

Crisis Communication in a Social Media Age



THE ART OF KNOWING WHEN TO ENGAGE



If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell six friends. If you make customers unhappy on the internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends.

— JEFF BEZOS, FOUNDER OF AMAZON

The barrier to communication is the lowest it's ever been. Social media gives us the ability to communicate with thousands of people in an instant. With this great opportunity, however, comes great risk. The opportunities for missteps also are the highest they've ever been.

When thinking about potential crises, it's not a matter of *if* an incident will happen, but *when*. Virtually every organization around the world routinely deals with incidents, but the true matter of resilience lies in managing them so they do not regularly become full-blown crises. The organizations that realize the inevitability of incidents and prepare for them in advance are those that are likely to avoid crises and emerge with minimal brand reputation damage.

Developing a crisis communications plan is the first step to managing your response to future incidents. This plan needs regular updates and should be reviewed often by an established crisis management team.

Planning is the only phase of a crisis that you can control. The crisis itself and the period following will be fraught with factors and elements beyond your control. So, essentially the amount of time, organization and effort that goes into planning could very well determine how successfully you emerge from it.

The Reality of Our Social Media World

EVERYONE IS A REPORTER.

Today, anyone can be a reporter. What you say while standing in line for coffee or at lunch with a friend can be overheard. It's all fair game. We don't have to be paranoid, but do need to be wise—and this is especially true in how we interact with our friends and the general public on social media. Everything we share can be captured quickly in a screenshot that lives forever. Even private messages (or any digital communication) can be shared broadly in seconds.

EVERYONE IS IN PR.

In a social media age, everyone is in PR. With social media, everyone has access to a platform that gives them a voice and influence.

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED.

Because everything online is integrated, your messages have to be unified across all channels. A single post can impact the entire brand's reputation.

Five Fundamentals of Managing a Crisis

1. **Perception:** If people believe you've lost control, then for all practical purposes, you have. Perception shapes reality. Regaining control becomes an uphill battle.

2. **Perspective:** Do not underestimate or overestimate your problem. However, if you are going to be guilty of one of these, it is better to overestimate your problem. Keep your eye on the solution. It is very easy to get frustrated when certain things do not go according to plan. Maintain long-range vision whenever possible.

3. **Alignment:** Being in alignment is critical for nonprofit and faith-based organizations. Although a crisis may only involve one part of your organization, it will likely subject all the related entities to intense scrutiny. All branches and affiliated organizations need to be on the same page before, during and after a crisis. A crisis is not the time to begin touting positive aspects of your organization.

4. **Tone:** The spokesperson for the circumstance must not show signs of being frustrated, defensive, nervous, confused, frantic or uninformed. They will influence the impression that the public will form about your organization. Approximately 90% of impressions are formed by nonverbal cues. You must also maintain a professional and positive tone throughout all proactive posts and reactive responses.

5. **Credibility:** Above all, prioritize emerging from a crisis with your integrity intact. Organizations have survived many things—loss of donors, lawsuits, moral failures—but it is difficult to survive losing your integrity and credibility when communicating in the wake of a crisis.



When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

Guiding Principles for Social Media Response

Before implementing any proactive or reactive tactics in a crisis situation, consider the following:

- People are paying attention now more than ever. Social media platforms often bring out detractors and critics. This is the nature of the digital world and *it will rarely be “fair.”*
- Regardless of how unjust it feels, consider the *actual degree* of damage the criticism is causing. What is the size of the critic’s platform? Is it making a *true impact* on your audience?
- Be *extremely cautious* when using your platform to bring light to your critic’s feedback. You typically want to avoid using your platform to elevate or bring more attention to a critic. A “win” for a critic is that your response amplifies their platform. Avoid giving them free publicity.
- We must strategically consider whether doing something is better than doing nothing. It will always feel like doing “nothing” is letting the critic win—that is often a false assumption.
- Every time you engage a critic, it gives them fuel for the tank and new information to misconstrue. If you choose to respond, aim to do so in one thorough way.
- Pause and consider your tone. Make sure everything you do *appears confident*, resolute and just. Fear, panic and defensiveness will communicate that you have something to hide. In a crisis, *everything you do*—or don’t do—communicates something.
- In most situations, less is more. If you address critics, *keep it simple*, clear and direct. Audiences have a limited capacity to try and understand your side. Don’t debate petty or minor issues. However, make sure any response is complete so you don’t have to follow up.
- Be aware that anything you say could be used as fodder for critics down the road. Once you have the message points finalized, make sure they are *applied across your team*.
- Consider conducting a social media audit to see whether you have any prior content on the topic at hand. Don’t remove anything without counsel. Sometimes removing content can create *more controversy*.
- If you are in the wrong, be *quick to apologize*.

Do's + Don'ts

WHEN RESPONDING TO A CRISIS, REMEMBER TO:

- Use the words “apologize” and “I’m sorry.”
- Clearly state what you did wrong.
- Use brevity.
- Offer reparations.
- Own it all at once.

WHEN RESPONDING TO A CRISIS, AVOID:

- Minimizing the situation.
- Using the word “but.”
- Asking the victim to do something (e.g., forgive you).
- Shifting blame.
- Using conditional statements (if this, then that).

Digital + Social Media Considerations

Social media has altered the dynamics of all communications initiatives. We’ve learned that digital strategies are critical and should follow solid communications principles in alignment with all other efforts. When establishing your social communication efforts in the time of a crisis, remember:

- Most people view their activity on social media as isolated instances, but the internet’s memory is infinite. Your social media activity creates a de facto body of work. With every post, you are adding to your repertoire and making deposits—or withdrawals—on your **desired brand equity**.
- It is better to have fewer followers and **maintain high-quality, on-brand messaging** than to have a larger audience with less consistency.
- Do not engage critics **without counsel**. Rash behavior escalates issues, elevates a critic and extends a debate.
- As a general rule, if you wouldn’t want an image or comment on a screen in Times Square, **don’t post it**.

Questions to Ask When Determining Social Media Communication During a Crisis:

1. Who is driving the issue?
2. What level of influence do they have?
3. Have you faced this type of incident before?
4. In addition to social media, is this incident impacting other channels?
5. Could no response be the best response?
6. When can “business as usual” begin again?
7. What are the PR implications and legal ramifications of the issue at hand?
8. Should my response be topical, empathetic or apologetic?
9. What is the potential backlash?
10. What are the risks of “blocking” a critic?
11. Is there a way to move this conversation offline?
12. Can we turn misinformation into accurate messaging?

Guardian was built to increase the impact, influence and awareness of faith-driven organizations in this media-driven age.