

Crisis Communication for Nonprofits

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The pandemic, 9/11 and a highly partisan national political climate have heightened everyone's awareness of disasters, disruptions and uncertainties, and the need to be prepared in the event of a crisis. Given the current climate (political and environmental) of our nation and the recent escalation of crises, it is a good time to think about crisis prevention and management for your nonprofit.

No one is exempt from a crisis, even—especially!—nonprofits. Surprisingly, most organizations don't plan ahead for crises.

Crises can come in many forms, including a disgruntled donor, a negative industry trend (such as losing federal funding), or even a fire in the office building.

When bad things happen to good nonprofits, reputations can be damaged in an instant. Information is passed to the public through rumors, gossip, and the media. Few things will hurt your organization more than negative publicity.

A crisis does not necessarily mean something “negative” has happened. Having a lottery winner as an employee, for example, could constitute a crisis because of the volume of media and public attention.

According to the [Institute for Crisis Management's 2023 Annual Crisis Report](#), there were **1.97 million crisis incidents reported in 2023. Approximately 50% of crises were categorized as "smoldering"...** meaning they were foreseeable and could have been identified and addressed by management before escalating.

In short, many crises aren't surprises, but rather the result of delayed or inadequate response. Typically, there are some warning signs that a crisis may occur.

If something were to happen at your nonprofit, would you be “on call,” know how to communicate both internally and to the media, know who the “quarterback” is going to be to get you through this stressful time, and what messages you'll want to transmit?

The main thing to remember is—expect the unexpected.

Crisis Communication 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 ongoing 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 allow your surgeon to maintain his or her good reputation.
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 or another outside source (like a donor or volunteer). 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 partners and staff, but also your donors, volunteers, community contacts, and professional colleagues.**
After the 9/11 tragedy, we recommended that clients post messages of concern on their website, send out a "how we are doing" message to their stakeholders, and let the public, in general, 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 advance is not only a good precautionary step but can also be fun!**
Choose appropriate spokespeople—your executive director and/or board chair. 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's mission, your concern, and your responsive actions.**
If you do not have a communications professional on staff or on an outside contract, run your messages by a trusted, objective outsider—one of your advisors (lawyer, accountant, etc.), a professional colleague, or a current or former board member with whom you have a particularly close relationship.
8. **Seize opportunity in a crisis.**
Communicate your nonprofit's excellent reputation and the beneficial aspects of the mission work that you do. Tell positive stories.
9. **Small nonprofits may have limited budgets for the distribution of information.**
Use inexpensive ways to get your messages out: email, posting on the website, social media, text chains, or the tried-and-true touch of personally calling people. (You may not need to contact every donor or volunteer who has ever walked through your doors, but

make sure to contact anyone who has had close contact with your organization within the last year and who will play a big role in your organization in the coming year).

Have a phone tree and/or text chain established in advance of all the calls that will need to be made during a crisis so your audiences are informed. Most people think “it couldn’t happen here”, and then it does. If September 11 taught us anything, it was that no one is immune to a crisis. Be proactive about crisis communications for your nonprofit and you can prevent a crisis from turning into a disaster. Joanna Brody owns Brody Public Relations, a full service public relations agency with special expertise in social cause promotions. For more information on public relations, media training, and how to prepare your nonprofit for a crisis, visit www.brody-pr.com. Brody can be reached at 310.430.0292, or joanna@brody-pr.com, and on [LinkedIn](#).