

Crisis Communication

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What This Tutorial Covers

- Comparison of risk communication and crisis communication
- Stages of a crisis
- Communicating with the public during a crisis
- Communicating with the media during a crisis
- Additional communication considerations

Risk Communication and Crisis Communication

- Crisis communication refers to communication about an unfortunate event or occurrence that can hurt people, organizations, and economies, among other things.
- For the purposes of this tutorial, risk communication refers to communication related to the health and safety of people and the environment.
 - While we can see that the principles of risk communication sometimes pertain to crisis communication...
 - It is also clear that not all risk communication is crisis communication, and, conversely, not all crisis communication is risk communication.
- Nevertheless, given the overlap, it is helpful to review some principles and special characteristics of crisis communication.

Stages of a Crisis

- A crisis has five stages (Fearn-Banks, 2002):
 1. *Detection*: The crisis may begin with warning signs, such as an organization like yours having a crisis.
 2. *Prevention/Preparation*:
 - *Prevention*: These include specific actions an organization can take to prevent a crisis from occurring. Having ongoing communication with key publics can help build relationships that may prevent a crisis or lessen the damage.
 - *Preparation*: When crises cannot be averted, having an up-to-date crisis communication plan that tells everyone in the organization what needs to occur can help organizations manage crises.
 3. *Containment*: This refers to the actions that the organization takes to minimize the crisis' impacts.
 4. *Recovery*: This relates to how an organization returns to “business as usual” after the crisis.
 5. *Learning*: This refers to how the crisis is examined afterward to determine losses, gains, and areas for improvement.

Communicating with the Public During a Crisis

- Organizations must identify their “publics” during a crisis. This includes people inside and outside the organization that need to know what’s happening.
 - People inside the organization include all types of employees, from the CEO to the intern, as well as stockholders.
 - People outside the organization may include the media, community members, consumers, government officials, and trade organizations or other groups that have an active interest in your organization.
- Crisis communication works best when public relations programs have been *ongoing, positive, and proactive* with these internal and external audiences.
 - In other words, organizations should develop positive relationships with their publics *before* a crisis happens.

Communicating with the Media During a Crisis

- Before a crisis or when a crisis occurs, organizations should anticipate what information the media will want.
- Never say “No Comment” to a reporter during a crisis. It will look like you are hiding something or admitting guilt.
- What will the media ask in the event of a crisis? Fearn-Banks (2002, p. 67) says to expect the following questions:
 - What happened?
 - Were there deaths or injuries?
 - What is the damage’s extent?
 - Why did the damage happen?
 - Who or what is responsible?
 - What is being done about the crisis?
 - When will it be over?
 - Is this the first time it has happened?
 - Were there warning signs?

Additional Media Considerations

- Here are some additional suggestions (Fearn-Banks, 2002):
 - If your organization has made a mistake, it is best to admit it at once and apologize. Trying to cover up will only prolong the crisis.
 - If the situation is urgent, e.g., the disaster has already resulted in death, injury, or poses a safety threat to people's health, contact the media and let them know that you are working on the situation. This shows that you care about the people's well-being and are aware of the media's needs.
 - If the situation is not urgent, spend some time investigating the situation and what happened so that you can prepare for the media's questions.

Additional Media Considerations

- More suggestions (Fearn-Banks, 2002):
 - If a reporter contacts you and you are unaware about the situation, ask if you can get back to the reporter after you check out what happened. Don't talk about something when you do not know the details.
 - Identify a primary spokesperson for your organization to reduce the possibility of conflicting statements or unsubstantiated opinions. In the case of a crisis, the CEO is typically the primary spokesperson.
 - Consider holding a news conference to communicate key messages about the crisis. However, don't hold unnecessary news conferences that only maintain the spotlight on your organization.

Cooperating with the Media

- In the “spirit of cooperation” with the media, Fearn-Banks (2002, p. 68) recommends three types of responses to media questions:
 1. “We know and here’s all the information.”
 2. “We don’t know everything at this time. Here’s what we know. We’ll find out more and let you know.”
 3. “We have no idea, but we’ll find out and tell you.”

Do's and Don'ts When Working with the Media During Crises

- Do...
 - Listen to the whole question before answering
 - Use everyday language
 - Maintain the right attitude
 - Understand the reporter's job
 - Be accessible
 - Treat the reporter as an ally
 - Tell the truth
 - Look the reporter in the eye
 - Follow your crisis communication plan
 - Keep employees informed about the crisis
- Don't...
 - Be timid
 - Guess or speculate
 - Get too upset about being misquoted
 - Play favorites
 - Pull ads from the media because they weren't cooperative
 - Consider your news release perfect "as is"
 - Stick to a story if the story has changed
 - Get trapped into predictions
 - Wear sunglasses, chew gum, or smoke

(Drawn from Fearn-Banks, 2002, pp. 70-71)

Additional Communication Considerations

- While the media are an important conduit of information during a crisis, *do not rely completely on the media to get your message to people the crisis affects.*
 - Relying on the media means you have less control over the final message.
 - In addition, the media may have other topics to cover besides your crisis, meaning that you may get very little “air time.”
- Alternative methods of communication with your publics include:
 - Direct mailings
 - Telephone calls
 - 1-800 Hotlines
 - Newsletters
 - Web sites
 - Emails
 - Employee meetings
 - Public meetings outside of organization
 - Paid advertisements in media outlets

References

- Fearn-Banks, K. (2002). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.