

Crisis Communication

Why does it always seem that a crisis occurs at the worst possible time?

Plan ahead for a crisis, because you surely won't have time to plan after one occurs.

A crisis communications plan, whether for a natural or man-made disaster, and done ahead of time with volunteer input, focuses on expressing your mission in the best possible light. By thinking about how you will present yourself to the media and your constituents in advance of a crisis, you will free up time to deal with the crisis itself when it occurs. Another goal in developing a crisis communication plan is to gather all critical information in one place so you won't be scrambling to gather it during the actual event.

Crisis Communication: What, Who, When, and to Whom?

Whatever you do—do not react spontaneously to a crisis without a strategically developed game plan.

What should be said?

1. What ever you say, it should be well planned before you speak a word. When a crisis hits, the public only wants to know three things: What went wrong? How it will be fixed? and What will happen to ensure it doesn't happen again?
2. Develop a simple, straightforward message no matter how complex the crisis. When making a press statement, print it large and read from a script.
3. Prepare a list of specific message points and bring all questions from the media back to these essential points.
4. Adhere to the cardinal rules of crisis communications: tell the truth, tell it all, tell it fast.

Who should say it?

1. Form a crisis communication team. This team should include all of those individuals who have accurate knowledge about the problem and hold staff and volunteer leadership positions in your

- organization. This team will craft any statements to the public and may include such advisors as your legal representative and a public relations specialist.
2. One person should be designated as spokesperson for the organization. This may be your executive director, the chair of your board of directors, your financial director, your media/public relations staff person, or another person who could represent your organization credibly and presents well.
 3. Select a spokesperson who is calm under fire, knows the organization's message, comfortable with the media, and able to represent your organization in the most professional and positive manner.
 4. The spokesperson may, if it is deemed appropriate, defer to another expert, but that person must be fully prepared to keep on the message developed by the crisis communication team.

When should it be said?

1. Immediately! A delayed response will be seen as what it is: an attempt to cover without taking responsibility.
2. To help steer public perception, and the trust of your supporters and constituents, you need to get your message out first, before misinformation is given, thereby creating a secondary crisis.
3. The spokesperson should take time to read any prepared statements, and review possible questions and answers before appearing in front of the media.

To whom should it be said?

1. If an organization finds itself in a situation bad enough to be considered a crisis, fundraising, especially among major donors, may be impacted negatively. Regardless of how difficult the crisis, be truthful and communicate with your donors before they hear it broadcasted.
2. The people who need to hear the story from you may include your decision makers, your staff, your volunteer leaders, your program volunteers, your parent organization, your legal counsel, your insurance agent, vendors, suppliers, regulators, key community officials, and others.