

Steadying the Ship

10 Tips for Effective
Crisis Management



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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 organizations 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.

In today's digital world, we are **more vulnerable than ever** to crises of all kinds.

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 public relations 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.

Train your staff to field reporter calls

The opening salvo of a crisis response is often a media inquiry. A curious reporter will reach out to your organization in search of a comment or a lead. But it's rare that reporters have a direct line to your CEO or public relations manager. More often than not, journalists will reach out to the first publicly listed number for your organization that they can find and end up connected with a receptionist. With this in mind, it's essential that all staff members know how to field a call—not just your C-suite.

Staff should be trained to never give a statement, regardless of how benign a reporter's questions or disposition may seem. **Never provide a comment.**

Instead, train your staff to say the following: "I am not an authorized spokesperson for our company. I will give your information to the appropriate person."

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

Then, employees should be trained to take down some basic information about the reporter. They should know to ask for the reporter's full name, outlet and/or station name, and contact information. Then, it is critical that they ask the reporter for their story 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 call from a reporter.

Once the call ends, staff should immediately—and without any delay—pass the reporter's information along to their supervisor. The organization should then immediately loop its public relations firm into the situation and begin to strategize a response.

Reporters work on tight deadlines and often give firms hours—sometimes minutes—to provide a comment. They will not delay publication of their article to wait for your company to devise a response. If management is not immediately alerted to inquiries, your company could be squandering its opportunity to comment and insert its message into the narrative around the 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 a crisis. 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

Journalists speak a unique language. Familiarizing yourself with the jargon they often use can help you better understand the parameters of an interview and use it as an opportunity to spread your message far and wide.

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 and title to these quotes.

In a “not 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.”

All reporters, from high schoolers to Pulitzer Prize winners, generally use the same set of terms.

When you want a reporter to follow a certain lead, but you cannot officially 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 for research purposes. Beware, though. Before you jump headfirst into an off-the-record conversation, confirm with the reporter that anything you say is indeed off the record. It’s important to note, too, that while these terms are long-held journalism conventions, they’re not legally binding.

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

03

Practice makes preparation

Responding to a crisis can be difficult and confusing. When the pressure begins to mount, our worst instincts often 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, these exercises will test your staff's crisis acumen under simulated pressure.

Recruit someone outside the organization to pose as a reporter and call your company's line. Instruct them to ask questions about your 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 the changing media landscape

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 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. 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.

The practice of journalism is shifting seismically.

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 for businesses and individuals facing a crisis.

05

Deliver your message directly to your audience

Your owned media channels—your social media, email lists, website, and more—are critically important vehicles for broadcasting your message.

How do you effectively deploy these channels?

First, you must have clear internal procedures and approval processes in place ahead of time. That way, 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 within your organization needs to approve items before they go out? And how can this decision maker be reached in a timely manner to do so?

Take the opportunity to make your message fly off the page and into social feeds and the consciousness of your target audience.

As much as possible, try to line up key vendor relationships ahead of time—whether with a crisis communications firm, web developer, videographer, graphic designer, or cybersecurity specialist.

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.

Evaluate who's writing

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 a lot of followers on X 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 quickly and carefully evaluate 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 stories or does most sourced material feel dubious? Even worse, does the outlet feel fringe? Do its stories carry racist or conspiratorial undertones?

Bloggers writing on their own platform are even more challenging, although equally 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.

Designate spokespeople and duties

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

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

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.

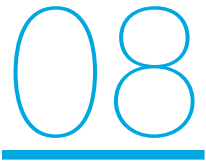
Much of crisis management is about optics. Incongruent responses elicit the message that an organization is unprepared and unable to handle the matter at hand. If a company cannot even figure out how to give statements in a unified voice, then how can the public expect it to deal with a crisis?

This is another reason why PR firms should play large roles in crisis responses. They have the experience and industry know-how to coordinate individuals and departments. They can help 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, it is highly preferable this decision be made ahead of time to reduce confusion if a crisis actually strikes.



Invest in cybersecurity

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.

These kinds of attacks are more common than many organizations may think. Hackers are crafty; weak passwords, unprotected Wi-Fi networks, and vulnerable servers are easy access points into your system that even the most unsophisticated actors can breach. Data on the cloud can also be an enormous liability if it is not properly secured.

A hack, leak, or data breach can lead to untold personal damage and years of costly litigation.

Are your passwords as strong as they could be? Have any of your employees ever accessed your Dropbox or Google Drive on a Starbucks Wi-Fi connection?

The best way to protect yourself from nefarious actors online is to invest in cybersecurity. Cybersecurity professionals can assess your organization's vulnerabilities and shore up your defenses against digital marauders.

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.

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. Anyone with a Wi-Fi connection is now a reporter, capable of broadcasting messages about your organization to audiences potentially unlimited in size.

Thankfully, the internet has also given rise to new ways for your organization to defend itself and proactively shape its image.

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—an unflattering article from three years ago, or a scathing Glassdoor review from a former employee—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 proactively engage a search engine optimization to ensure that your online reputation presents a positive and accurate view of you and your company.

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—it can allow you to understand what the world is saying about you, and quickly act to tell your story or correct misinformation when necessary.

10

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 organization or individual crafts a statement.

The speed at which a company's PR firm is looped into the crisis response 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, when the media has already written the first round of stories—without your narrative included.

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

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.

Learn more about how we can help your organization prepare for a crisis. Contact our team at: info@miller-ink.com

Tell Your Story Better

Miller Ink is a strategic communications and crisis management firm based in Los Angeles, California. Our team helps high-profile individuals, nonprofits, and companies—as well as the attorneys, accountants, and advisors who serve them—address and mitigate crisis situations. We work closely with a global network of partners to implement proactive crisis prevention plans, take immediate action when crises occur, and manage their long-term impacts for clients in Los Angeles and around the world.



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