

10 Things to Know About Crisis Communications

1. What is crisis communications?

- Crisis communications is clearly defining potential crises, risks or situations associated with an organization's products and/or activities, creating responses to each crisis to address the issue to the public in order to minimize the damage.

2. Who needs crisis communications?

- Every organization needs a crisis communications plan—companies offering products or services, non-profit organizations, governmental departments, even places of worship.

Eventually, an event or situation will arise that will demand a company has an organized plan to address the situation, and provide communication to the public before, during and after the event.

3. Why would you need to provide communication *before* a crisis event?

- The communication that comes before a crisis event is all in the planning. Every organization or company needs a plan, created in advance, of how to respond and manage the risks connected to the event.

4. What does a crisis communication plan look like?

- A crisis communication plan will have communication policies established beforehand, so when a crisis occurs, no time is wasted in trying to figure out what to do. The plan will ideally be created by the company's leadership team and led by a key person or team to make sure the plan is implemented.

5. What is the first the step to creating a plan?

- First, anticipate every possible crisis for your organization. What happens if a product fails? Or worse, if a product causes a death or serious injury? Example: the braking system malfunction on the Toyota Prius in 2010, or the Tylenol poisonings in 1982. A crisis can be caused by a natural event, like Hurricane Katrina and its effect on the population in Louisiana in 2005. Other events could include a political uprising, the moral failure of a leader in a faith-based organization or house of worship, pandemics—global or isolated (Covid-19).
- Group the potential events into categories: weather-related, crisis events (a fire in the factory or an explosion on site), events involving third parties (live shooter), events involving people in the company. Once the general categories are defined, create a plan of response. First steps for any general category will often be the same.

6. What are key next steps?

- Have a press release and a defined distribution channel.
- Designate a spokesperson who can speak publicly about the event. Make sure they are well-rehearsed and that they stick to the plan. (Many plans have gone down the drain because the spokesperson decided he or she would deviate from the plan. That creates a NEW crisis and the process has to start over again for the crisis communication team.)
- Turn employees into ambassadors. Communicate with the people who work for the organization. Keep them informed so they can give correct information to friends, family, neighbors who look to them for what's going on. Example: An event happens at XYZ, a non-profit organization and you work there. Your neighbor knows that's where you work. Where do you think they'll go for information?
- Do not be tempted to use knee-jerk responses.
- Don't overcommunicate.
- Don't fall victim to wrong thinking that, "if we ignore it, it will go away." That may have been true 30 years ago, but with social media, it events will live on forever.

7. What about social media?

- Social media monitoring requires tracking keywords, hashtags and relevant “chatter” about the company’s brand, product, and people.
- Invest in a social media monitoring service like HootSuite so you can keep an eye on what’s being said on social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. It’s a good idea to check social media once a day, but in a crisis, check it once an hour, or keep a monitoring tool open on your desktop so you can monitor in real time.
- Watch for social media influencers who may be saying positive things. You can consider engaging with them to bump up the positive information. A social media influencer generally has approximately 10,000 followers, but in niche categories, that number can be lower.

8. When should a plan be implemented?

- As fast as possible. It is essential to respond quickly. If there are victims involved (example—someone has been injured or killed as a result of an event), put the victims first and respond with compassion and kindness before launching into the who-what-where-when-why.

9. When should names be used in crisis communications?

- When it’s appropriate, provide names of key leaders who are addressing a situation. Do not provide names of victims unless that information has already been freely disseminated. Even then, mention those names sparingly. Whatever you do, do NOT engage in a blame game.
- If it helps, use the names and/or organizations of experts who can help back up what you are communicating. Make sure to vet the experts thoroughly.

10. What’s the one cardinal rule in crisis communication?

- **Never, ever**, ever say “No comment.” It’s fine to say you are still examining the situation and you will provide information when it is available, but under no circumstances say “No comment” unless you want to ignite social media with accusations that you are covering things up.