

# **The 11 Steps Of Crisis Communications**

**By Dr. L. Darryl Armstrong and Associates  
Behavioral Public Relations**

**[www.armstrongandassociates.org](http://www.armstrongandassociates.org)**

***Crisis: An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs whose outcome will make a decisive difference for better or worse (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary).***

**Every organization is vulnerable to crises.**

**The days of playing ostrich are gone.**

**You can play sticking your head in the sand, but your stakeholders will not be understanding or forgiving because they've watched what happened with**

**Bridgestone-Firestone, Bill Clinton, Arthur Anderson, Enron, Worldcom, 9-11, The Asian Tsunami Disaster, Hurricane Katrina, Vice President Dick Cheney's hunting accident and President George W. Bush's port contract, the UT President fiasco, or the Governor Ernie Fletcher illness**

**If you don't prepare, you WILL take more damage.**

**And when I look at existing "crisis management" plans when conducting a "crisis document audit," what I often find is a failure to address the many communications issues related to crisis/disaster response.**

**Leaders in organizations don't understand that, without adequate communications:**

- **Operational response is going to break down.**
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- **Stakeholders (internal and external) won't know what's happening and quickly become confused, angry, and react negatively.**
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- **The organization will be perceived as inept, at best, and criminally negligent, at worst.**

**The basic steps of effective crisis communications are not difficult, but they require advance work in order to minimize damage.**

**The slower the response, the more damage is incurred.**

**So if you're serious about crisis preparedness and response, I want to share 11 key steps you must take --- the first eight of which can and should be undertaken before any crisis occurs.**

# **The 11 Steps of Crisis Communications**

## **1. Identify Your Crisis Communications Team**

**A small team of senior executives should be identified to serve as your company's Crisis Communications Team.**

**Ideally, the team will be led by the company CEO, with the firm's top public relations executive and legal counsel as his or her chief advisers.**

**If your in-house PR executive does not have sufficient crisis communications expertise, he or she may choose to retain an agency or independent consultant with that specialty.**

**Other team members should be the heads of major company divisions, to include finance, personnel and operations.**

**Let me say a word about legal counsel. I don't like lawyers – although some of my best friends are lawyers and understand what I mean when I say – What is a 100 lawyers at the bottom of the ocean? Not enough.**

**However, sometimes, during a crisis, a natural conflict arises between the recommendations of the company's legal counsel on the one hand, and those of the public relations counsel on the other.**

**While it may be legally prudent not to say anything, this kind of reaction can land the company in public relations "hot water" that is potentially, as damaging, or even more damaging, than any financial or legal ramification.**

**Lawyers have a hard time understanding that you can and often do lose in the "court of public opinion" when you clam up.**

**Fortunately, more and more legal advisors are becoming aware of this fact and are working in close cooperation with public relations counsel.**

**The importance of this understanding cannot be underestimated.**

**I am pleased to say that I have grown to respect most lawyers I personally work with – however, it still doesn't mean that I have to like them {SMILE}**

**Arthur Anderson lost its case and went out of business due to the judgment rendered by the court of public opinion, not the judgment of a court of law.**

## **2. Identify Spokespersons**

**Within each team, there should be individuals who are the only ones authorized to speak for the company in times of crisis.**

**The CEO should be one of those spokespersons, but not necessarily the primary spokesperson.**

## **Crisis Communications Management 101**

**The fact is that some chief executives are brilliant business people but not very effective in-person communicators.**

**The decision about who should speak is made after a crisis breaks - but the pool of potential spokespersons should be identified and trained in advance.**

**Not only are spokespersons needed for media communications, but for all types and forms of communications, internal and external, including on-camera, at a public meeting, at employee meetings, etc.**

**You really don't want to be making decisions about so many different types of spokespersons while "under fire."**

### **3. Spokesperson Training**

**Two typical quotes from well-intentioned company executives summarize the reason why your spokespersons should receive professional training in how to speak to the media:**

- **"I talked to that nice reporter for over an hour and he didn't use the most important news about my organization."**
- **"I've done a lot of public speaking. I won't have any trouble at that public hearing."**

**Regarding the first example, there are a good number of Mike Wallace's "60 Minutes" victims who thought they knew how to talk to the press.**

**In the second case, most executives who have attended a hostile public hearing have gone home wishing they had been wearing a pair extra absorbent of Depends.**

**All stakeholders - internal and external - are just as capable of misunderstanding or misinterpreting information about your organization as the media, and it's your responsibility to minimize the chance of that happening.**

**In one example of such confusion, a completely healthy, well-managed \$2 billion company's stock price dropped almost 25 percent in one day because Dow Jones reported that a prominent securities firm had made a "sell" recommendation, which it later denied ever making.**

**The damage, of course, was already done.**

**Spokesperson training teaches you to be prepared, to be ready to respond in a way that optimizes the response of all stakeholders.**

## **4. Establish Communications Protocols**

**Initial crisis-related news can be received at any level of a company.**

**A janitor may be the first to know there is a problem, or someone in personnel, or notification could be in the form of a midnight phone call from an out-of-town executive.**

**Who should be notified, and where do you reach them?**

**An emergency communications "tree" should be established and distributed to all company employees, telling them precisely what to do and who to call if there appears to be a potential for or an actual crisis.**

**In addition to appropriate supervisors, at least one member of the Crisis Communications Team, plus an alternate member, should include their cell phone, pager if they have one, office and home phone and fax numbers on the emergency contact list.**

**Some companies prefer not to use the term "crisis," thinking that this may cause panic.**

**Frankly, using "potentially embarrassing situations" or similar phrases doesn't fool anyone.**

**Particularly if you prepare in advance, your employees will learn that "crisis" doesn't even necessarily mean "bad news," but simply "very important to our company, act quickly."**

## **5. Identify and Know Your Stakeholders**

**Who are the stakeholders that matter to your organization?**

**Most organizations, for example, care about their employees, customers, prospects, suppliers and the media.**

**Private investors may be involved.**

**Publicly held companies have to comply with Securities and Exchange Commission and stock exchange information requirements.**

**You may answer to local, state or federal regulatory agencies.**

## **6. Decide on Communications Methods**

**For each stakeholder group, you need to have, in advance, complete emailing, snail-mailing, fax and phone number lists to accommodate rapid communication in time of crisis.**

**And you need to know what type of information each stakeholder group is seeking, as well as the best way to reach each of your contacts.**

## **Crisis Communications Management 101**

Another thing to consider is whether you have an automated system established to ensure rapid communication with those stakeholders.

You should also think about backup communications options such as toll-free numbers for emergency call-ins or special Web sites that can be activated in times of crisis to keep various stakeholders informed and/or to conduct online incident management.

Consider these factors in advance and rapid communication during crises will be relatively easy.

### **7. Anticipate Crises**

If you're being proactive and preparing for crises, gather your Crisis Communications Team for long brainstorming sessions on all the potential crises, which can occur at your organization.

There are at least two immediate benefits to this exercise:

- You may realize that some of the situations are preventable by simply modifying existing methods of operation.
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- You can begin to think about possible responses, about best case/worst case scenarios, etc. Better now than when under the pressure of an actual crisis.

In some cases, of course, you know that a crisis will occur because you're planning to create it -- e.g., to lay off employees, or to make a major acquisition.

Then, you can proceed with steps 9-11 below, even before the crisis occurs.

There is a more formal method of gathering this information that is called a "vulnerability audit," about which information is available at our website, [www.armstrongandassociates.org](http://www.armstrongandassociates.org)

### **8. Develop Holding Statements**

While full message development must await the outbreak of an actual crisis, "holding statements" - messages designed for use immediately after a crisis breaks - can be developed in advance to be used for a wide variety of scenarios to which the organization is perceived to be vulnerable, based on the assessment you conducted in Step 7 of this process.

An example of holding statements by a hotel chain with properties hit by a natural disaster - before the company headquarters has any hard factual information - might be:

"We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our guests and staff."

## **Crisis Communications Management 101**

**"Our hearts and minds are with those who are in harm's way, and we hope that they are well."**

**"We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our Web site."**

**The organization's Crisis Communications Team should regularly review holding statements to determine if they require revision and/or whether statements for other scenarios should be developed.**

### **9. Assess the Crisis Situation**

**Reacting without adequate information is a classic "shoot first and ask questions afterwards" situation in which you could be the primary victim.**

**But if you've done the entire above first, it's a "simple" matter of having the Crisis Communications Team on the receiving end of information coming in from your communications "tree," ensuring that the right type of information is being provided so that you can proceed with determining the appropriate response.**

**Assessing the crisis situation is, therefore, the first crisis communications step you can't take in advance.**

**But if you haven't prepared in advance, your reaction will be delayed by the time it takes your in-house staff or quickly hired consultants to run through steps 1 to 8.**

**Furthermore, a hastily created crisis communications strategy and team are never as efficient as those planned and rehearsed in advance.**

### **10. Identify Key Messages**

**With holding statements available as a starting point, the Crisis Communications Team must continue developing the crisis-specific messages required for any given situation.**

**The team already knows, categorically, what type of information its stakeholders are looking for. What should those stakeholders know about *\*this\** crisis?**

**Keep it simple -- have no more than three main messages for all stakeholders and, as necessary, some audience-specific messages for individual groups of stakeholders.**

### **11. Riding Out the Storm**

**No matter what the nature of a crisis...no matter whether it's good news or bad...no matter how carefully you've prepared and responded...some of your stakeholders are not going to react the way you want them to.**

**This can be immensely frustrating. What do you do?**

## **Crisis Communications Management 101**

- Take a deep breath.
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- Take an objective look at the reaction(s) in question. Is it your fault, or their unique interpretation?
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- Decide if another communication to those stakeholders is likely to change their impression for the better.
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- Decide if another communication to those stakeholders could make the situation worse.
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- If, after considering these factors, you think it's still worth more communication, then take your best shot!

### **"It Can't Happen To Me"**

When a healthy organization's CEO or CFO looks at the cost of preparing a crisis communications plan, either a heavy investment of in-house time or retention of an outside professional for a substantial fee, it is tempting for them to fantasize "it can't happen to me" or "if it happens to me, we can handle it relatively easily."

Hopefully, that type of ostrich playing is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

Yet I know that thousands of organizations hit by Hurricane Katrina will have, when all is said and done, suffered far more damage than would have occurred with a fully developed crisis communications plan in place.

This has also been painfully true for scores of clients I have served over the past 35 years.

Even the best crisis management professional is playing catch up - with more damage occurring all the time - when the organization has no crisis communications infrastructure already in place.

### **The Last Word - For Now**

I would like to believe that organizations worldwide are finally "getting it" about crisis preparedness, whether we're talking about crisis communications, disaster response or business continuity.

Certainly client demand for advance preparation has increased dramatically in the past several years, at least for my consultancy.

But I fear that there is, in fact, little change in what I have said in the past, that 95 percent of American organizations remain either completely unprepared or significantly under-prepared for crises. And my colleagues overseas report little better, and sometimes worse statistics. Choose to be part of the prepared minority. Your shareholders, employees, management and all your stakeholders will appreciate it!