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10 Tips for Effective Crisis Communications

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Effective crisis management is much easier said than done.

There is no greater misconception in the communications field than the idea that all press is good press.

Negative press exists and it poses a profound liability to individuals and companies across every industry.

In today's digital world, we are more vulnerable than ever to crises of all kinds. Leaks, hacks, and data breaches can lead to embarrassing headlines, costly lawsuits, and irreparable damage. In just 500 words, an unfriendly article can upend years of investment and tarnish consumer trust. Individuals and businesses can no longer afford to ignore these risks. The stakes are too high.

Adopting a robust crisis management program is the best way to protect your interests and mitigate these risks.

The following ten tips for effective crisis management are designed to help companies and individuals think critically about how they can better prepare themselves for a crisis. By following and adopting these tips, you can develop a better sense of what to do, what to say, and who to call when crisis strikes.

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01.

Train your staff to field reporter calls

A crisis response often kicks into high gear after a media inquiry. Journalists reach out to a general information line and connect with a receptionist. With this in mind, all staff members *must* know how to field a call.

All staff should be trained to never give a statement. Reporters may come off as friendly or ask for off-the-record opinions, but staff members must refrain from making any comment.

Not being authorized to comment is not the same thing as declining to comment. Train your staff to say the following: “I’m sorry, but I am not an authorized spokesperson for our company. I will give your contact information to my supervisor.”

This gives employees an easy out, saves face for the firm, and allows management to release an official statement later.

“I’m sorry, but I am not an authorized spokesperson for our company. I will give your contact information to my supervisor.”

Any team member who finds him or herself on the phone with a journalist should also be trained to get some basic information about the reporter. First, ask the reporter’s full name and how to spell it. Second, ask their outlet and contact information. Third, find out their deadline.

It is important to highlight to staff that the flow of information should not stream both ways. Your staff should ask the reporter the questions outlined above, but they should never answer any questions that the reporter may have. They should never confirm nor deny the identities of clients or disclose any business interests, even inadvertently.

First name, last name, outlet, contact information, deadline. That is the entire extent of the information that should be exchanged when fielding a reporter’s call.

After referring all reporter information to management, any firm intent on judiciously managing a crisis should immediately call their PR firm. Strong strategic communications professionals can see the full chessboard and are equipped to guide their clients through the complexities of a crisis.

As the situation evolves, the PR firm will take the lead in fielding inquiries and crafting statements. Recognize that this is their field of expertise. Just as you would trust your in-house counsel on all matters legal, let your PR firm take the reins during crises. They are trained for this moment, but they will only see you through it to the extent that you let them.

02.

Get familiar with journalist jargon

> **Knowing journalistic jargon is crucial to understanding the parameters of an interview.**

When speaking with a journalist, understanding some of the jargon they use is crucial to understanding the parameters of an interview.

While some phrases, like “off the record,” have become part of the public lexicon, these terms can get confusing under pressure. Luckily though, journalist jargon is nearly universal. All reporters, from high schoolers to Pulitzer Prize winners, generally use the same set of terms. Let’s go over some.

An “on-the-record” conversation is one in which anything you say is fair game to quote. The journalist will attach your name to all of these quotes.

In a “for attribution” interview, the reporter can quote anything you say, but will not attribute the quote to your name. Rather, you will likely be referred to as a “high-level official” or a “source close to the matter.”

When you want a reporter to follow a certain lead, but you cannot help their cause, ask to go “on background.” This means that the reporter can use what you say for their research, but that they cannot directly or indirectly quote you.

Finally, an off the record interview is one in which the content cannot be published or used.

When speaking with reporters in rapidly changing situations, it is often helpful to understand the limits and constraints of what a reporter can actually report. Use this to your advantage.

03.

Practice makes preparation

Responding to a crisis can be difficult and confusing. When faced with the pressure of a crisis, our worst instincts can take over.

Crisis management is a skill, and it helps to practice.

Consider integrating unannounced crisis response drills into your ongoing staff training. Just like a fire or earthquake drill, they will test your staff's crisis acumen under simulated pressure.

Practice crisis response regularly so that when crisis strikes, you're ready.

Recruit someone outside the firm to pose as a reporter and call your company's line. Instruct them to ask questions about clients and internal affairs, and see how your staff responds. Do they tell the reporter that they are not authorized to speak on the matter? Do they ask for the reporter's contact information? Do the managers promptly call up the company's PR firm?

Practice crisis response regularly, so that when a crisis strikes, these steps feel like second nature.

04.

Understand how the media landscape is changing

The communications environment – the way that we share and consume information – is shifting faster than most people can grasp. A short video on YouTube or TikTok now regularly garners more viewers than a prime-time slot on CNN. A website put up overnight masquerading as “news” may make a bigger splash than an in-depth investigative report in the Washington Post.

These radical changes are driven by several interrelated trends.

The practice of journalism is shifting seismically.

The practice of journalism is shifting seismically. Declining ad revenues have shrunk newsrooms beyond recognition, with outlets taking in just 30% of what they generated at the turn of the century. Who fills the gap left behind by shrinking outlets? Everyone.

Today, everyone is a publisher. Digital platforms empower anyone with an idea to share it with the world, and research shows that the public will listen.

These changes have created new liabilities and opportunities to businesses and individuals facing a crisis.

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05.

Deliver your message directly to your audience

Your owned media channels are all vehicles for getting your message out to the public, the press, your customers, and your employees.

Your owned media channels—your social media, email list, website, and more—are all critically important vehicles for getting your message out to the public, the press, your customers, and your employees.

How do you effectively deploy these channels?

First, you must have clear procedures and approval processes in place ahead of time so that when a crisis hits you can move nimbly to put out a statement, launch a website, shoot a video or develop a piece of social content.

Ask your team ahead of time: who in the organization has to approve items before they go out? And how can the decisionmaker be reached in a timely manner to do so?

As much as possible, try to line up key vendor relationships ahead of time – whether with a crisis communications firm, web and video company, or cybersecurity firm.

Second, it is vital that those responsible for owned, earned, and paid media channels are in close communication. The message communicated on social media has to be aligned with the one deployed in television interviews and employee and customer communications.

Third, it has never been more important to harness the power of creative and dynamic storytelling. Take the opportunity to make your message fly off the page and into social feeds and the consciousness of your target audience. You can speak to your audience directly like never before.

06.

Evaluate who is writing

When you get a press inquiry, always check their headlines.

How can you tell if an outlet or blogger writing about you is legitimate?

In a media environment that has been turned upside down in only a few years, it is not always easy to tell if the inquiry you have received is from a real media outlet or a fringe platform designed to spread misinformation. Just because a blogger has lots of followers on Twitter or because someone claims to be writing for a news outlet that has a nice-looking website, it doesn't mean that they are who they say they are.

In the event of a crisis, you must evaluate quickly and carefully who is covering you in order to respond effectively, taking into account that scammers and misinformation campaigns are becoming increasingly frequent.

Marquee print and television media outlets, like The New York Times or NBC, are easy to spot. That goes for well-known local newspapers and broadcast stations, as well. Generally, affiliates of any of the broadcast giants should be afforded the same level of consideration as their parent companies.

Yet, when it comes to less recognizable media, you may need to do some digging. Google the outlet in question and start to look for signs of misinformation.

Conspicuous bias is an easy giveaway. Check their headlines. Do they look like something you would see in a major paper or are they conspicuously biased or partisan? Then, look at their sources. Does the outlet run Associated Press (AP) stories or does most sourced material feel dubious? Even worse, does the outlet feel fringe? Do its stories carry racist or conspiratorial overtones?

Bloggers writing on their own platform are even more challenging, although equaly important, to evaluate.

Check their social media. Do they have a high number of followers? Are those followers engaging with the content on the feed? If not, they may be fake.

If you aren't sure, ask around. Before responding, it is vital that you know who is on the other end of the inquiry.

07.

Designate spokespeople and duties

Effective crisis response is like a symphony. Different individuals and departments work separately, but in accordance with an overarching plan, ton drive an effective response.

This is why crisis management protocols should stress alignment and standardization, identify spokespeople, and clearly outline every employee's responsibilities.

Employees should have a clear understanding of their expectations and executives and management should ensure their actions advance the response in the same direction. Contradictory statements from spokespeople only create public embarrassment and deepen the crisis.

Much of crisis management is about optics. Incongruent responses elicit the message that a company is unprepared and unable to handle the matter at hand. If a company cannot even figure out how to give statements in a unified voice, for example, then how can the public expect it to deal with a crisis?

Identify spokespeople and clearly outline every employee's responsibilities.

This is another reason why PR firms should play large roles in crisis response. They have the experience and industry know-how to coordinate individuals and departments. They can help to ensure that internal debate remains internal and that the public-facing response to the crisis is cogent and unified.

As discussed earlier, all staff members should be trained to tell journalists calling during a crisis that they are not authorized spokespeople and that they cannot provide any comment. The question remains: who exactly is an authorized spokesperson?

In general, companies should select a small number of individuals who will give interviews to the media during a crisis. Executives should consult their PR firm about which team members would be most appropriate to engage reporters.

Whomever a given company chooses, though, it is highly preferable this decision be made ahead of time to reduce confusion when a crisis actually strikes.

08.

Invest in cybersecurity

Cyberattacks and data trafficking pose serious threats to everyone.

Cyberattacks and data trafficking pose serious threats to individuals and companies alike. A hack, leak, or data breach can lead to untold personal damage and years of costly litigation.

The best way to protect yourself from nefarious actors online is to invest in cybersecurity. These investments can prevent a crisis from disrupting your business and upending your life.

Oftentimes, it is hard to identify your vulnerabilities from the inside. Conduct a cybersecurity audit with a trained professional to evaluate your vulnerabilities and identify areas that need to be secured. This may include weak passwords, unprotected wifi networks, vulnerable servers, and more.

Data on the cloud can also be an enormous liability if it is not properly secured. Investing in a qualified vendor to put in place strong security practices is invaluable in preventing crises – and having that person in place in the event of a breach will be critical.

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09.

Get your digital house in order

The Internet has created new vulnerabilities for those facing a crisis. A story can explode across social media before you have time to share your narrative or correct the record. There is a range of actions you should consider taking now, before a crisis.

Online Reputation Management: Where do you think that a curious reporter or disgruntled partner will look first to formulate their narrative about your company? Google.

If your online presence includes problematic items before a crisis strikes, these vulnerabilities will be magnified once your organization faces greater scrutiny.

That is why it is vital to fix that inaccurate Wikipedia page, respond to those bad yelp reviews, and engage an SEO firm proactively to ensure that your online reputation presents a positive and accurate view of you and your company.

In the digital age, you have more liabilities than ever before.

Digital listening: if you cannot hear what people are saying about you online, how can you respond to them? It is important to designate either someone at your PR agency or someone on your team with the task of monitoring news coverage and social media chatter about your organization. There is a range of tools and products – from free to very expensive – that can help with this work. Investing in digital listening is a necessity, allowing you to understand what the world is saying about you – and quickly act to tell your story or correct misinformation when necessary.

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10.

Timing is everything

When it comes to crisis and reputation management, timing is everything.

When it comes to crisis and reputation management, timing is everything. Many reporters are on tight deadlines and will not stall while the concerned company or individual crafts a statement.

The speed at which a company's PR firm is looped into the crisis media strategy often directly impacts the outcome of both the crisis and the crisis coverage.

A statement released hours after the given crisis is often much more important than one released a day or two later after the media has already written the original salvo of stories. To facilitate this, all relevant stakeholders should immediately mobilize and liaise with the PR firm to craft a thoughtful response during the brief window in which a response can yield the greatest impact.

About Miller Ink

Miller Ink is a full-service strategic communications firm, which integrates earned, owned, and paid media to deliver consistent results in a rapidly changing field. Headquartered in Los Angeles, Miller Ink serves dozens of businesses, high-profile individuals, and non-profit organizations around the world.

Nathan Miller, CEO

Nathan is a communications strategist sought out by executives at the highest levels of business, government, and non-profits, who has helped dozens of organizations tell their stories better and navigate complex issues and crises spanning the globe.

Before founding Miller Ink in 2013, Nathan was the Director of Speechwriting for Israel's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, serving as a senior communications adviser and the chief speechwriter for Israeli Ambassador Ron Prosor. Nathan also served as the policy director of the Homeland Security Advisory Council and as a Goldman Fellow at the Transatlantic Institute, a think tank in Brussels, Belgium.

Get In Touch

To hear more about our crisis team, strategic communications programs, or award-winning creative services, get in touch. We'd be happy to answer any questions or discuss how to advance your goals and tell your story better.

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