

Your Ultimate Guide to Crisis PR Management

How to manage your business reputation
in a crisis



Table of Contents

1: Introduction

2: Create your plan

3: Designate your crisis team

4: Crisis notification

5: Crisis intelligence

6: Business champions

7: Statements & briefings

8: Analysis & learning

9: Top tips

1 | Introduction

Crisis PR management comes in two forms – planned and unplanned. Crisis PR management for a planned event, such as staff layoffs, are better described as critical comms simply because it's something over which you have greater control, but if you handle it badly, it could damage your reputation.

Unplanned crisis PR management, sometimes called crisis comms, refers to events over which you have little or no control, where there's an external agent at work such as a cyber attack, environmental disaster or a global pandemic.

This document will equip you with everything you need in order to plan your crisis management PR.



2 | Create your plan

Be prepared. If you have the luxury of time, the most effective way to approach this is to conduct scenario planning within your leadership team way before any crisis occurs. Alternatively, you will need to execute the following at pace.

- 1. Brainstorm:** identify the worst crises that you might have to deal with which might encompass technical, ethical, environmental, financial or health disasters. This exercise will probably reveal some weaknesses within your organisation that enable you to take preemptive action.
- 2. Scenario planning:** Sketch out the best and worst-case for each scenario giving yourself SMART goals; solely for the purpose of providing discipline and purpose to your actions.
- 3. Timelines:** Develop a working timeline of how events, actions and your comments might play out, accepting that this will need to be updated as a situation develops. The plan provides you with structure, structure provides stability and stability prevents panicked, unplanned, and damaging comment.
- 4. Holding statements:** Prepare your holding statements for each given scenario. This should be a statement of fact – what has happened and your planned response over the next 24 hours. Ideally, you will have a template for this on file and can refine the messaging to reflect the live crisis.



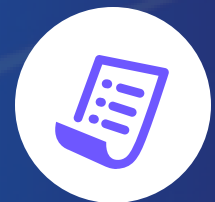
Brainstorm



**Scenario
planning**



Timelines



**Holding
statements**

3 | Designate your crisis team

Allocate responsibilities for each scenario and make sure that those responsible have the right attributes to get the job done. They will need:

- 1. Authority:** if a situation is genuinely a crisis, who you dedicate to lead it speaks volumes about how serious you are in managing the incident. The more senior, the more credible you will appear.
- 2. Subject matter expertise:** in addition to the CEO, the team must include relevant experts. A scientific/biological crisis requires the leadership of an appropriate authority, an environmental crisis may require the advice of an appropriate engineer and so forth.
- 3. Media skills:** it is essential that the team is articulate, credible, and empathetic. Undertake practice runs and if any member of your crisis team performs poorly, make sure you source the relevant training so that they can improve upon their skills. Your team needs skills across different media platforms – i.e. able to deliver in front of a news camera right through to social media. If you're in a crisis and have not had the benefit of any pre-planning, it's best to field the experts you know for an absolute fact, can perform well in the media channels in which your crisis is unfolding.



Authority



Expertise



Media skills

4 | Crisis notification

It is essential that your team is kept abreast of events as they occur. A secure system of sharing information is essential e.g. a WhatsApp group is an ideal way of keeping people informed. Remember:

- 1. Keep the channel exclusive:** it goes without saying that the channel should be used for sharing facts and intel; no pictures of kittens, jokes or funny pics – even to relieve the tension – should appear. Nothing irrelevant or inappropriate to be shared; keep focused and respectful of the people being impacted by the unfolding disaster.
- 2. Always On:** a crisis is no respecter of time. Set up a system that endures and make sure any notifications are checked at regular intervals. Introduce a rota so that everyone gets a chance to rest. No one can turn the phone to silent during the crisis - appropriate expertise needs to always be accessible.



Exclusive



Always On

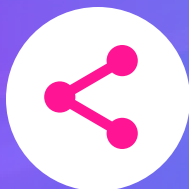
5 | Crisis intelligence

Facts and fiction can quickly gain traction in the media, unfortunately, the more sensational interpretation can spread the fastest. Stories which are not managed can grow their own tentacles and be highly damaging, causing panic and ridicule and adding unnecessary distress while harming your reputation. Misinformation can also cause people to act against their own best interests which can also reflect poorly on your business. Consider the following:

- 1. Responsibility:** agree who will be responsible for capturing live intelligence across different media.
- 2. Circulation:** determine the most effective way of disseminating the information and who is responsible for sharing it.
- 3. Prioritisation:** set a traffic light system so that different types of intelligence can be responded to in a timely and appropriate manner.
- 4. Reassessment:** constantly re-evaluate the scale of the crisis and the impact that your comms is having so that you can adapt your messaging and responses accordingly. For traditional and social media, Google Alerts is an excellent option and it's free, while for social media tracking, apps such as Hootsuite are ideal. There are also a variety of paid services that provide both monitoring and reporting options.



Responsibility



Circulation



Prioritisation



Reassessment

6 | Business champions

In addition to your crisis comms team comprising senior management, it's wise to identify influential individuals inside and outside the organisation whose support you will need to successfully deliver the optimum outcome. Use these three points to guide you:

- 1. Be prompt:** Make sure these people get accurate information and receive it promptly and regularly.
- 2. Repeatable:** Deliver nuggets of easily repeatable/actionable information which can be shared as soundbites.
- 3. Compassionate:** Remember, people under pressure won't always be able to read nuances or implication – however this does not mean people are sheep. Treat them with respect and kindness and they will do the same for you.



Be Prompt



Easy to repeat



Compassionate

7 | Statements & briefings

Your holding statements for each stage of the crisis will need to be updated daily, to remain factually current and in tune with prevailing temperament amongst your target audiences. Remember:

- 1. Positive habits:** Create a briefing routine during your crisis by setting a regular time of day for your communication. If you say nothing, or miss a day, or are late, people will fill the information vacuum with supposition and rumour which will damage your brand.
- 2. Be adaptable:** Every statement needs to be adaptable to all media channels. Consider how you might circulate a link to your statement using the limitations of a social media post. What summary might you use; is this summary empathetic and is it open to misinterpretation?

8 | Analysis & learning

In many ways the analysis and learning phase should equip you with insight and knowledge that will prepare you for the next crisis. Once you've returned to a post-crisis 'new normal', sit down with your senior leaders and review your performance. Pose the questions and answer honestly:

1. What did we do well & why?
2. What did we do poorly & why?
3. What will we do differently & how?
4. When will we institute these changes?



Positive habits



Be adaptable



Analysis & learning

9 | Top Tips



Tell the truth

If you are found lying in a crisis your brand will never recover. Lead with the facts and recognise the impact these have on people's lives.



Over communicate

You cannot communicate enough in a crisis. You need to communicate frequently, regularly and consistently. Never mix your messages.



Be compassionate

Compassionate leadership is the most potent way people can deal with what feels frightening and overwhelming.



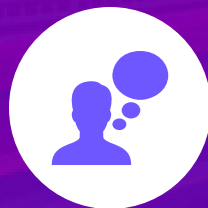
Seek collaboration

Taking away autonomy in a crisis creates stress, resentment and alienation. Constantly seek to bring your audience with you.



Be hopeful

Provide clear direction on the actions that need to be taken, and why they are necessary, in order to successfully respond to the situation.



Never stop learning

Ensuring autonomy and control means listening to your audience every day and taking account of their knowledge, skills and experience to make crucial decisions.

10 | Contact us

At ec-pr we are passionate about B2B communication. We believe your work is amazing and we want to help you tell the world how extraordinary it is.

For more B2B PR insights or help with your communications strategy, please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you.



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