

Expecting the Unexpected: Preparing for and Managing Crisis Communications

Despite our best efforts to plan for the future and control outcomes, life happens! And it doesn't always happen when – or how – we would like it to. We often refer to those unanticipated moments as a “crisis,” and almost every organization, large and small, has to deal with a crisis at some point or another. It could be external (a natural disaster puts your volunteers on the ground in peril or threatens the wetlands you've spent years fundraising to protect) or internal (an organizational leader leaves abruptly or scandal erupts).

Handling a crisis well can be an extremely positive turning point for an organization. Fumbling a crisis can be an organization's downfall or can take years to recover from. At M+R Strategic Services (M+R), our Communications Team helps clients design communications plans that anticipate and mitigate potential crisis moments.

Below we've compiled a list of “must-dos” before, during and after a crisis. Don't panic! Take a deep breath and follow these tips. Your staff, advocates and stakeholders will be grateful.

Before

- **Identify Your Crisis Communications Team and Manager.** Your team should include your organization's CEO or board president, someone from your public relations team, the heads of various departments, and legal counsel. Maintain a list of your team's personal phone numbers and email addresses.
- **Define Roles Ahead of Time.** Each person on your Crisis Communications Team should understand what his or her role will be in a crisis. Any designated spokespeople should be trained on how to deal with the media in a crisis moment.
- **Identify and Know Your Stakeholders.** Your stakeholders should receive necessary information during a crisis, and in the right order. Board members, for example, should receive major announcements before the press.
- **Anticipate Trouble.** Brainstorm the most likely events that could create crises for your organization and strategize possible responses to them.
- **Develop a Plan for Rapid Response.** Once you've identified possible crisis situations, write a basic script for each that answers questions that the crisis might raise. Even if your initial response is, “We're aware of the situation, and we'll have more information for you soon,” laying out your plan today will allow you to respond quickly and calmly tomorrow.
- **Know Your Media.** Maintain a list of the media outlets and reporters who are likely to cover the story if your organization is in a crisis. Know reporters' phone numbers and email addresses. Build relationships with reporters *now*, when you are not in a crisis.

Crisis Communications

- ✓ Appoint a Crisis Communications Team.
- ✓ Communicate about the crisis within your organization.
- ✓ Communicate what you know to the public and the media.
- ✓ When it comes to answering questions, be honest about what you don't know!
- ✓ Give updates when you can and stay calm.
- ✓ Learn from experience.

During

- **What's the Crisis?** Take time to get *all* of the information you can about a crisis. Evaluate and implement your Crisis Communications Plan. Is the spokesperson(s) you designated still the best messenger? Do you have everything you need to move forward?
- **Identify Key Messages.** What do you want the public to know? What's necessary for them to know? What isn't? Your Crisis Communications Team should meet frequently to adjust the messaging strategy as the situation becomes public and the tenor changes.
- **Keep Your Team Informed.** As soon as possible, inform your organization internally about a crisis. It is critical for staff at all levels to understand the situation and their roles. Staff should be aware of how to respond if they are approached by the media, friends and family.
- **Seek Legal Counsel.** Almost every major crisis requires legal counsel every step of the way. Have your legal team identify and discuss risks and liabilities and review all press statements before release.
- **Establish A Clear Chain of Command and Feedback Channels.** Your spokesperson(s) should consult with senior leadership and/or your board of directors before every decision regarding the release of information.
- **Don't Hold It In.** Being secretive and reclusive during a time of crisis only inspires suspicion. Word travels fast – it's not realistic to keep crises under wraps. Tell the public and the press as much as you can, as soon as you can. Be cooperative and calm. Give concise updates as details emerge, not when it's convenient.

What Should Be in Your Crisis Communications Kit

- ✓ Contact numbers and email addresses for stakeholders, press, your Crisis Communications Team, and organizational leaders.
- ✓ The chain of command – who to inform about a crisis first, second and third.
- ✓ Fact sheets about the organization.
- ✓ Pre-written scripts that answer questions that are likely to come up in a crisis.

After

- **Take a Step Back.** No matter how effective your Crisis Communications Plan is, you may not be able to control the entire situation or keep some audiences from viewing your organization in a negative light. Let the dust settle.
- **Look Back, Look Ahead.** After a crisis has subsided, gather your Crisis Communications Team and debrief. Talk about how you might have avoided the crisis altogether or dealt with it differently. Solicit the input of critical stakeholders. Take notes and apply what you've learned to the future. Edit your Crisis Communications Plan accordingly.

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