



Crisis Communication Tips – Stay Calm and Communicate On

No one is exempt from a crisis. Leadership gone awry, an investment that's politically charged, or a facility that burns to the ground. Crises are not always “negative” – an employee that wins the lottery may create enough media attention that you need to activate your crisis communications plan. And then there are “outside” crises that offer opportunities to shine.

Are you prepared? It's too late to develop a crisis communications plan once the crisis hits. You need to have a plan in place with professionals “on call,” know how to communicate both internally, to the public and to the media, know who the “quarterback” is going to be to get you through this stressful time, and what message you will want to transmit.

Tips:

- 1) **Appoint a crisis communications “team” and develop a crisis communications plan.** Communicate it to all appropriate parties. A crisis communications plan needs to have systems developed to disseminate information quickly and efficiently, internally and externally, before and after a crisis strikes.
- 2) **Proactive media and community relations programs should be part of your comprehensive disaster plan.** Having an on-going public and community relations program with pre-existing, positive relationships with the media and your community will help minimize the impact of many crises, and will help maximize support.
- 3) **Don't forget to communicate to your internal audience during a crisis.** Internally, you need to “over communicate” to strengthen your internal team and for rumor control. Do not let them hear about your crisis for the first time from the news. Providing no information leaves a vacuum, which is quickly filled with speculation – usually erroneous. Make sure you continue to communicate with your internal audiences as the crisis unfolds and gets resolved.
- 4) **Your “internal” audience is not just your employees, but your donors, volunteers, beneficiaries, community contacts and colleagues.** After the 9-11 tragedy, we recommended that clients post messages of concern on their web site, send out a “how we are doing” message to shareholders and customers, and let the public know that they care and the business was still in operation.
- 5) **Be honest about what's going on.** You do not have to reveal information that is confidential, but provide as much information as you can, and tell the truth!
- 6) **Simple media training in an excellent precautionary step.** Choose appropriate spokespeople - your ED, Board Chair, President, and other organizational leaders. During times of crisis, it is important that your audiences, internal and external, hear from the top. Do not let people who have not been designated as spokespeople speak to the media.

7) **Develop message points that communicate the essence of your nonprofit, your concerns, and your responsive actions.** Create an FAQ document that you can use to answer questions from stakeholders and the media, post on your website, and share on your social media channels. Be consistent with your messages. Create a “difficult questions and answers” document that is not for public consumption but only used in the face of challenging questions.

8) **Don’t go it alone.** If you do not have a communications professional on staff or outside contract, run your messages by a trusted, objective outsider - one of your advisors (lawyer, accountant, etc.), a business colleague or a current or former client with whom you have a particularly close relationship.

9) Nonprofits likely have limited budgets for distribution of information. **Use inexpensive ways to get your messages out:** social media, e-mail, posting on web site, messages on voice mail – or the tried and true touch of personally calling people. Have a phone tree established *in advance* of all the calls that will need to be made during a crisis so your audiences are informed.

10) **Stay calm and communicate on.**

Crises are inevitable, but they don’t have to turn into disasters. And with the right treatment, crises can even turn into opportunities.

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