

Guide to Effective Crisis Communication:

Key considerations in
developing a sound crisis
communication plan



The crisis communication challenge:

When companies are in the midst of a crisis, they're juggling a collection of critical communications issues—from upset customers to negative media coverage, to getting the word out to employees, shareholders and stakeholders, often under incredible time pressures and high stress.

A fundamental skill of crisis communication is communicating the right information to the right people at the right time. Just ask the leaders at Keysight Technologies, Inc, a U.S. company that manufactures electronics test and measurement equipment and software, that featured in a November 2017 Harvard Business Review study on crisis management. When a large wildfire broke out at 10 p.m. in October 2017 near Santa Rosa, California, Keysight's headquarters and many employees' homes were in the mandatory evacuation zone.

Keysight Technologies hit a number of crisis communications bullseyes in its response. Executives spent the night calling employees to ensure their safety while coping with unreliable mobile phone and internet service. Next, the company provided sales teams with targeted customer communications and met in-person with key customers to reassure them they'd receive their orders on time. Customers soon informed Keysight that its competitors had been in touch, claiming Keysight wouldn't be able to deliver and offering to fill in any gaps. Keysight responded by again reassuring customers and asking the competitors' CEOs to stop or it would publicize the predatory behavior¹.



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The three critical factors – Speed, Accuracy, Consistency (SAC)

No matter the event, crisis communications—the purpose of which is to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis, with the goal of reducing its overall impact—need speed, accuracy, and consistency¹.



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Communicating quickly in response to a crisis allows an organization's leaders to tell the story from their perspective rather than allowing someone else, such as an unhappy customer, to control the public narrative. And, speed is essential in crises that involve public safety.

Accuracy also helps keep all stakeholders safe, and it's critical to meet your duty of care obligations. Communicating accurately enhances the public's perception of your organization. Inaccurate communication, by contrast, can make your organization appear out of control during a crisis and creates the risk that a third party will take over the public narrative.

Consistency reinforces your ability to maintain control of the narrative. Issuing corrections can confuse the public and lead them to conclude your organization is incompetent. Consistency goes beyond messaging and includes frequency. Most audiences need to engage with a message more than once, potentially several times, to fully understand the situation and how they need to respond.

Without all three elements of SAC, crisis communications could damage a business's reputation, potentially permanently. But SAC in crisis communications isn't readily achieved in practice.

Room for improvement?

In fact, organizations that have experienced a crisis within the last two years wish they had communicated better, according to Deloitte's study, "Stronger, fitter, better: Crisis management for the resilient enterprise," which found that:

17% would communicate more effectively with employees.

14% would communicate more effectively with business partners.

8% would communicate more effectively with customers.

4% would communicate more effectively with suppliers.

Planning is key to achieving all these goals. Indeed, the same study found that 15 percent would execute a timelier and more robust communications plan. Yet, according to another study, conducted by Nasdaq Public Relations Services, nearly half of companies either don't have a crisis communications plan at all or are unsure whether they do. Only half of companies feel adequately prepared to effectively manage crises, and more than half do not role-play crisis scenariosⁱⁱⁱ.



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and more than **1/2** do not role-play crisis scenarios.

Why develop a crisis communications plan?

Crisis communication planning is easy to put off, especially if it seems a crisis won't affect your organization. But chances are a crisis is coming: according to the Deloitte survey, "80 percent of organizations worldwide have had to mobilize their crisis management teams at least once in the last two years."

A plan for communicating during an organizational crisis saves time because you're focused on execution, not caught up in deciding what to do. You can also address the root cause of the crisis more quickly and protect your organization's reputation and business value. And, you ensure all relevant parties are communicating with each other seamlessly.



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The essence of a good crisis communication plan

So, how do you communicate effectively during a crisis? We've put together a set of best practices to make planning easier.

1 Know your risk and response/mitigation strategy

Perform a risk assessment to determine current and future risks. Include those you can anticipate—severe storms, or floods, for example—and those you can't, such as getting hacked^{iv}. Look beyond risks related to cybersecurity and physical safety and think about risks related to human resources, the economy, workplace violence, and reputation, such as layoffs or social media posts. For more on risk assessment, see our Getting Started Guide to Crisis Management.

For each key risk, determine the goal of your organization's response. For example, for a product recall, your initial focus will be on notifying affected customers, the general public, and relevant regulatory agencies. You'll also want to protect your reputation by making it clear you understand the cause of the problem and are taking steps to prevent anything similar from happening again. For a natural disaster, your goal will be protecting employees, your business, and responding to customer questions.

2 Know and prioritize your stakeholders

Define each of your stakeholder groups and analyze how they would be affected by each key risk. A crisis can have very different effects on each group, as Keysight learned. Its local employees were in potential danger; its customers were worried about getting their orders on time. In addition to employees and customers, other stakeholder groups include creditors, regulators, local community members, business partners, politicians, activists, and competitors. Consider how some crises may disproportionately affect certain stakeholders, including underrepresented groups, such as minority communities. And remember that some groups may not become stakeholders until after the crisis hits, so prepare for that too. For example, your organization may not typically interact with a federal police agency but if you're a victim of a cyber-attack in the U.S., the FBI will investigate and become a key stakeholder.

Develop strong, positive working relationships with all stakeholders—not during a crisis but well before. During most crises, you'll need to work with members of the local or national media, who may want to speak with people throughout your organization. The more familiar journalists are with what your business does and who its key employees are, the faster you'll be able to start talking about what's important to your organization. Organizations that share your values, such as trade and professional associations, can also provide support during a crisis even though they may not be direct stakeholders^v. Joining and contributing to these groups now can prove valuable when you need their support.

3 Tell your story, but don't forget to use your ears

Listen. Though it's important to tell your organization's side of the story, doing so without also listening to stakeholders could raise questions about whether you're spinning the story rather than telling the whole truth. Listening to your stakeholders may also reveal concerns you weren't aware of and that you need to address^{vi}. Furthermore, when you listen first-hand to stakeholders talk about what matters to them, you can better understand the impacts of the crisis on their lives and engage in a dialogue about how to improve.

4 Get the basics right—remember SAC

Plan for SAC so you can communicate early and often with everyone affected. To ensure speed, revisit your stakeholder analysis and think about how you'll contact each group. Employees could be reached by email or text, for example, but the public will need updates from your website, social media, or the news. Plan for accuracy by determining where you keep the information that's relevant to the key risks you've identified. Think about who has access to that information and how they'll share it with all relevant stakeholders. Only portray information as certain if it genuinely is^{vii}. Otherwise, you may have to contradict yourself and appear inconsistent or potentially dishonest.

5 Find the root cause

Consider how you'll identify the root cause of the crisis. This process can take a long time, but without a definitive answer, the public, the media, and other stakeholders will almost certainly speculate about the cause^{viii}. For some crises, the cause will have nothing to do with your organization. Keysight, after all, didn't start the fire near its headquarters. Still, it's important to prepare for those situations where your systems or even your people are at fault.

6 Prepare your communications in advance

Build digital templates and monitor social media. These can be for your company intranet, an external microsite that's dedicated to the crisis, and social media posts. About one third of customers expect a response to a routine customer service request sent on social media within just thirty minutes^x. During a crisis, they're likely to expect a much faster response, even if it's not personalized. But more than a third of organizations still rely on manual social media searches rather than using a monitoring platform, and 10 percent don't proactively monitor^x. Include in your crisis communications plan how you can use features on the major platforms that are especially useful during a crisis, such as pinned Tweets and private messaging.

7 Prepare leaders with regular media training

Even with the rise of social media, the traditional media remains an essential part of any crisis communication plan. However, only about a quarter of CEOs and spokespersons receive media training annually^{xi}. Without practice answering tough questions, executives may send inconsistent messages or act in a way the public perceives as unsympathetic.

8 Practice so you'll be perfect

Review and practice your plan at least once per year. Practice keeps the plan fresh in employees' minds, trains new employees, and can reveal potential areas for improvement. As you review, think about how your business and its systems have changed in the last year so you can update your plan accordingly.

9 Make time for lessons learned

Include a post-crisis review in your plan. Take the time to analyze how well you executed on your plan and how well the plan itself met your needs. For example, were there risks you hadn't identified that you need to prepare for now, before the next crisis strikes? Also consider how well your systems did—or didn't—perform. Do they need an upgrade or replacement?

Conclusion

As you plan, remember that a crisis communications plan is not a step-by-step prescription to handling every type of crisis. Nor is it set in stone. Rather, it's a valuable guide that helps save time and reduce stress, one that you revise as your organization changes.

Knowing your risks and understanding your stakeholders will help you execute all three elements of SAC. Preparation and practice will ensure you identify any potential communications obstacles before crisis strikes. And reflection will help you improve both your operations and the tools you use to support them.

Finally, stay focused on the plan's ultimate goal: to reduce the impact of the crisis. That helps keep everyone safe, preserve your organization's reputation, and set the stage for recovery. As Keysight learned during the wildfire, "in a large-scale crisis, it's how you react to its real-time situations that determines the speed at which you can begin to rebuild."



Citations

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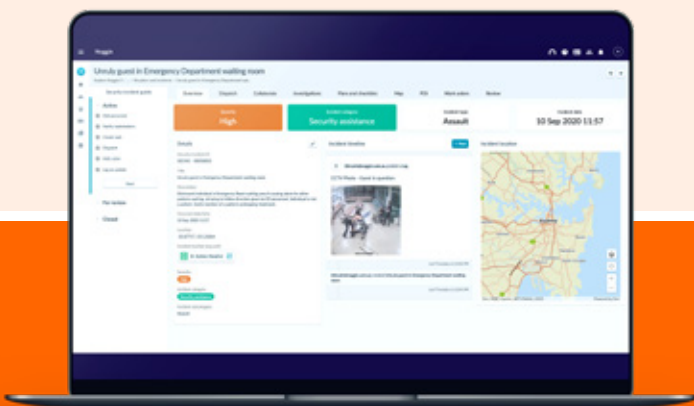
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