

SUCCESSFUL CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Factors to consider when preparing your business
for a crisis situation

Address

BLASTmedia
11313 USA Parkway
Fishers, IN 46037

Contact

Phone: 317.806.1900
Email: info@blastmedia.com

Online

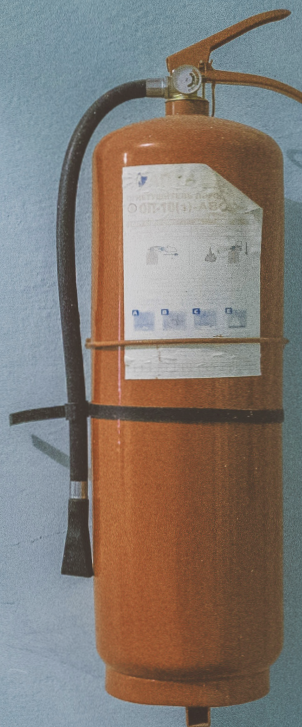
Twitter: [@BLASTmedia](https://twitter.com/BLASTmedia)
Website: www.BLASTmedia.com

Successful Crisis Communication

Being prepared before a crisis situation can help ensure consistent messaging and orderly, proactive distribution of critical (often sensitive) information to stakeholders — including customers, partners, board members, employees and the media. Advanced planning also prepares your organization to respond quickly and with some level of transparency, authenticity and accountability, should a crisis occur.

The advancement in social media and other digital forms of communication has not only altered how information is disseminated, but also our expectation for how brands respond in a crisis. Stakeholders expect communication to be timely, transparent and authentic. They also expect brands to take accountability for their actions and to hold those responsible accountable as well.

This guide to crisis communication breaks down each of these stakeholder expectations and how you can put a plan in place to address them.



Timeliness

When your team only has hours to react, how do you respond? Without pre-planning, it's impossible to act quickly. Indecision, conflicting opinions or a poorly chosen spokesperson can unravel even the best intentions. Protecting your organization begins long before a crisis hits.

Pre-Crisis Checklist

- Who are your most important audiences?
- Do you have the tools to reach them?
- Who is your spokesperson and can they set the right tone?
- Does your website have the flexibility to create a special landing page?
- Are your social media channels places where people are accustomed to getting information? Can you use them to share details in a crisis?
- Do you have a list of the top 20 stakeholders that you must reach in the event of a crisis?
- Who are the internal parties responsible in a crisis?



Though it is rarely possible to address all aspects of a crisis situation instantaneously, a quick response is critical. Following this approach will help you get ready:

- 1 Conduct regular risk assessments** in order to identify potential crisis situations or areas of high risk early. Know the plan for returning to normal business, resolving the issue and ensuring your stakeholders that you have command of the situation.
- 2 Share positive news.** Know your audiences ahead of time and regularly share company news proactively. This helps establish a flow of information, and more importantly, a relationship that may prove beneficial when you need support.
- 3 Know your communications tools.** When a crisis occurs, do you know how to reach employees or customers? Focus on building up your communications channels before a crisis so they are ready to deploy if needed. This includes social media, email and other digital communication tools.
- 4 Establish a clear line of communication between the marketing/communications team and legal counsel.** Making sure that you're on the same page before an incident occurs helps ensure crisis communications response is effective.
- 5 Engage the leadership team** in developing an overall crisis response strategy. This makes it easier to get buy-in if an event is to occur.

Transparency

Maintaining credibility during a crisis event requires at least some level of transparency about the situation at hand. Most organizations fail at this step. The public, and your employees, expect honesty. You may not be aware of all the details surrounding the incident in those early hours, but acknowledging what you do know – and where you will go from there – can go a long way in preserving trust.

- Determine what aspects of an issue can be shared publicly
- Be certain audiences hear the details in an appropriate way and as part of an orchestrated cascade of information
- Assure that comments about the shortcomings are coupled with clear steps for improvement

What to Share During a Crisis

How much information should you share in a crisis? While any response requires careful consideration and input from your crisis and legal team, it typically includes these key components:

- 1 Provide the right information.** Understand the most important issues to your key audiences and determine which facts are most relevant to each group.
- 2 Avoid information overload.** While any crisis can quickly become a significant public issue, particularly if not well responded to initially, most crisis situations will likely never become “public.”
- 3 Assure that any information about the challenges faced is coupled with clear steps to address the situation.** Know the plan for returning to normal business and resolving the issue.

Authenticity

Don't let the media – or the public – own the narrative in a crisis. Sharing your version of the story, both publicly and with various stakeholders, ensures that you have the chance to avoid rumors and misinformation.

A key part of owning the narrative is identifying the correct spokesperson and making sure that they are prepared to project an authentic response.

Spokesperson Readiness Checklist

Your spokesperson should be able to:

- Focus on key messages succinctly and efficiently
- Answer difficult questions
- Avoid getting angry or defensive when pressed for answers
- Show empathy
- Use tonal inflection to support key points
- Demonstrate confidence
- Maintain eye contact
- Deliver news in ways that are appropriate for broadcast, print and online media
- Modify messages and delivery style for internal audiences
- Speak in “sound bites”

When Do You Bring Out the CEO?

In most cases, crisis response requires the highest-level leadership. But does your president or CEO have the experience, training and tools to be an authentic spokesperson during a time of crisis? Any organization faced with allegations of wrongdoing needs an authentic spokesperson. Lacking compassion or empathy, or any emotion at all, can be the quickest way to anger your audience and lose your brand's credibility.

Depending on the crisis, the response can be strengthened by leveraging the CEO as the company spokesperson. The CEO may add a layer of credibility and show a commitment to following through with improvements, while also displaying a personal investment by the most powerful person in the company.

CEO Checklist

Any one of these factors should cause a response from your leadership. If you count more than one, stop wondering and prepare the CEO.

- Are a large number of your employees impacted?
- Has anyone been injured or fatally wounded?
- Is there a disruption in your business operations?
- Has a product malfunctioned?
- Will regulatory agencies be listening?
- Is there litigation that creates a public fight?
- Are there members of the media knocking on your door?

Accountability

When faced with difficult questions or allegations, defensiveness is often the most common response. However, this response can have negative ramifications in the face of a crisis.

On the other hand, a willingness to take responsibility for possible errors in practice, policy or judgment shows a desire to correct the situation. This approach, particularly when taken by the CEO, can also provide another opportunity to own the narrative and reiterate the overarching organizational mission or values.

In order to demonstrate that you are taking responsibility, make sure to touch on any/all of the following points:

- Clearly delineate what went wrong
- Show an understanding of how to fix it
- Spend money to fix the problem
- Hold people accountable
- Commit proactively, not a result of consumer outcry or regulatory agencies

In addition to noting what went wrong, it's important to:

- 1** Show any penalties or the impact on the parties responsible
- 2** Highlight steps taken to address the immediate situation
- 3** Outline changes to policy, procedure and training

While corporate apologies are much more common today, they are not always executed in a way that exhibits accountability. Two key rules to keep in mind when issuing an apology:


- An apology should be made by someone with direct responsibility for the action or a leader in the organization
- To be effective, apologies need to be made before multiple days of negative press. Waiting makes it appear as though you have been forced to make a statement

What Not to Say as an Apology

- ✘ I'm sorry I made you feel that way
- ✘ We don't know how to fix it
- ✘ Our company leader is not available for comment
- ✘ It was not my intention
- ✘ There are no steps at this time
- ✘ Anything diluted by legalese



Ultimately, it's about more than just an apology. A company spokesperson must demonstrate that they have an understanding of what and where things went wrong – and take part or all of the responsibility for it. Without this fuller picture, apologies can feel hollow. You are better served by being transparent – with even the negative or unsavory details – in order to demonstrate your full knowledge and understanding of the issue. Historically, companies have been reluctant to do so because of fear of litigation. Tread carefully — and consult legal when necessary — but remember that sticking by your corporate and personal values can go a long way in strengthening the overall image of the brand during times of crisis.

 **You are better served by being transparent.**

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