

Agility | PR
Solutions

THE PR PRO'S

Essential Crisis

Communications Prep

Guide & Workbook

Ah *crisis communications*, the branch of public relations that keeps us up at night (quite literally) and throws a wrench (not quite so literally) into any organization's best laid plans.

Whether it's a leak about employees behaving badly or navigating a natural disaster, as public relations professionals we're often tasked with mitigating whatever situation our organization or clients deem to be a "crisis".

To do this successfully, it takes experience, a keen intuition, and perhaps most importantly PREPARATION.

Every organization (yes, even yours...we're looking at you small non-profits!) should be prepared with a plan of attack for the unexpected because of course the question is never *if* a crisis will happen, but when.

Pessimistic? A little. Practical? Absolutely.

In the world of communications, being prepared for a crisis before it happens will determine how quickly your company or clients can bounce back. Which begs the question:

How exactly does one prepare for all the unknown factors that can create a crisis in the first place? Isn't it a crisis for the very reason that it happens unexpectedly and mostly out of the organization's control?

Well yes, but also, *kind of*.

It's true in the sense that the context of every crisis is different, and there's no formula for a perfect crisis communications response. What has worked for others will not necessarily work for you, and the unique details of each crisis scenario need to be taken into account before coming up with an effective strategy to counteract.

BUT (and this is a big "but"), you CAN have certain measures in place that will reliably ensure you're able to pull it all together as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

Which brings us to this prep guide.

Whether you're starting from scratch or working from existing policies, this guide will walk you through five steps using tips and practical exercises to ensure your organization or clients are as well prepared as possible next time life throws a curveball your way.

So dive in and prepare to never be un-prepared ever again!

Crisis Communications Prep Guide & Workbook

TYPES OF CRISES

The concept of “crisis” is subjective and there is a huge range of things that your organization or client might believe is worthy of the title. [Sachs Media Group](#) has a great list of a few categories that you may encounter and that are worth considering when diving into your crisis communications preparation:

- Embezzlement
- Misappropriation of Funds
- Accident
- Natural Disaster
- Fraud
- Sex Scandals
- Internal Issues
- Discrimination
- Substance Abuse
- Unexpected Death

The Crisis Communications Lifecycle

Another important starting point for crisis communications planning involves looking at the general life cycle of a crisis, including any of the kinds listed above.

While there are several models of a crisis communications lifecycle, most can generally be summed up by the following:



Prepare: This is where we’ll be focusing in this guide, as it makes every subsequent step easier and can help shorten the overall length of the crisis lifecycle.

Crisis breaks: MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS!

Initial response: This is when your audiences will be reacting and when you’ll be launching your crisis comms strategy.

Assess response impact: At this point, you'll want to take a good hard look at how your strategy is doing (i.e. how your audiences are responding to statements etc.) and monitor the public narrative closely to see if or how it's changing. You'll want to adjust your strategy accordingly.

Resolution: You can see the light at the end of the tunnel and your strategy tactics should be winding down at this point.

Evaluate and Evolve: Once the crisis has passed, you'll want to debrief and evaluate the entire situation from start to finish so that the organization can learn, grow, and if possible, implement policies to decrease the likelihood of the crisis repeating.

Now that we've got a sense of the ebb and flow in a crisis situation, we can also better understand just how each step in the preparation process will affect the crisis lifecycle process.

Internal vs. External Preparation

The steps that can be taken to prepare in advance of any possible crisis can be broken down into two categories:

1- Internal

2- External

Internal

If you've ever flown on an airplane, you've probably seen the safety demonstration that always stresses something along these lines:

Always put your own oxygen mask on first before trying to help the person next to you.

This same strategy is important in the context of crisis communications. You can't effectively impact your external audiences if you haven't taken care of your internal audiences first.

Internal communications are often overlooked, especially in crisis communications. This is a mistake and one this guide will do its best to help fix!

External

Dealing with external audiences makes up the bulk of the overall crisis communications lifecycle despite only making up a small part of the preparation step. However, there are still some important foundations you can put in place for external audiences that can then be tailored for any unique crisis situations that rear their ugly heads!

But first things first. Let's dive into internal crisis comms preparation and get your proverbial oxygen mask on!

Internal

STEP #1: DESIGNATE A CRISIS TEAM

The first thing to do when putting together a crisis communications procedural document is to figure out who your crisis team will be.

Below you'll find different types of employees you may want to consider:

› **Leadership representation**

- CEO/Executive Director/Board President
- Typically considered the official face and voice of a company and likely owns the final decision on responses, you'll want to make sure they're included on your team.

› **Senior communications staff**

- This is probably you. Senior communicators are absolutely essential to managing any corporate crisis, and so you'll need the best of the best on the team to advise leadership on the best crisis communications strategy and for implementation.

› **Senior human resources representatives**

- They will likely be instrumental in helping you communicate with the company as a whole, as well as advise on existing policies and tools, and depending on the nature of the crisis, they may be required to carry out related disciplinary action.

› **Financial representation**

- CFO/Senior accountant
- While this may not apply to all crisis, there is often some financial fallout from corporate crises, whether the company is private or publicly traded. Having someone who has a full understanding of potential or real financial impacts can be helpful.

› **Department heads**

- You may want a senior representative from each department to be fully briefed so that they can aid in internal communications with their own departments/teams, and to advise on specific factors that may affect or be affected by the crisis.

› **Legal representation**

- Again, while not always necessary, it's a good idea to have your company or client's legal representative on board so they can advise on any related legalities.

› **Chosen spokesperson/people**

- These are the people who will be responsible for speaking directly to the media. It may be one person or several (more on that later), and they may already be represented in this list (i.e. CEO), but either way, you'll always want to make sure they're included on the crisis team and fully briefed.

DECIDING ON YOUR SPOKESPERSON/SPOKESPEOPLE

Spokespeople are vital to ensure consistent clear communication with the media and other external audiences. They are your official voice in a time of crisis. Will it be your CEO? A board president? A department head? Company expert? You can have more than one but as a rule, always be as selective as possible. ***The more people speaking to the media means there's more chances for the message to be diluted or contradicted.***

PRO TIP: You don't need to be a big organization to put a crisis team in place. If you're a small non-profit of 6 full-time staff? Great! That will probably make your life easier. Give everyone a job and bring on third-party partners (i.e legal advice) as needed.

A checklist to help you choose and prepare your spokesperson/people:

- › Who is the official voice/face of the company? (We're guessing it's likely your CEO)
- › Who in the company has previously spoken with media?
- › Are they media trained? If not, they'll need to be.
- › Are they an expert on any particular topic?

PRO TIP: Once you've chosen your spokesperson/people, these should be the **ONLY** people speaking to the media. Ensure that they, and the rest of the company's employees/board are aware of this, so they know to redirect media inquiries as necessary.

CRISIS TEAM EXERCISES

Some questions you'll want to ask to help determine this crack team include:

1. Will the team always be comprised of the same people regardless of the crisis?
2. Will the teams be tailored to the specific nature of the crisis? Revisit the list of crisis types to help you brainstorm.

Our Recommendation:

We'd recommend going with a flexible scenario 1 situation: Have a designated crisis team but understand that 2-3 spots may change on a case by case basis.

1. Crisis Dream Team

Based on the guidelines above, create your crisis dream team

Leadership Representation

Senior Comms Staff

Human Resources Rep

Financial Rep

Department Heads

Legal Rep

Spokesperson/People

2. Alternative Crisis Teams

If considering a different team for a different type of crisis, come up with a few sample teams for at least three of the following crises:

- Financial (i.e. Embezzlement)
- Accident
- Fraud
- Natural Disaster
- Sex Scandals
- Discrimination
- Substance Abuse
- Unexpected Death

Sample Team - Crisis Type #1: _____

Sample Team – Crisis Type #2: _____

Sample Team – Crisis Type #3: _____

3) Subject Matter Experts

It's always good to have a running list of subject matter experts specific to your organization or client. Are you a non-profit dealing with endangered wildlife? A national bank? A start-up tech company? Come up with a list of topics that might warrant having an expert who can also comfortably talk to the media. This is a good list to have not only for crisis communications, but for general media relations as well:

Topic	Expert
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

STEP #2: LAY OUT INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Often during crises, companies spend so much time thinking about the outside, they forget to communicate with their own employees. This is a mistake that can lead to all kinds of situations that only add fuel to the fire. Things like unwanted media interviews or statements and diluted key messages can all be avoided with some solid internal communications.

Much like you would do with external-facing communications, a good place to start is by identifying your different internal audiences. There are lots of ways to do that, but some breakdowns might include:

Hierarchy

Leadership
Senior Managers
Staff

OR

Department

Leadership
Human resources
Legal
Sales
Marketing
IT
Customer Service

Once you've got that down, you'll want to think about the following questions:

- › Who needs to be fully briefed on any given crisis?
- › What internal communications channels do you have in place for each audience?
- › How will you disseminate information?
 - Do you want department heads to be fully briefed and then hold team meetings to go over the details with their team in person?
 - Will you be sending out a staff wide email?

Some of these questions will be difficult to answer without the context of a specific crisis, but they're good to consider in advance simply on a surface level.

Some internal communications channels for your consideration might include:

- Direct email
- Mass email
- Telephone (Call or text)
- Conference Call (Video or Audio only)
- One-on-one meeting
- All staff meeting
- Department or small group staff meetings
- Intranet or internal chat programs (i.e. Slack)
- Community Bulletin Boards
- Internal online/digital community boards
- Staff newsletters (digital or hardcopy)

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS EXERCISES

1) Internal Audiences

List your different internal audiences (eg. sales or regional offices):

2) Internal Communications Channels

List your internal communications channels:

3) Bring it all together

List your internal communications audiences and the best channels to reach them

Internal Audience	Preferred Communications Channel?

STEP #3: INTERNAL DECISION MAKING

Now that you've got a solid understanding of your internal audiences and communications channels, you'll want to determine what internal logistics and processes are involved to ensure an orderly and consistent response to crises.

It should be crystal clear to everyone in your organization what they should be doing during a crisis, even if it's as simple as a direction to "Direct all media inquiries to xx".

A few things you'll want to ensure everyone is aware of:

- › Procedures for calling an emergency crisis meeting
 - Who calls the emergency crisis team meeting?
 - How will you notify people if they are part of this team?
 - Where/How will you meet?
- › Who needs to be briefed on any given crisis?
- › Who needs permission from who to get things done? What is the chain of command?
- › Contact information for everyone on the crisis team and the main media relations contact

PRO TIP: Contact info for your crisis team needs to be info that will reach those folks any time of the day or night. A personal cell phone number is probably the best option here.

If this is mostly agreed upon and understood in advance of a crisis, from here the team can create a specific crisis strategy that delegates responsibilities and dictates timelines etc. quickly and efficiently when the time comes.

INTERNAL DECISION MAKING EXERCISES

1) Emergency Meeting Procedure

Write out step-by-step how an emergency crisis meeting would be called and attended.
Consult the above questions for guidance:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____
6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

2) Contact Information

List the emergency contact information for your media relations contact and each of the people on your crisis communications dream team from step #1:

Name	Emergency Contact Info
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

STEP #4 MESSAGING

Crisis messaging can't really be developed in advance. However as a rule, it's always good to ensure that everyone in the company is super familiar with:

- Company's values
- Mission statement
- [Founder story/ The Big Why](#)

Second:

- Who will be crafting the crisis messaging and crafting public responses when the time does come. We suggest a close collaboration between the spokesperson/people, the senior communications team, and leadership.

You'll want to have an idea of the assets you'll need to create. You'll likely need messaging for things like:

- Spokespeople statements
- Media advisory/Press conference
- A press release
- Internal staff briefings and communications
- Social media posts

And finally, you'll want to have some sort of media monitoring in place.

Why you ask?

Media monitoring allows you to understand the public discussions about your company before and during a crisis, making it much easier to perfect your key messages and understanding what's necessary to create an effective response.

Media monitoring on a regular basis gives you a baseline of your company's narrative in the public from day-to-day, which makes tracking and evaluating the response to a crisis much easier when the time comes.

During a crisis you can't respond effectively if you don't fully grasp what people are saying, what the tone of the conversation is, or the general sentiment. To create effective messaging you need to know how the story is developing.

Media monitoring helps you prepare and evaluate the effectiveness of your messaging and strategies, so if you don't already have something in place, you'll want to research some options.

May we humbly suggest starting [here](#)!

MESSAGING EXERCISES

- 1 List some of your company's key messages
- 2 List the communications assets you'll likely need to develop during a crisis:
- 3 Outline the tools and resources you have to monitor media before, during, and after a crisis:

If you're not convinced that your current media monitoring resources/tools are up to the task or truly pulling their weight when it comes to crisis prevention, monitoring, and management, you may want to get a sense of the tools that can.

We can help with that! Check out [Agility Monitoring](#) and see what it can do for you and your crisis strategy.

SHOW ME!

External

STEP #5 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

As we mentioned, while the bulk of prepping for a crisis actually happens on the internal side of things, there are in fact some things you can prep ahead of time for external communications.

Just like your internal communications, the first think you'll want to do for external communications is determine your audiences. These could include:

- Media
- Customers
- Partners
- Investors
- Government
- General public

Then you'll want to establish the existing communications channels you have with each of these audiences and identify which are best suited for communicating during a crisis.

- Some channels might include:
- Media outlets (International, national, regional, local)
- Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc.)
- Your website
- Email newsletters
- Advertising

Finally, you'll want to develop your *Ally List*. This is a list of people you trust as ambassadors for your company and who will help you spread the story on your terms. These are people you'll want to share your story with as soon as possible so that they can help, either directly or indirectly, keep your messaging on track.

Trusted journalists

- These are journalists you have a good working and or personal relationship with. They're the journalists you can call up as soon as you've got your messaging nailed down and trust to listen to your story and report on it fairly. This is instrumental in establishing a credible, factual narrative before it has time to derail or get hijacked by other news stories or the court of public opinion.

- If you don't currently have a list of trusted journalists that you're comfortable working with, you'll want to get on that ASAP. A great place to start is with a media database tool that can help you research journalists in your city or field and provide contact information to help with the outreach process. Researching and knowing your journalists is fundamental to a good working relationship with them. For more info on media database tools and how they can help, check out [this piece](#)!

Partners

- Do you work with bloggers or influencers? Organizations you've partnered with in the past? This is anyone you have a good professional working relationship with that you work with on a semi-regular-to-regular basis.

Experts

- Does your organization ever work with industry or subject matter experts outside the company who could help back up your story?
- Are there experts you can bring in to evaluate the situation from an objective point of view?

Third party validators

- This is a group that can include anyone from politicians to community leaders to dedicated customers or other stakeholders. These are people you know are friendly towards your organization to begin with who will be more likely to sing your praises during a crisis situation.

Once you've got your *Ally List*, you'll want to brainstorm ways to work with them in different crisis situations. Can they:

- › Publish content?
 - Traditional media
 - Social media
 - Blog
- › Provide word-of-mouth support?
- › Act as references for journalists or others?

However you choose to work with your allies, this list is always helpful (not to mention reassuring) during times of crisis.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS EXERCISES

1) External Audiences

List your external audiences:

2) External Communications Channels

List your external communications channels:

3) Bring it all together

List your external communications audiences and the best channels to reach them

External Audience	Preferred Communications Channel?

4)The Ally List

Brainstorm some possible members of your company's *Ally List* and how they might be able to support the organization in times of crisis:

Journalists:

Influencers:

<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

Partner Organizations:

Experts:

<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

Community Leaders:

Dedicated Customers/Stakeholders:

<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

To Recap

At this point, you should confidently be able to say “We’re prepared”!

No matter what curveball is thrown your way, you’ve now got the plan to ensure that you’re ready to jump into action as quickly and efficiently as possible. To come up with a stellar crisis strategy in the moment, you’ll still need the same creativity, attention to detail, keen intuition and solid writing that brought you to PR in the first place, but by completing this workbook you’ll have given yourself (and your organization) a leg up in the process.

But don’t stop now! Now that you’ve

- Designated a crisis team;
- Laid the groundwork for effective internal communications;
- Made the internal logistics of your crisis team and internal comms crystal clear;
- Nailed down your messaging tools and resources and;
- Gotten a solid grasp of your external communications audiences and allies;

You need to put the wheels in motion to implement these things! Set up a meeting, send out a memo, or get the ball rolling on an official procedural document. None of this will be worthwhile if you’re the only one who knows about it.

So go forth and spread your crisis-communication-preparedness knowledge and rest easy knowing your organization or clients are ready for anything.

And as always, if you want to learn more about how tools like media monitoring or media databases can help you prepare for a crisis, reach out and say hello! We’re always happy to chat.

TALK TO US