairperson, the team should also include the heads of IT, HR, marketing, finance, operations and security/health and safety. It's also important to include someone with knowledge of and responsibility for the legal side of the business. There should also be a dedicated team member with responsibility for keeping records and documenting proceedings.

Allocate responsibilities in the event of a crisis; making sure that members have a full understanding of their individual duties and how these fit in with the team as a whole.

2. Appoint a spokesperson

The spokesperson is tasked with communicating the company's message to the public when a crisis breaks. As such, they become the face and voice of the organisation. This is an extremely important role as the public's perception of how a company responds to the crisis can impact significantly upon a firm's reputation. The spokesperson will play a central role in damage limitation. This may be the organisation's head of PR, who will already have experience of dealing with the media and established relationships with journalists, broadcasters and bloggers or a senior person who can speak with authority on behalf of the organisation. Whoever is appointed will need to be adept at public speaking, with the ability to communicate to a wide range of different audiences.

It is also advisable to appoint a deputy spokesperson. Depending on the scale and duration of the crisis, and the level of interest it generates, the deputy can support the spokesperson and stand in for them if necessary. This will help to speed up responses to enquirers.

Brief the spokesperson and the deputy as to what they are likely to be required to communicate and the circumstances in which they will need to do so. Provide appropriate training to ensure they have the skills to deliver the all-important public address calmly and confidently. Make sure everyone within the organisation knows who the spokesperson and the deputy are and make their contact details readily available to internal and external audiences.

3. Consider potential risks

Drawing on Business Impact Analysis and risk assessment activities carried out in the course of wider business continuity planning, consider the most likely and most serious scenarios which will call for focused communication efforts. The team should convene at regular intervals to review risks and potential or imminent crises, so that questions can be raised promptly and dealt with appropriately.

4. Develop a crisis communications plan

Based on the risks identified, draw up a plan outlining the strategy for responses in the event of a crisis arising and the key steps for handling it.

The plans will need to take the following factors into account:

- the nature of the crisis and who or what is the cause of it
- the scope of the crisis and the level of disruption it will cause - can the business continue to operate?
- those who will be affected – employees, customers, shareholders or other groups
- the likely duration of the crisis
- how the media and other stakeholders are likely to respond.

It will need to cover contingencies for:

- how the crisis will be resolved
- who will need to be informed, including emergency services, and public authorities such as those with responsibility for health and safety and the environment
- who will be responsible for handling communications of with the various stakeholders
- which communication channels will be used
- what will need to be communicated.

It should also establish what training is required for spokespersons and other employees and whether additional personnel resources will be needed.

As part of the plan, ensure that a briefing on the company and its operations is available. This should cover matters such as what it does, how long it has been in business, who the senior people are, how many employees it has, etc. Don't automatically assume that everyone knows what your company does. Having a

briefing document ready can be invaluable for providing background information to the media and other interested parties at short notice. Rehearse and revise the plan regularly, making amendments whenever necessary.

5. Make arrangements for a control room

When a crisis occurs it's imperative that the communications team have a private and secure location in which to convene before giving a statement. This should be equipped with appropriate resources: phone lines, broadband connection, telephones, mobile phones, PCs, telephone/video conferencing facilities, a television, a radio and adequate supplies of stationery. Make briefing notes and copies of the crisis communications plan available for everyone involved and plan to provide refreshments/a drinks dispenser for the comfort of the occupants.

If the room is also to act as a media centre for addressing/broadcasting to the public, lighting and sound quality needs to be taken into account. The general appearance of the space should create the right visual effect, so it must look clean, tidy and professional.

6. Keep communication lines open

In the immediate aftermath of a breaking crisis, it is necessary to ensure that the organisation can easily be contacted by those affected. It is vital that adequate facilities and sufficient personnel are available to deal with a potential deluge of phone calls, emails and forum postings. It may be necessary to extend opening hours and/or install a 24/7 telephone hotline, for example. Such courses of action will have implications for staffing and training which should have been agreed as part of the crisis communications plan. Check that all lines of external communication are operational – website links, phone lines, email addresses etc. Ensure all communication channels are regularly monitored and that enquiries are responded to promptly.

7. Identify your audiences

In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to identify the recipients and tailor your responses accordingly. Depending on the scale of the crisis, there may be several groups of stakeholders (as well as non-stakeholders) who need to be informed. Stakeholders could include: a parent company, employees, investors, customers and suppliers. Non-stakeholders may include: the media, regulators/trade associations, local communities, lobby groups/special interest groups, and local and/or central government. It may also be necessary to inform the emergency services if the crisis involves a breach of the law, security or safety. Maintain a database of the key people and their contact details to inform in the event of a crisis. This should be checked and updated on a regular basis by a specified member of the crisis communications team.

8. Don't forget to communicate internally

Your employees need to be kept fully informed about the crisis and its impact on them as well as its broader implications; otherwise rumour, uncertainty and speculation will spread, damaging morale and causing unrest and dissatisfaction. Depending on the circumstances, you may need to give instructions about when and where to report for work, reassurances about employees' jobs or information that will enable them to respond to enquiries and communicate consistently and authoritatively with customers. Be as honest as you can with employees, especially when the outcomes are uncertain; otherwise trust will be undermined.

Provide employees with updates as things progress; preferably face to face. Bear in mind that all internal communications via email or the intranet could at some point end up in the public domain. Ensure that messaging is consistent and professional at all times and that the need for complete confidentiality is made clear to everyone. Internal communications need to be handled effectively in order to ensure the consistency of external messaging.

9. Formulate your response

When a crisis breaks the spokesperson will be required to make a statement. Appropriate messaging is crucial to ensure your organisation presents an accurate account of the situation. The message should provide answers to the Who? Why? Where? What? When and How? Be consistent in your responses to

these questions. Tailor the message to suit different audiences and what they need to know. For example, customers will want to know when to expect the resumption of deliveries in the event of delays and disruptions. Keep the messages simple and short, leaving no room for misunderstandings so that audiences get the gist of your communication easily. The messages must be truthful and sincere in order to be credible. Don't hesitate to make an apology if it is warranted but endeavour to deliver a positive message and demonstrate that you are in control of the situation. At the same time be careful not to make unrealistic promises which you will be unable to keep and don't pretend that you have all the answers if the facts have not yet been established.

The tone of the message and its immediacy will influence the communication channels chosen for its delivery. Channels include: media interviews, press releases, social media, email, and telephone. Decide which is the most appropriate for your purpose; taking into account the audience being addressed.

10. Communicate with the media

Your spokesperson will be required to communicate with the media as part of their public role. Journalists could be representing regional or national press, TV or radio. It's essential to put your side of the story across clearly to avoid unnecessary speculation. Communicate promptly as soon as the crisis breaks. Keep the press informed at all times and always be seen to cooperate. Be proactive in instigating contact so that you aren't caught off guard. Provide usable quotes and be mindful of journalistic deadlines. Share information generously. Return calls promptly and be available for comment. The more cooperative you are, the easier it will be to keep the media on your side.

When speaking to the media, especially in broadcast interviews, remember that body language and attitude convey just as much as the spoken word. Spokespersons need to present themselves well and stay in control of the situation. They need to keep poised; they should be assertive without being aggressive, respond firmly but politely to criticism or provocation, and avoid coming across as defensive or evasive, as this will only fuel speculation. It should be decided in advance what subjects they will not allow themselves to be drawn into (e.g. profits, punishments, compensation) and they must resist the pressure to make commitments the company may be unable to keep. Finally, they should communicate openly and honestly and resist the temptation to lie - this is liable to cause more serious problems in the future. Our checklist on Preparing for a media interview gives further information (See Related checklists below).

11. Identify third party endorsers

In times of crisis it's invaluable to get others to speak well of your organisation. Satisfied customers, suppliers, former employees or trade associations are just some of the third party endorsers you may wish to enlist. Endorsers who can shine a positive light on your company can be particularly helpful if the media appear to be against you. As well as offering positive support to your company, endorsers can validate what the organisation does and how it operates. They can help to circulate and communicate information which is accurate and reliable to those who are seeking a 'scoop'.

12. Provide employee training

In order to ensure staff handle things in an appropriate manner they need the right training. Training is essential in all areas of the business but especially for those on the front line who will be fielding calls and emails and potentially having face-to-face exchanges with affected parties. Front line employees are also often the most vulnerable to journalists looking for a story.

Ensure employees know what to do in the event of a crisis and have the necessary skills to deal with irate customers or inquisitive outsiders. To ensure consistent messaging to all external enquirers, draft a script that can be used for all verbal and written communications. Ensure that employees know whom to pass enquiries on to and impress upon them that they must not be drawn into giving any comments themselves. Employee training should also incorporate awareness of the crisis communications plan and highlight who is responsible for what.

13. Keep communicating after the crisis

It's important to keep the lines of communication open in order to restore order as well as reputation. Go

back to the external parties on your contact list and update them appropriately – anyone who has been affected will be looking for reassurance that the situation won't be repeated. Thank those who helped to resolve the crisis as well as those whom gave loyal support to the business during this troubled period.

Analyse how well the communications plan worked in practice; highlighting lessons learned and any improvements that could be made. Assess how well external and internal audiences were kept informed. Talk to your employees and seek their feedback too. Frontline employees are often the first to notice a change in customer attitudes so their opinions are paramount.

» MANAGERS SHOULD AVOID

- › being ill-prepared
- › failing to train employees
- › appointing an inexperienced spokesperson
- › failing to communicate in a timely manner
- › failing to engage with the media.

» NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- › Unit EC4 Communicate information and knowledge
- › Unit BB3 Develop, maintain and evaluate business continuity plans and arrangements.

» ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

A manager's guide to crisis management, Johnathan Bernstein and Bruce Bonafede
McGraw-Hill, 2011 (See chapters 6, 7 and 9 in particular.)
This book is available as an [e-book](#).

New strategies for reputation management: gaining control of issues, crises and corporate social responsibility, Andrew Griffin
Kogan Page, 2008

Managing a crisis: a practical guide, Tom Curtin, Daniel Hayman and Naomi Husein
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005

Managing communications in a crisis, Peter Ruff and Khalid Aziz
Gower, 2003

These books are available for loan to members from the CMI Library. [Click here](#) for more information.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Coping with the media in a crisis: succeeding where BP and Toyota have failed, Tom Maddocks
Strategic Direction, June 2013, vol. 29 no. 6, pp3-4

Leadership communications: planning for the desired reaction, Helio Fred Garcia
Strategy and Leadership, 2012, vol. 40 no. 6, pp42-45

This is a selection of journal articles available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/library

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