

A Quick Guide to Crisis Communication Planning

Write your plan now using best practices, a template and case study examples

OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Yes, there is opportunity in crisis. Because a crisis commands attention, you have the opportunity to enhance the reputation of your organization through behavior that exceeds expectations.

People pay as much attention to the response as to the problem. So, when you act and communicate in a way that demonstrates your values, you'll forge stronger relationships with key stakeholders.

BEST PRACTICES

Fundamentally, preparation supports success; crises are in inverse proportion to preparedness.

Prevention and planning

In short, you want to prevent what you can and prepare for what you can't. A useful exercise is a 'risks list' defining:

1. What can go wrong
2. How likely it is to happen
3. What damage can result

From there, you can define scenarios that enable a speedy crisis response – the work to protect lives and property and restore operations and the communication that tells the whole truth and tells it fast.

Managing reputation risk is everyone's responsibility. Your organization can best manage risk with:

- clear vision and values: 'what we stand for'
- a code of conduct; policies stating expectations
- understanding of stakeholders' expectations
- an open, trusting and supportive culture
- organizational learning
- reward and recognition systems
- extension of vision and values to partners
- open and honest communications

Strategies for communicating in crisis

Embracing the opportunity in a crisis means saying and doing things that reinforce the feelings you want people to have about you, working to exceed stakeholder expectations.

Transparency and accountability are the key institutional behaviors for successful reputation management. Your communication team must:

- Lead the creation of trust and generating goodwill
- Pay attention to warning signals
- Plan to be successful

TEMPLATE: Crisis Communication Plan

What's in a crisis plan? The ability to move fast!

We've included an outline that below to get you started. Your plan should...

1. Identify potential risks and responses
2. Establish the crisis team and set roles
3. Spell out the values and principles that will guide response and communications
4. Provide authority to act and to communicate

Here are the essential elements of a scenario-based crisis communication plan...

- Objectives and strategies
 - Tied to operational response
 - Require governance support
 - Tactics are situational
- Roles and responsibilities
 - Defined in advance
 - Communicated with transmittal of the plan
- Activation mechanism
 - What is a crisis?
 - What are the first steps?
- Resource inventory
 - People
 - Facilities
 - Equipment
- Templates and tools
 - Scenario-based assets – initial statements, etc.
 - Checklists for activation plans
 - Reporting: incidents, telephone logs

Again, your crisis communication plan needs to be instantly actionable by your team. Your response will be measured in minutes, not days.

AGENCY SUPPORT

Whether you want help planning or need to extra support in executing your plan in the face of a crisis, an experienced team is available to support you. We'd prefer you [call us now](#), so we have time to make the most of your opportunity

to exceed expectations. [Contact us](#) with any questions about this guide.

Read on for case studies on crisis communication...

Additional case studies available [upon request](#).

Health care system generates support for service expansion

SITUATION

Buffalo, New York-based Catholic Health, formed in 1998, is a non-profit healthcare system that provides care to Western New Yorkers across a network of hospitals, primary care centers, imaging centers and other community ministries. The successful system consolidated hospitals and services following the 1998 merger; then introduced advancements in cardiac, neonatal and other services; increased patients served; and improved financial performance. In 2000, Catholic Health needed to expand comprehensive cardiac care, the largest patient demand, projected to increase more than 20 percent in the next decade. Although Catholic Health led in cardiology services (with 45 percent market share), none of its hospitals provided cardiac surgical procedures. Catholic Health desired to provide a full continuum of cardiac care services rather than transfer patients outside the system to receive surgery at competing hospitals regarded for quality cardiac care. Catholic Health's goal: Successfully add heart surgery and advanced cath lab services in a competitive marketplace. Although Catholic Health had obtained necessary Certificate of Need approval from New York regulators, success would not come easily.

STRATEGY & TACTICS

Catholic Health board and management called on Hanser & Associates to recommend a communication strategy, message and plan that would resolve competitive issues, address stakeholder concerns related to Catholic Health's expansion, and launch the new service line to produce revenue for Catholic Health. The firm, already knowledgeable regarding marketing of cardiac services and familiar with the Catholic Health executive team through a series of previous projects, began the assignment with primary and secondary research. We interviewed local cardiologists and cardiac surgeons, health care administrators and community leaders. We also conducted comparative market research using data on cardiology centers in the top 100 markets in the U.S, which proved the need for an additional surgical center in Buffalo and that "competition breeds quality." These findings preempted competitors from credibly declaring, "Buffalo doesn't need another cardiac surgery center." Then, Hanser & Associates wrote physician, employee, donor and community communications; supported media relations; and created new Catholic Health Cardiac Services marketing materials.

RESULTS

The strategy and communication program created by Hanser & Associates received approval from Catholic Health's management and board, and was implemented within weeks. The resulting Catholic Health cardiac expansion announcement produced community-wide understanding and support of the new service. Funds to build and equip the new facility were quickly raised from donors. Top national cardiac surgeons sought the position of medical director for the new program. The program began performing surgeries in newly constructed cardiac operating rooms within 18 months! Net result: A much-needed cardiac surgery program serving the needs of patients in Western New York and producing millions of dollars of new revenue annually for Catholic Health.

Additional case studies available [upon request](#).

PR drives manufacturer's nationwide product recall

SITUATION

Oskaloosa, Iowa-based Clow Valve Company, one of the nation's leading manufacturers of fire hydrants, has millions of fire hydrants in use across the United States. Clow discovered in 2006 that a lubricant used in its Medallion and F2500 brand hydrants (manufactured 2002-2004) can corrode internal hydrant parts. The lubricant, containing a calcium acetate additive which causes the corrosion, is no longer used by Clow. The company hired Hanser & Associates in 2006 to assist in communicating the situation nationwide to its clients, industry and the public.

STRATEGY & TACTICS

Clow's response was driven by the company's commitment to locate every hydrant and replace the hydrant's upper stem and lubricant at Clow's expense. With the firm's communication counsel and assistance, Clow sent a Safety Notice in August 2006 to clients (water and fire departments in communities across the United States) to alert them to the need for replacing the lubricant and upper stem, and again in November 2007 and September 2008 regarding progress; informed clients of the very real danger that hydrants will be rendered inoperable if action is not taken. Clow – to manage its reputation – also informed clients that they will provide, at no cost, a contractor to do the inspection and replacement of the affected fire hydrants, or provide a labor fee and a free replacement kit. We distributed multiple news releases to related trade media, provided media spokesperson training for the Clow nationwide sales team and prepared them to proactively meet with every client.

RESULTS

More than 75% of the estimated 113,000 affected hydrants (in more than 600 communities) have been located and repaired. News coverage has been positive. Clow's management of the situation earned praise in the industry and loyalty from customers; representative of customers' accolades was Rick Adamson, an Oklahoma fire chief, who said, "Clow found a potential problem and proactively came to their customers... has its act together ... and is providing textbook customer service. We'll use more Clow fire hydrants in the future because they care for customers."

Additional case studies available [upon request](#).

PR during strike maintains customer relations

SITUATION

Monroe, Louisiana-based CenturyLink, the third largest telecommunications company in the United States, was formerly named US WEST and Qwest. The company was faced in 1998 with a classic crisis: a labor strike by 36,000 members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which describes itself as “union for the information age.” In Iowa, 1,900 workers were off the job. In CWA, the telecom industry was dealing with a respected, savvy organization. Hanser & Associates was retained by the telecom company to cover the Iowa region.

STRATEGY & TACTICS

We helped develop message strategy for a potential crisis, and conducted media training for local managers, produced a video news release and other video footage for TV news segments, and — through proactive placement of news coverage statewide — helped drive the message to the public that US WEST would maintain its commitment to customer service no matter what.

RESULTS

The strike lasted only two weeks. Customer complaint volume was minimal; public understanding was strong. Close contact with the media, public, regulatory agencies and elected officials averted a public backlash against the company.

EXCERPT FROM *INSIDE PR MAGAZINE*:

- “It’s a pleasure to be able to point to a company that seems to be making all the right moves. US WEST... is executing a masterful public relations plan. The tone of the company’s communications has been resolute without being confrontational, addressing both the demands of a competitive business environment and the needs of workers.
- “Given that US WEST is facing a well-coordinated ‘corporate campaign’ by the union, which has targeted investors, customers and employees with its own communications efforts, a proactive public relations approach is essential.
- “It’s not just a matter of framing the debate or getting the tone right, however. US WEST is managing the logistical aspects of the strike impressively, also. What the telecom provider has been able to do— is coordinate the delivery of a coherent corporate message at the local level ... What the telecom provider has been able to do ... is coordinate the delivery of a coherent corporate message at the local level ... has put in place a network of local media contacts that appears to be functioning seamlessly.
- “It is always difficult to predict, in the middle of a tense situation such as a labor dispute, who will win the battle for hearts and minds. There is plenty of room for error on both sides...US WEST has met the communications challenge in textbook fashion.”

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