



Crisis Communication Preparedness Amid a Global Pandemic

If your organization doesn't already have a crisis plan, now is the time to create one. If you do have a plan, it's the perfect time for reflection as we move through different stages of this global crisis. This means taking a fresh look at your crisis plan with the lessons you've learned over the past few months in mind.

BE PREPARED

The most effective way to manage a brand crisis is to plan and practice. A crisis communications plan – one that can be tailored and implemented in specific crisis scenarios like clockwork – is essential to every business. Creating a strong plan begins with answering the right questions.

Let's use an example of a restaurant facing accusations of a lack of social distancing. What questions will media ask you, your customers and possibly even investigators? What are your procedures and regulations due to COVID-19? How are your employees trained and held accountable for proper enforcement of social distancing? You get the point. Information is power. Once all that information is compiled, you can develop a comprehensive fact sheet that anticipates the tough questions and makes answering them a bit easier.

Prepare your "frontline communicators" (receptionist, security, call center, customer service, etc.) for exactly what they should do in a crisis. What do they do if the media calls? What if a camera crew shows up in your parking lot? Ensure they know who to call and how to refer media or other inquiries to the right person. This should be clearly defined in your crisis plan and media policy. This information should also be part of new employee orientation and ongoing training for frontline roles.

DEFINE ROLES

There is almost nothing worse than conflicting messages coming from multiple sources within your organization. A clearly defined crisis team with individual roles and responsibilities is vital to the successful execution of a crisis plan. Knowing in advance who is responsible for developing and approving messaging, and who is authorized to disseminate that information to each stakeholder group, will improve efficiency and effectiveness in crisis communication. It's important to assign backup roles in the event someone on your team is unavailable during the crisis.

SPEAK HONESTLY, EARLY AND OFTEN

A crisis evokes fear and uncertainty, and your audiences will look to you for fast and accurate information. In most cases, you'll want to address the issue early, and often (whenever you have "new" news to share) to keep your stakeholders informed and feeling at ease. Honesty and transparency are critical in times of crisis and help maintain loyalty among employees, customers and communities. The facts also help your loyal fans act as brand

ambassadors if and when they are asked about the issue. Avoid declarative statements that can be used against you later, such as "We will not let this virus be responsible for the loss of one job." These always end up coming back to haunt you, and once it's said, you can't take it back.

BE WHERE THEY ARE

When you're in the midst of a crisis it's important to evaluate all communication channels you use and how you will connect with your internal and external audiences on each of them. This includes an analysis of social media platforms, website, newsletter and more to ensure all key audiences are reached in an efficient and effective manner.

Like any good communications plan, one of the first things to consider when developing a crisis strategy is who your target audiences or stakeholders are and how they consume news. When your brand's reputation is in danger, you want all stakeholders to hear your side of the story, and the communications tools you use should match their preferences.

PRACTICE EMPATHY

We all know 2020 has been tough on the world so empathetic messaging is important. Most people want to know "how does this impact ME?" It's critical to anticipate the questions your audience will ask and prepare responses accordingly. The right kind of communication in a time of crisis can help restore a sense of calm to those you're interacting with when messaging is rooted in honesty, transparency and a commitment to solving the crisis at hand.

DEVELOP AN INFORMATION CENTER

The fast-moving nature of a crisis can easily lead to confusion and inaccurate messaging from both internal and external sources. Transparent communication and a central repository of information and statistics gives you a valuable resource to share across channels and audiences to ensure the facts are easily available when conflicting statements arise.

KEEP AN EAR TO THE GROUND

It's important to listen across all paid, earned, shared and owned media. This ongoing monitoring allows your team to quickly adapt and update your communications in the face of a reputation-impacting event. If you haven't invested in a social listening tool, we strongly recommend doing some research and allocating budget for a tool that meets your needs as an organization.



RUN PRACTICE DRILLS

Holding mock crisis drills gives your team a better understanding of their responsibilities so they are confident in their abilities when (not if) a real crisis occurs. Drills should vary in severity, focus and origin to ensure each group has an opportunity to practice and prepare.

The process to develop appropriate crisis scenarios and prepare for the training is tedious, but worth it. A crisis drill works best when the participants don't know the topic or the twists and turns the scenario may take. That's where it helps to have a partner like Franco to help design and facilitate the drill. We can develop the scenarios in advance and roll out updates on how the mock scenario is unfolding and circumstances are changing to the crisis response team throughout the course of the crisis drill. It forces the crisis response team to think on their feet and play their roles to effectively handle the situation from all angles – from operations to communications with internal and external audiences and stakeholders.

During the crisis drill, decisions will be made – some good and maybe some not so good. That's perfectly okay. The point is to have a safe space to practice and learn instead of making mistakes during the real deal. Following the drill, it's important to take time to reflect on what happened and identify gaps and areas to improve and update the plan accordingly.

REFLECT AND LEARN

The post-crisis phase includes the review of each event and helps you better prepare for the next crisis by focusing on “lessons learned.” This time is also used to provide follow-up information to the public, media and other stakeholders. By reflecting on what went well and how your team can improve, you can positively impact operations going forward. Pose questions such as:

- What surprised us?
- What weren't we prepared for?
- Who wasn't involved but should be in the future?
- What needs improvement?
- Should we consider updating our crisis plan more frequently?

STARTING YOUR CRISIS PLAN

Now that you feel more prepared it's time to develop or refresh your company's crisis plan. Here's a template to get you started.

Interested in learning more about our crisis services? Email us at FrancoCares@franco.com. You can also subscribe to our newsletter to receive regular updates on our team, clients and work in the community.



Founded in 1964, Franco is an integrated communications agency that builds strategic programs for B2B and B2C clients in a variety of industries. The company's integrated programs include a wide range of PR, marketing, digital and crisis communications counsel. Franco serves organizations in the automotive, technology, healthcare, consumer, nonprofit and professional service industries. Contact President Tina Kozak at kozak@franco.com or visit www.franco.com for more information.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN TEMPLATE

It's time to consider a potential crisis on your horizon and think through your crisis plan.
Map out the following:

SCENARIO OVERVIEW

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

HOLDING STATEMENT(S)

OUTLINE YOUR CRISIS TEAM AND CLEARLY DEFINE ROLES

Identify and prepare spokesperson

KEY MESSAGES AND WHICH CHANNELS TO USE TO COMMUNICATE THOSE MESSAGES

PRIORITY AUDIENCES

INTEGRATED APPROACH

POTENTIAL MEDIA QUESTIONS

KEY TIPS

- Communicate early and often.
- If an apology is warranted, give one.
- Be forthcoming, honest and empathetic. Take a “human first” approach to your response.
- NEVER say “no comment” – there’s always something better you can say. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say you will find the answer and get back in touch.
- Always return calls from the media and other key stakeholders promptly. Say what you can and follow up with more information when you have it.

Need help with your crisis communications? Contact us to learn more about how we help companies prepare for and navigate through a crisis.