

10 Steps to Build a Rock Solid Crisis Communications Plan

We have a problem...

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Step 1: Know Your Vulnerabilities



It is difficult to change hearts and minds if you don't know what people think about your organization. **You must understand the kinds of issues and crises that are most likely to happen to an organization like yours.** What *are* your major vulnerabilities? How likely and how much damage can each possibly cause? What kinds of issues are identified in your risk management and business continuity plans? What kinds of concerns keep your executives and managers awake at night? The answers to these questions will help drive the content of your plan.

As part of the assessment, review current policies, processes and crisis and disaster response procedures, if you have any. **The new crisis communication plan should integrate seamlessly with current practices.**

Research the crises your competitors have faced and how they managed them. What did they do well? In what areas did they stumble? Learn from their mistakes as well as their strengths.

Step 2: Build the Crisis Team

You may not know what the next crisis is going to be, but if you prepare for the most probable crises, the better prepared you are for those that are unlikely but can be devastating for your company. **Having the right crisis management team to implement those plans is critical to your success.**

Depending on the nature and severity of the crisis, you may activate all or a subset of these key players to respond. In addition to key executives and operations management, here are some of the most important people you may need at the crisis table.



- Public Relations/ Communications
- Legal and Compliance
- Marketing
- Finance/ Accounting
- Risk Management
- Information Technology and Security
- Investor Relations
- Human Resources
- Security
- Product Management or Engineering

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Step 7: Build a Dark Web Site



Your company website will become an important communication vehicle when crisis hits. Ideally, your communications will **drive people to this site as a single source for accurate, timely information** on the crisis. The middle of the chaos is not the time to have to build pages and populate them with the content your stakeholders are seeking. Build a “dark site”—a page or series of pages that are built but not published until needed.

Don't forget to include meta data and leverage search engines to drive traffic to the site when it is activated. Design templates with space to fill in the who / what/ where/ when/ why as the situation evolves. Depending on the nature and severity of the crisis, consider replacing your company home page temporarily with the dark site. The page can have its own URL or can live as a sub-page to your main site.

Step 8: Stay Ahead of Social Media

The middle of a crisis is not the time to get started with social media. **Your next crisis is likely to go public first on social media.** Twitter has become the de-facto source for reporters to find emerging stories. Most organizations have embraced social media and leverage it to build brand loyalty. Effective use of social media is critical to your crisis communication plan. Keep in mind that:

- Ignoring social media won't make it go away
- Social media crises happen in real-time, and must be managed in real-time
- Content is immortal on the Internet
- You can't control what people post on your pages
- You *can* control how you respond to an attack
- Deleting negative comments will probably backfire- badly
- Social media is about transparency, honesty and humanizing a brand



Today's social media rules of engagement dictate that you must:

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- Respond immediately to key stakeholders at the onset of a crisis
- Be committed to maintaining an open, two-way dialogue
- Listen to stakeholder concerns and address them
- Be honest, transparent, open, and credible
- Build a relationship with your publics before crisis strikes
- Be accountable before the public demands it
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Be human, authentic, and use compassion in all communications
- Monitor all communications in real time

Monitor discussions and mentions of all the words related to your brand, organization, products and services. Include names, keywords and phrases, names of key players in your organization and industry, and industry-related terms and acronyms.

Don't forget to monitor your competitors' key names and terms, too. Follow journalists and bloggers who write about your company and industry.

Finally, and this is an important point: don't let interns manage your social media presence. The people responsible for your social media accounts should be experienced and trained with these skills and mindsets:

- Social media and crisis
- Responding to negative criticism online
- Understanding what a social media crisis is and what it means to the brand
- Ability to identify red flags
- Ability to make the initial response when needed

We recognize that this is all much easier said than done. But engaging with social media well before a crisis will become important when it is time to mitigate damage and protect reputation. There are a variety of social media platforms that will help you to monitor who talks about your company, where they talk, and what they are saying. Many social platforms have both free and fee-based versions. Try out the free versions before you decide whether you need to go for the paid features.

Step 9: Implementation and Training



Once the plan is ready to roll out, it is time for implementation training. Your **crisis plan will fail if you simply issue it without teaching crisis team members how to use it**. Spend the time to familiarize them with the components of the plan and conduct tabletop exercises that allow the team to practice.

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About the Author



Deborah Hileman, SCMP is a business leader and globally certified strategic communication management professional with more than 30 years' experience in public and private companies and non-profit organizations. She has led high-performing communications teams in numerous industries.

Known as a voice of calm in the midst of chaos, Deborah has earned a reputation as a trusted strategist and advisor to C-suite executives, operations and other organizational stakeholders. She has been president and CEO of the Institute for Crisis Management since 2014.

Deborah is a member of the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators, where she recently served as a member of IABC's International Executive Board. She is a past chair of the Global Communication Certification Council, a worldwide accrediting body for communications professionals.

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