

Crisis Management and Communications

The most effective way to deal with crisis communications is to have a crisis communication plan in place ahead of time. In the event of a crisis, effective communication and public education are key, as misinformation, fear, and ignorance can fuel public panic. So it is essential that accurate information be released promptly to the public in the immediate area and surrounding areas.

Pre-Crisis Communications Planning:

- Identify and Prepare Staff Spokespeople
 - Identify individuals in the organization who can serve as spokespersons. These individuals may be experts across a variety of disciplines.
 - Prepare spokespersons with key message, facts, answers to relevant questions, and the mission of the organization.
 - Be prepared to notify employees before issuing any kind of statement or press release to the media.
- Identify Target Media Outlets and Specific Journalists
 - Mainstream traditional media such as television, radio, and local newspapers are the most efficient means of communicating with large, general populations.
 - Develop a specific list of local journalists to contact in the event of a crisis to share with them information that would be of importance and value to the public. Targeted journalists should include those who cover emergencies, health, and government.

Immediate Response in the Aftermath of a Crisis:

- Identify Tools for Proactive Outreach to the Media
 - E-mail – A short e-mail offering your organization and its spokespersons as credible sources of information are a welcome communications tool for journalists, who are typically on deadline when writing about a disaster.
 - Phone call – A brief phone call (and brief message if the journalist is not available) is also a welcome communication strategy.
 - Special feature on homepage of organization Web site, if applicable. This resource can identify the expertise the organization has to share regarding a particular crisis.
 - Develop informational fact sheets on your organization or program to distribute to the media as well as the general public.
- Respond to Inquiries from the Media
 - If your organization is successful in proactively connecting with a journalist or if a journalist contacts your organization for an interview regarding a crisis matter, be prepared to respond quickly. As reporters have hard deadlines, they typically need quick responses to requests for interviews.
 - If you are not prepared to participate in the interview due to a lack of time or other work commitments, let the journalist know immediately, but try to offer another spokesperson within the organization as a contact.
 - If you agree to do an interview, make sure you are prepared. Never “wing it.” You should always view an interview as an opportunity to communicate what YOU want to say. Before you begin, decide what two or three points you want to get across and have both data and human examples ready to highlight each one. Be sure to make these points during the interview, even if the journalist does not ask about them.
 - Anticipate difficult questions and prepare responses to them. Never say, “No comment.” Instead, explain why you can not or will not answer the question. If you do not know the answer to a question, simply say, “I don’t know but I’ll try to find out for you.” Then follow up.
 - Give simple, direct answers and be brief. Journalists will likely use short quotes, clips, or sound bites. Avoid jargon and explain the topic as simply as possible. It is best to avoid flippant or joking comments that sound acceptable in conversation but might be taken out of context.
 - Use anecdotes. Nothing reinforces credibility and believability as much as stories about real people.

- Always remember that nothing is “off the record.” Do not say anything you do not want to read in the newspapers or see on the evening news. Be especially mindful of conversations during introductions – before the formal interview begins – and small talk once the interview concludes.

Long-Term Communications Strategy:

- Maintain Ongoing Dialogue and Good Relations with the Media:
 - Once the immediate aftermath of a crisis passes, an organization will want to maintain solid relations with the media to continue to build awareness of the organization and position it as a valuable resource to the community.
 - Organizations may wish to continue to share with journalists any follow-up stories that may be related to the recent crisis. Perhaps your organization has developed some new resources or processes as a result of the crisis.