

Creating a crisis communications plan

Companies rarely have the opportunity to break their own bad news. Today's always-on, networked society means citizen journalists report crises on social media before company officials are able to gather information. Social sharing quickly spreads the news beyond the immediate region. Within minutes, company executives face local officials, community members, employees and their families, customers, stakeholders and media who demand immediate and accurate answers. Under pressure and with all eyes watching, a company's initial response to a crisis will affect long-term public perception, business continuity and financial impact.

Crisis planning is the ultimate corporate responsibility and should be a critical component of any strategic communications program. It ensures all employees in a position to contain and manage a crisis understand the proper procedures and all other affected people are provided consistent, factual and timely information. Although crisis plans should be customized to the organization, they should address eight important areas:

Crisis team identification:

- Crisis leader and team
- Outside experts
- Main spokesperson and backup spokesperson
- Clear roles and responsibilities for each team member
- Complete contact information for every team member

Potential crisis scenarios:

- Up to 10 potential crisis scenarios
- Key stakeholders for each crisis scenario, including employees, community members, elected officials, public safety and health departments, regulators and outside legal counsel

Crisis protocol and procedures:

- Crisis team activation plan
- Communications command center set up
- Chain of command for approvals and information sharing
- Communication infrastructure needs: microsite, phone and email service, social media platforms, etc.

Stakeholder communications:

- Key messaging for each scenario by audience
- Channels, timing and frequency for communications
- Templates for standby statements, health/safety instructions, microsite copy, telephone scripts, etc.
- Public information resources, such as websites or experts in fields applicable to the crisis
- Incident and question documentation

Media relations:

- Main spokesperson and backup spokesperson
- Corporate media policy
- Media information center plans
- Media best practices, tips and techniques
- Templates for media statements, press releases and fact sheets for each scenario
- Potential Q&As for each scenario
- Media request documentation
- Media coverage monitoring services
- Contact information for all key media

Social media:

- Corporate social media policy
- Social media best practices, tips and techniques
- Templates for social media posts across all platforms
- Social media monitoring services

Emergency contact lists:

- Employees and board members
- Safety and health officials
- Suppliers and key customers
- City and community officials

Corporate background:

- Information for corporate locations: maps, number of employees, departments, etc.
- Product information: ingredients, supplier sources, potential health issues related to ingestion or exposure