



16-2 PR crisis management

Key term

Web 2.0 – the second generation of the web, where people can work together and share information online.

Of all the areas of PR, that of issues and crisis management has changed the most fundamentally in recent years. Those changes revolve around the advent of the digital age. Two areas that have forced PR practitioners to review their operations and practices across the board are the phenomenal speed at which stories break and spread, and the creation of the citizen journalist. The digital era has now reached a point commonly known as **Web 2.0**, which refers to the ability through mobile devices to catch, spread and report on incidents.

More dangerously, the digital era has enabled lobby and pressure groups to set forth their grievances more quickly, and to magnify these more greatly.

1 Crisis management planning

Reasons for crisis management planning

Crisis management springs into action when a crisis occurs. However, crisis management **planning** can and should take place in advance. It can be used to identify potential crises and put in place strategies to respond to different types of crises, thus limiting the damage the crisis can cause. A crisis management plan tries to seek the best possible outcome for an organisation, brand or person and its stakeholders in the circumstances.

Aims and objectives of crisis management plans

The main aim of a crisis management plan is **damage limitation**. The plan will focus on reducing the impact of a crisis to the organisation's business and/or reputation if a crisis is to occur. The objectives of the plan will set out how damage should be limited – for example, by identifying risks, anticipating potential types of crisis, predicting possible scenarios and producing plans which can be quickly actioned when a crisis does occur. Being able to act quickly can be key to limiting the damage to reputation or business.

Key term

Damage limitation – all efforts made to minimise the negative effects of a crisis on reputation and/or business.

Methods used to create crisis management plans

Crisis management plans set out the processes that should occur if a crisis arises. When a crisis happens an organisation is likely to be under intense media attention; the PR team and other key people will be stressed and very busy just trying to react to what is going on. A ready-made plan will help to keep your head clear, outline what to do and who needs to do it.

Management plans are created through a number of steps:

- auditing the risks to an organisation
- looking in depth at possible scenarios
- putting in place contingency plans which can be used in the event that a crisis does occur.

Audit

Part of the role of those in PR is to anticipate possible threats. The very first part to constructing a crisis management plan commences with a crisis audit. A crisis audit establishes within an organisation the many different crises it may face and any vulnerabilities within its structure. If an operational issue is discovered during the course of the audit, for instance rumours about malpractice, then this issue can be addressed.

Scenario planning

Scenario planning aims to produce flexible plans to deal with potential crises. It combines known facts, with educated guesses, for example, the potential reaction of the press to news that an employee has committed fraud.

One method of scenario planning is to ask 'What are the worst things that could happen to your organisation or your client?'. Identifying all the possible 'what ifs'

will allow you to assess the likelihood of them occurring and their severity if they did occur. Using this information it is possible to draw up a series of potential scenarios or stories and create a model for managing them.

In carrying out this type of planning, it may be possible to anticipate possible crises and adapt current protocols to prevent them from occurring in the first place.

Risk analysis and contingency planning

There is some crisis management planning that can be put in place before a crisis occurs. A crisis requires a very swift response, so it is good to have a skeleton plan in place. You can use risk analysis to identify and assess the severity of the types of crisis your organisation faces. Having identified risks, you can put a plan in place to minimise the risk of a crisis occurring or to minimise the damage if it does occur – these are contingency plans. Organisations prepare contingency plans because it is understood that things can and will go wrong at some point. The contingency planning will prepare people, for example, by providing media training to key spokespeople who may be called on in a crisis.

Contents of the plan

The crisis management plan:

- contains details of the courses of action to take in the event of a variety of types of crisis
- gives names and contact details of critical personnel, including the crisis management team, key departments and spokespeople who should be notified in the event of a crisis
- provides instructions on what is required in the immediate response – for example, who will deal with media enquiries and what resources they will need
- sets out the necessary type and style of any crisis communications, and puts fact sheets and dark site web pages in place
- identifies which media and social media should be monitored, and which media and social media should be used by the organisation to communicate messages
- provides templates for crisis communications and give a guide to the type and style of these communications
- will give a contact list of all key stakeholders and media agencies.

Types of crisis management plan

An organisation may create plans to manage the different types of crisis it identifies that it may face. For example:

- a crisis which occurs due to an ongoing internal operational problem which has been allowed to escalate
- an employee dispute
- a loss of service due to a technical problem
- an emergency or incident which occurs and threatens the lives of employees or customers
- an attack on the organisation from activists or the public – for example, a boycott.

Reviewing and evaluating crisis management plans

To review crisis management plans, you should ask yourself or your organisation a number of questions.

- Are you listening to what people are saying about you in traditional and new media? Do you need to adapt your message to prevent an issue escalating? Will you spot a crisis before it hits?
- Are you addressing any issues identified by an audit?
- Are the nominated crisis management team prepared to react at very short notice if a crisis occurs?
- Does the plan outline the required roles and responsibilities?
- Does the plan effectively position digital media as a vital element within the overall response framework?
- Do you have templates and guidelines in place for news releases, web pages, social media, etc. to communicate your key messages at short notice?
- Have you tested that your plan will be effective in a number of 'what if' scenarios? Does the plan clearly set out steps you can take to limit damage?
- Does the plan contain key contact details? Are you regularly reviewing these details and updating the list of stakeholders?

Crisis simulation

Crisis simulation is a role-play exercise that can give people an insight into what a crisis might be like. It can also be used as a tool to help you review and evaluate the plans you have put in place to manage a crisis.

A group of individuals, perhaps a communication team, are placed in a fictional crisis scenario and must manage it. The scenario is made to feel real as the group receive a stream of emails and telephone calls, and see fictional media responses to the crisis. Major companies may use this type of crisis simulation to test their management strategies and identify strengths and weakness. It can also be helpful in identifying individuals who cope well during times of crisis and ensuring everyone feels more prepared.

Crisis resolution

While the details of the crisis management plan will focus on how to communicate in the initial phases of a crisis to limit the damage, it is also important that the plan identifies ways to resolve a crisis. The resolution to a crisis will vary with each situation; however, it is very likely to require:

- a plan to ensure continuity of service and business as usual, as far as is possible
- an investigation of the events leading up to and factors contributing to the crisis
- decisions made about how to address the findings of the investigation
- institutional or operational change to address issues identified by the investigation and to minimise the risk of the crisis occurring again.

The crisis management plan should identify the people who have the authority to make enquiries and sign off changes required to resolve issues.

2 PR strategies for crisis management

When a crisis occurs, you need to respond quickly and confidently to limit damage. A crisis management plan will help you do this, but every crisis will be different and you need to assess the best way to respond. A strategy to do this is as follows.

- **Monitor** – try to get all the information available and make a quick but thorough assessment of the facts. Continue to do this as the crisis develops: assess the situation and how it is changing. Listen to your stakeholders.
- **Manage** – decide on the key messages you need to give to stakeholders and the best method to reach each group. Brief any spokespeople and prepare them to speak to the media.
- **Respond** – it is important to respond quickly. A lack of information will give the public and the media space to speculate. Rumours and speculation may be far more damaging than the original crisis. Responding quickly may allow you to direct the narrative of the crisis and limit the damage. Communicate to stakeholders through appropriate channels, both traditional media and social media. Make sure the tone of voice is appropriate and that you are listening as well as giving your key messages. Be honest – remember that people are more likely to forgive an organisation if they are open and appear to want to address an issue.
- **Reassess** – however good your communications are, some stakeholders will remain unhappy. In this situation you need to decide how to respond. Sometimes it may be better to stay quiet, but if you feel you may still be able to change their opinion, prepare an appropriate communication.

Timelines

Once a crisis is identified, it is wise to produce a timeline to show the key tasks you need to complete as part of your monitoring, managing and responding to the crisis. The timeline will show you how long you have to implement each task and will help you make sure that you use your time effectively to handle the crisis, not spending too long on one thing.

Lines of communication

As detailed in Topic guide 16.1, pages 8 and 9, it is important to keep internal and external lines of communication open. You need to keep your own people informed as well as ensuring your key messages are communicated clearly to stakeholders and the public. It is also important that you monitor and listen to the feedback in response to the crisis and your key messages.

Types of crisis response

Organisations will react in different ways to a crisis. They may respond by:

- stating that the accusations against them are false and providing evidence to show this
- denying that the crisis exists
- claiming that the organisation has done everything in its control to prevent a crisis and is not at fault

- acknowledging that a problem has occurred and explaining what they are doing to put it right
- acknowledging that a problem has occurred, but stating that it is not significant to the larger scheme of things, e.g. one unhappy customer but many more happy ones
- apologising for an incident, accepting blame and explaining what will be done to put it right.

You need to assess the crisis and decide which response you will take and how to communicate this to stakeholders.

Importance of a good spokesperson

The crisis management plan will identify the crisis management team and key spokespeople. It is very important that the spokesperson is well chosen and has adequate **media training**. In a time of crisis, a throwaway remark by someone in an important role will be magnified. It is therefore important that spokespeople understand how to speak and behave. Spokespeople need to:

- represent the organisation well, speak with confidence and empathy, and appear to be listening to concerns
- be well briefed. Journalists are likely to ask tricky questions and the answers will be scrutinised. If the spokesperson does not appear to have all the facts, they may worsen the situation
- react well in an interview situation, answering questions and not appearing evasive
- be well versed in the key messages that the organisation wants to get across to the media, stakeholders and the public, and put these across in a clear way.

Activity

Richard Branson has been the spokesperson for Virgin Trains during times of crisis, for example for the 2007 Cumbrian train crash. Analyse his approach. What do you think have been his strengths?

3 Responding to the media

Key terms

Media training – training to help spokespeople appear natural in interview situations, in front of cameras and in radio and television broadcasts. It also helps them identify and get across their key messages and gives them strategies for responding to difficult questions with confidence.

Citizen journalism – news stories reported, analysed and disseminated by the public (for example, via mobile phones or the internet), shifting the focus of breaking news away from traditional media.

In the past, organisations could use courts of law to close down the circulation of negative news. They could also brief media in advance for a crisis situation, and develop relationships with media and stakeholders ahead of an incident. Those tactics and strategies no longer necessarily apply to the modern world.

Social media and **citizen journalism** have changed the way a crisis may break. It is now possible that news of a crisis will appear in social media first, perhaps as a complaint tweeted about a technical problem or a photo posted by a bystander. Normal members of the public can share images and audio of an incident, and blogs can misinform and fuel speculation.

While Web 2.0 provides a platform for broadcasting a crisis, it also provides organisations with other channels to respond to news of a crisis, without needing to rely on journalists. Organisations can respond to criticism on social media and defuse situations by talking directly to customers. They can have conversations with the public and stakeholders, rather than simply giving messages. A company can immediately address inaccurate information. Social media allows organisations to notify stakeholders of any issues before they become crises and once a crisis has occurred, social media will allow an organisation to provide up-to-the-minute information about the situation and the response.

The key to a successful crisis strategy in the digital world demands a change in mindset for an organisation. Instead of combatting the negativity, it is imperative that we respond to it positively – inviting the target audience to ‘make up its own mind’.

Strategies and tactics to respond to different media

Having identified your key messages, you will need to communicate these to the public and your stakeholders. There are many media channels through which you can communicate. **Table 16.2.1** shows the types of media and what communications will need to be prepared for them.

Table 16.2.1: Strategies and tactics to respond to different media

Type of media	Strategy	Tactics
Traditional print media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor news stories to establish the media's response. Prepare key messages and establish which publications and journalists to target; prioritise if necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare a news release. Hold a press conference or media briefing. Respond to enquiries quickly. Address key questions on your own website so journalists have a source of information. Respect the deadlines to which journalists work.
Television and radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor what is being broadcast. Prioritise broadcasts appropriate to your key stakeholders. Prepare key messages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief spokespeople on the situation and coach them to give the key messages. If you do not have full details of the situation, prepare a holding statement to explain as much as you do know. Supply spokespeople for interviews. Supply images, video and audio where relevant.
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor social media channels closely to ensure issues do not escalate and to ensure misinformation is addressed. Use social media to communicate directly with stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address criticisms and complaints by acknowledging that people are unhappy and setting out how you can put this right. Communicate your key messages via social media. Give up-to-date information about the situation and your actions to resolve it. Mobilise advocates that you have built up prior to the crisis with your overall social media strategy – their positive messages can defend or neutralise an attack on social networks.

Activity

Carry out some research into the service outages that affected the O2 and Research in Motion's BlackBerry networks in 2012. Compare the two companies' handling of the crises they faced. What strategies and tactics did they employ? How did they use social media to communicate with customers? What messages did they communicate? What was the overall outcome?

While you need to tailor your communications to the different types of media, the most important thing to remember is that the quality of the content and the messages must be clear and relevant. Communications must:

- explain the facts of the situation
- set out what the organisation is doing to address the crisis
- show empathy for the stakeholders who have been affected.

Link

You will find more information about different types of media in Unit 5: Understanding the media landscape. You can read more about pitching to and communicating with the media in Unit 7: Communicating effectively in public relations and Unit 8: Pitching public relations stories to the media.

It is also important to recognise when you need to take responsibility and, if applicable, to say you are sorry. Saying sorry does not necessarily mean that you are admitting guilt or taking the blame. It shows that you understand that you are involved in a situation in which the media and stakeholders are holding you to account, and that you want to deal with it in the best way possible.

Monitoring social media

Twitter, Facebook and other social media have created new channels of communication that allow the public and key influencers to vent their feelings or fury at an organisation or brand. Social networks also allow large groups of people to communicate with each other and create pressure groups quickly and efficiently. This means that an issue can very quickly escalate to become a crisis. Even if a crisis does not begin in the social media space, it is likely that people will talk about it here. Rumours about a crisis can circulate quickly via social networks and these can increase the damage caused by the original crisis.

The use of hashtags in Twitter to identify a keyword, name or phrase allows people to quickly establish links with others also using that hashtag. News of a crisis situation will begin to 'trend' as more people become aware of it and tweet or retweet about it.

The potential for a rapid escalation of a situation on social media means that all organisations should be monitoring conversations about themselves and their brands on social media platforms.

There are a number of tools available to monitor and alert you to any online activity involving your organisation. These allow you to select keywords and will record each time they are used on various social media channels. The keywords you might want to monitor include:

- your organisation's name
- any hashtags or other keywords people are using to identify the crisis situation
- brands or campaigns associated with the organisation
- famous people associated with the organisation
- policies that affect the organisation
- activist groups that hold negative feelings towards the organisation
- the industries your organisation is a part of.

You need to regularly review the feed from monitoring tools and assess whether it is positive, neutral or negative. Because of the speed with which negative coverage can escalate, you need to respond to it as quickly as possible to limit the damage.

Activity

Carry out some research into the most widely used social media monitoring tools. Which tools would you use for different social media platforms?

4 Positive and negative outcomes

Positive outcomes

If handled well, a crisis can actually be an opportunity to improve an organisation's reputation. An organisation that apologises for its mistakes, listens to its stakeholders and addresses issues will be stronger in the long term. Taking timely, effective action to resolve a crisis demonstrates that:

- an organisation will take responsibility when it is at fault
- the leaders of an organisation are in touch with the needs of their stakeholders
- the organisation is able to deal with situations under pressure
- the organisation is open and honest, and can be trusted
- the organisation wants to do its best and take the necessary steps to improve.

Negative outcomes

If crisis management is handled badly, long-term damage can be done to an organisation's reputation. This will affect relationships with stakeholders and in turn may affect a business's bottom line.

Negative outcomes of poor crisis management include:

- brand boycotts
- loss of trust in an organisation or brand
- reduction in sales.

What not to do

You should avoid:

- ✗ saying 'no comment'. It can make you look guilty and as if you do not care
- ✗ speculating about the situation and using loaded words such as 'crisis' or 'severe'. Give the facts as you have them
- ✗ spinning the situation. It is usually better to be open and honest. Doing anything else may appear insincere
- ✗ a delay in responding. A lack of information will provide a vacuum that the media will fill with speculation
- ✗ reacting without all the facts. It is important to respond quickly, but make sure your spokespeople are fully briefed. Journalists will ask difficult questions, so it is important to be armed with all the information. Media training is key!

After the crisis

A crisis, however well managed, will damage an organisation's reputation and its relationship with stakeholders. Therefore, when a crisis has been resolved, PR professionals need to be active in creating positive PR stories. Engage stakeholders, the media and the public in how you are addressing any continuing issues. Produce stories that show the organisation doing good – perhaps about how it is involved in the community or spearheading change in the industry.

Activity

Look into the statements made by BP's CEO and key spokesperson, Tony Hayward, in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Make recommendations for how the PR crisis management could have been handled differently.

In addition to rebuilding your reputation, make sure services are 'business as usual'. You can rebuild customer or stakeholder trust in the long term by doing your existing business well.

Carry out an audit to make sure that there are no issues lurking. If they are, address them so they do not become the next crisis.

Portfolio activity

3.1, 3.2, 3.3

To demonstrate that you understand PR crisis management, answer the following questions. Use relevant examples to demonstrate your understanding.

- 1 Evaluate the importance of PR crisis management planning to an organisation.
- 2 Using examples, assess the PR strategies used in the management of crises.
- 3 Using examples, analyse the role of social media monitoring in crisis management.

Further reading

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Steve advises a range of international brands, companies and government agencies on their digital and PR strategies and on their responses to crisis and issues management in the commercial and digital arena.

Sheila Gunn MBE was a journalist for over 20 years, including 12 years on the political staff of *The Times*, before becoming political press spokesperson for the then Prime Minister, John Major. After the 1997 general election, she was appointed head of European PR at Healey & Baker (now Cushman & Wakefield). She later moved to the strategic communications consultancy Fleishman-Hillard as associate director. She has also served as a councillor in Camden and stood as a parliamentary candidate in the 2005 general election.

She is now an adjunct professor at Syracuse University, teaching public relations at the London faculty. She is also a visiting lecturer at City University's journalism department and works with presidential and parliamentary candidates in developing countries. In 2010 she produced a textbook *So You Want to be a Political Journalist*.