



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Step One. Planning	5
<i>It Couldn't Happen to Me</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Why and What You Need to Plan</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Developing a Crisis Communications Action Plan</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Other Communication Channels</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Testing the Plan</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Continual Refinement</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Practice, Practice, Practice</i>	<i>41</i>
Step Two. The Crisis Communications Team	43
<i>Establishing a Crisis Team</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Selecting the team</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Media Training</i>	<i>63</i>
Step Three. Handling the Crisis.....	65
<i>Taking Stock</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Taking and Logging Calls</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>The Crisis Response</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Working With all the Media</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Reputation Control</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Use Technology</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Communicating with Stakeholders</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Wrapping Up</i>	<i>96</i>
Step Four. How to Handle the Media During the Crisis	99
<i>Media Releases</i>	<i>104</i>
<i>Press Conferences/Briefings</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Press Releases</i>	<i>132</i>
<i>Interview Techniques Radio and Television</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>Summary – The Rules Of The Game</i>	<i>169</i>
Step Five. Post Crisis Needs	183
<i>Resolution</i>	<i>183</i>
<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>184</i>
<i>Case Studies</i>	<i>185</i>



**Appendix 1. Example of a Crisis Communication and Emergency Risk
Communication Guide 197**

Appendix 2. Human Psychology During a Crisis..... 201



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Successful Crisis Communications and Issues Management



Symbols

Throughout this book you will see a number of icons displayed in the margins. The icons are there to help you as you work through the Five Step process. Each icon acts as an advisory – for instance alerting you to things that you must always do or should never do. The icons used are:



Must Do

This is something that you must always do



No No

This is something you should never do



Tips

Really useful tips



Remember

Points to bear in mind



Checklist

Have you checked off or answered everything on this list?



Successful Crisis Communications and Issues Management



INTRODUCTION

“The worst part of a crisis is being unprepared. By removing the unexpected quality, you are removing that which is most unnerving,” – Professor Jean Lipman-Blumen, Claremont Graduate School’s Executive Management Program, California.

Crises come in all shapes and sizes, but all cause panic because they are so unexpected. By anticipating potential problem areas, identifying solutions and being prepared you instantly remove a lot of the angst. If people know what to do in a crisis, they can get on with performing their designated tasks immediately and, as a team, tackle the problem.



A crisis is anything that occurs unexpectedly which has the capacity to cause damage. This damage can be to reputation, product, consumer confidence, profitability or all of these. Even non-commercial organizations, such as charities and societies can be seriously damaged by an unexpected and unwelcome focus of attention.

Good issues management is about anticipating crises, preventing them whenever possible and, when that is not feasible, coping with them speedily and effectively when they do arise. How you communicate during a crisis is critical. Always remember that forewarned is forearmed and that is half the battle.

Imagine: You are a major manufacturing company producing baby foods. Suddenly, one morning, you are told that some of your product has been tampered with and a blackmail demand received. You have no idea if the threat is true and, if so, how much product is affected or where it might be. What do you do?

Imagine: You are the PR chief of one of the world’s top oil producers and you get a call from your U.S. southeastern regional director to say there has been a deadly explosion aboard a drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico. What do you do?

Imagine: You are a major political figure and a likely presidential candidate in the upcoming election. You get a phone call from a newspaper in your hometown saying they have been approached by a woman who claims you are the father of her child. What do you do?

Imagine: You are a major retailer of wine. Suddenly you get a phone call from a local authority health inspector to say that a bottle of wine sold to a consumer has been handed in because small pieces of glass were found in the bottom. Two days later, a supermarket in another



Successful Crisis Communications and Issues Management

part of the country calls you with a similar story. Tens of thousands of bottles of this particular wine have been distributed to stores throughout the country. What do you do?

Imagine: You are the chair of a national charity. The phone rings in the middle of the night and a journalist asks for your comment on reports that the national treasurer has absconded with all the charity's funds. What do you do?

Imagine: You are the public relations officer for an international chain of luxury hotels. You are awakened by the phone ringing early one morning and a journalist asking questions about a fire at one of your properties in which people have died. It is the first you have heard about it. What would you do?

All of the above scenarios are based on real situations, and all had to be responded to, either publicly or behind the scenes. The purpose of this book is to help you identify potential crises and develop procedures to avoid them or defuse them.



Remember

There are always crises that cannot be prevented, such as an airline disaster or the sudden death of a key corporate figure, but, in almost all cases, potential crises can be identified and plans developed to tackle them and mitigate the impact.

Foolish indeed is the organization that doesn't have a crisis communications plan on the basis that "it won't happen to us." Every company and organization could one day find themselves facing a crisis, and how it is handled and how you communicate in the first minutes and hours is crucial. Crisis planning is neither difficult, nor expensive to implement and the advantages far outweigh any minor inconveniences and costs. Bad publicity in the event of a crisis could seriously damage your company or organization and destroy your reputation and credibility. Knowing how to react – having prepared in advance – will help you survive.

Any situation if not managed successfully, can develop into a crisis. BUT a crisis can usually be controlled, or averted, if it has been anticipated and everyone knows what to do as soon as it arises. The advantage of crisis planning is that it gives you the opportunity to look thoroughly at the workings of your organization and to develop "what if" scenarios for every conceivable situation – including worst case examples. Once you have done this risk assessment and identified all potential problem areas, you can begin to develop a plan to mitigate them. This is an absolutely necessary pre-requisite to developing and implementing a crisis communications plan, but it can also have enormous additional benefits as well.

Many companies that have gone down this route have found that while doing their risk assessments they have identified problem areas that needed attention. These issues have ranged from safety concerns on production lines to the way finances were handled by international non-profit organizations. As a result, measures were taken to correct the problems. In many cases

Introduction



this led to greater efficiency which had an immediate effect on the bottom line, and in all cases it removed an at-risk area that could potentially have led to a crisis down the road.

This handbook consists of an easy-to-follow five-step process that covers everything you need to know for successful crisis communications and issues management.

Step One is all about planning – why you need to plan, what you need to plan for and against, how to develop a crisis communications plan and how to practice, practice, practice to make sure it works and is kept constantly up to date.

Step Two focuses on the Crisis Communications Team, how to select team members, allocate responsibilities and provide media training.

Step Three concentrates on how to handle a crisis from the second you are alerted to it until the time it is over and it is safe to resume normal operations.

Step Four is mostly about handling the media but it also focuses on all the other stakeholders, both internal and external, that need to be kept informed if you want to successfully manage the crisis.

Step Five completes the circle. The crisis is over, but you now have to sit down and evaluate how things went. What worked, what didn't work, what could be improved on? This is the time to review your crisis planning and revise and update as necessary so that, heaven forbid, the next time it is needed it will be ready.



Successful Crisis Communications and Issues Management



STEP ONE. PLANNING

Some Definitions

Crisis Communication: Crisis communication can be defined in two ways and, therefore, can cause some confusion for a practitioner looking for expert training and counsel. Today, the term is most often used to describe an organization facing a crisis and the need to communicate about that crisis to stakeholders and the public. Typically, a crisis is an event that occurs unexpectedly, may not be in the organization's control, and may cause harm to the organization's good reputation or viability. An example of an organization facing a crisis is the occurrence of a mass shooting of employees by a disgruntled employee. In most instances, the organization is facing some legal or moral culpability for the crisis (unlike a disaster in which a tornado wipes out the production plant), and stakeholders and the public are judging the organization's response to the crisis.

A simple definition of crisis communication separates the judgment or reputation factors in the communication and deals primarily with factual communication by an involved organization to its stakeholders and the public. Crisis communication could simply be the effort by community leaders to inform the public that, by law, they must evacuate in advance of a hurricane. In this definition, the organization is not being overtly judged as a possible participant in the creation of the disaster, and the information is empirically sound, so the individual can judge its veracity without the help of an expert.

The underlying thread in crisis communication is that the communicating organization is experiencing an unexpected crisis and must respond. Crisis also implies lack of control by the involved organization in the timing of the crisis event.

Communicator: Participant

Time Pressure: Urgent and unexpected

Message Purpose: Explain and persuade

Issues Management Communication: Issues management communication is similar to crisis communication; however, the organization has the luxury of foreknowledge of the impending crisis and the opportunity, to some extent, to choose the timing of its revelation to stakeholders and the public and reveal the organization's plan to resolve the issue. Again, the organization is central to the event.



Successful Crisis Communications and Issues Management

Communicator: Participant

Time Pressure: Anticipated; timing somewhat in control of the communicator

Message Purpose: Persuade and explain

Risk Communication: Through risk communication, the communicator hopes to provide the receiver with information about the expected type (good or bad) and magnitude (weak or strong) of an outcome from a behavior or exposure. Typically, it is a discussion about an adverse outcome and the probability of that outcome occurring. In some health instances, risk communication has been employed to help an individual make a choice about whether or not to undergo a medical treatment, continue to live next to a nuclear power plant, pass on genetic risks, or elect to vaccinate a healthy baby against whooping cough. In some cases, risk communication is used to help individuals adjust to the knowledge that something that has already occurred, such as an exposure to harmful carcinogens, may put them at greater risk for a negative health outcome, such as cancer, in the future. Risk communication would prepare people for that possibility and, if warranted, give them appropriate steps to monitor for the health risk, such as regular cancer screening.

Communicator: Expert that did not participate in the event and is neutral regarding the outcome

Time Pressure: Anticipated communication with little or no time pressure

Message Purpose: Empower decision-making

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: Crisis and emergency risk communication encompasses the urgency of disaster communication with the need to communicate risks and benefits to stakeholders and the public. Crisis and emergency risk communication differs from crisis communication in that the communicator is not perceived as a participant in the crisis or disaster, except as an agent to resolve the crisis or emergency. Crisis and emergency risk communication is the effort by experts to provide information to allow an individual, stakeholder, or an entire community, to make the best possible decisions about their well-being within nearly impossible time constraints, and help people ultimately to accept the imperfect nature of choices during the crisis. Again using the health analogy, this is the communication that goes on in emergency rooms, not doctors' offices. Crisis and emergency risk communication also differs from risk communication in that a decision must be made within a narrow time constraint, the decision may be irreversible, the outcome of the decision may be uncertain, and the decision may need to be made with imperfect or incomplete information. Crisis and emergency risk communication represents an expert opinion provided in the hope that it benefits its receivers and advances a behavior or an action that allows for rapid and efficient recovery from the event.

Communicator: Expert who is a post-event participant invested in the outcome