

Key steps to creating a crisis communications plan



By [Leago Monareng](#)

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It is generally accepted in today's world that it is not a question of "if" a crisis will happen but of "when" it will happen. Although the reality is that it is difficult to accurately predict what kind of a crisis an organisation might face, there is no doubt that planning and preparing for a crisis is vital.



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It is therefore important that business organisations should develop a comprehensive communication strategy. The strategy will define the procedures organisations will put in place to communicate with the public and relevant stakeholders when an unexpected event occurs that could have a negative or devastating impact on the company's reputation. Crisis communication is a key component of reputation management.

In order to deal with a communication crisis, businesses should among other things assess their vulnerabilities where potential risks or shocks might emanate. An understanding of potential crises will assist in:

1. Proactively preparing for potential crises and where possible mitigating them
2. Managing the crisis to minimise reputational damage

Crisis communication strategies will define procedures of how a business organisation will communicate with key stakeholders during any crisis situation. The strategy will empower stakeholders to effectively execute crisis communication and manage the flow of information during a crisis.

Assessing risk in order to prepare for crises

In normal day-to-day operations, issues do occur and they are managed as they come up. Although some issues can be negative, they can be planned for and handled in a straightforward manner. These issues could be client-related or industry-related.

But a crisis is an unplanned, unexpected event that can potentially damage the company's reputation, negatively affect business continuity or it could also be an issue that was not properly dealt with initially and re-surfaces with more intensity leading to a full-blown crisis. A crisis may generate negative media coverage, affect staff morale and erode stakeholder confidence.

Business organisations need to understand which factors could constitute a crisis because this could assist in preparing for crises. Here are some scenarios of how businesses could assess potential risks:

- Bigger business impact and higher likelihood should be prioritised, e.g. IT security, environmental disaster, etc.
- Sensitive matters, such as racial issues, misconduct of leaders; should be prioritised.
- Indirect impact on the business and its image resulting from a crisis affecting business organisations strategic partners or suppliers.

Crisis communication strategy: from pre-crisis to post-crisis analysis

A crisis communication strategy will have a number of steps during which different activities will be implemented:

- Pre-crisis – preparation and planning
- Crisis breaks – assess the severity of the situation, determine the best response
- Managing the crisis – keep stakeholders informed, consistent updates, monitor media, regular feedback to company executive leadership
- Crisis resolution – examine and explain
- Post-crisis analysis – lessons learned, the impact of the crisis and improvement plan for future crisis

1. Pre-crisis – preparation and planning

- The first step in a crisis communication plan is the proactive preparation for crises.
- Identify the crisis communication Team
- Intensive brainstorming on all potential crises
- Develop stress scenarios
- Test possible responses and messaging
- Identify and train spokespeople
- Develop a stakeholder matrix

Benefits of the pre-crisis planning stage include:

- The realisation that some of the issues or situations are preventable by simply changing existing methods of operation.
- Crafting possible responses, about best-case/worst-case scenarios, etc. Better now than when under the pressure of an actual crisis. In some cases, of course, you know that a crisis will occur because you are planning to create it, e.g. retrenchments or major acquisition.

This assessment process should lead to creating a Crisis Response Plan that is an exact fit for your business organisation, one that includes both operational and communication components.

2. Crisis breaks – how and what we communicate

When a crisis breaks it is important to first determine what has actually happened, assess the situation, determine the level of the crisis and immediately assemble the crisis communications team to decide on how and what to communicate on which channels.

3. Managing the crisis

During the crisis, it is important that a business organisation should keep all stakeholders informed. There should be consistent updates and regular feedback to company executive leadership for updates and direction, as well as monitoring the media. The crisis communication team must continue to meet and discuss the unfolding crisis at all moments. At some point, it might be necessary to amend the approach and channels of communication.

4. Crisis resolution

This stage is aimed at demonstrating what is being done to fix the problem, gaining and consolidating support from stakeholders, educating stakeholders where it is necessary, explaining issues that have cropped up and promoting a positive corporate image.

5. Post-crisis analysis

When the dust begins to settle businesses should capture lessons learned, by undertaking a SWOT analysis, try to understand the impact of the crisis and discuss how the business can improve the plan for a future crisis. The crisis communication team will unpack what worked, what did not work and also develop a brand recovery plan as part of reputation recovery efforts. The loop is closed by returning to pre-crisis planning.

ABOUT LEAGO MONARENG

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