

How to Create a Crisis Communications Plan



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What's in your crisis communications plan?



1. Media relations plan



2. Pre-approved messaging



3. Roles and responsibilities



4. Contact information



5. Living Document

A crisis communications plan is a document many organizations know they need to have, but often procrastinate in creating or updating regularly. There are lots of businesses and organizations that are still without a current or relevant crisis communications plan, despite likely having experience with crisis communications thanks to the pandemic.

So why is that? I believe it is fear based.

Fear of not knowing where to start. Fear of getting it wrong and being held accountable. Fear stemming from being overwhelmed and not having the time to properly plan for an emergency.

But here's the thing – emergencies don't wait until it's a convenient time to happen. At any point a crisis could impact your organization – such as a weather emergency (fire, flood) or a personnel issue (theft, staffing shortage).

I know many of you are thinking, I cannot add one more thing to my plate. I don't even want to think about creating or updating a crisis communications plan.

If you don't take the time to plan for a crisis, you will be chasing the crisis versus leading your communications.

So, what is a crisis communications plan and why is it important?

It's different from your emergency plan, which likely outlines emergency response and operations procedures. A crisis communications plan is all about HOW you are going to communicate to your stakeholders (ex. staff, customers, public) in an emergency.

While a crisis communications plan can be as big or small as you need it, there are the 5 key pieces it needs to contain.

What I've learned as changemaker + communications expert.



Set aside uninterrupted time to write your plan.



Use these 5 key pieces as a starting point.



Practice your plan at least twice a year. Stay prepared and ready.



Ask questions, seek guidance when you need clarification.



Want to learn more? Download my crisis communications training video and step-by-step guide at www.howtocommunications.com



Media Relations Plan

This plan outlines your organization's media relations policies and procedures (which should be consistent with how you communicate with the media in a non-emergency). For example, are staff authorized to speak to the media on their own (hopefully not) or are media calls to be forwarded to the communications manager, plant manager, CEO or CAO?

Make it clear who your primary spokesperson is as well as secondary spokesperson. For government organizations, you would likely have two spokespeople – one elected official and one staff member. For other organizations, it would be a senior staff member who has media training. Appointing a spokesperson without providing media training is a recipe for disaster.

Include contact information for your local and regional media (making sure it's current) as well as other media relevant to your organization.



I also recommend including media interview tips in this section, to remind your spokespeople of how to get their message across. It's easy to get flustered when under pressure.



Pre-Approved Messaging

This is essential! Working on your top three most likely emergencies, write speaking notes, facts sheets, press releases and key messages.

For example, I live in an area where forest fires are a real threat. I would expect our local government and fire departments to have pre-written and pre-approved messaging on shelter-in-place, evacuation orders, air quality warnings and any other information that is regularly communicated during a forest fire.

The joy of pre-approved messaging is it allows staff to have content they can use quickly without going through the sometimes-lengthy approval process. This should also contain some public education messaging to fill airtime while you're busy figuring out the emergency.



Roles and Responsibilities

We often assume people are clear on the role they are assigned. But here's the thing - in an emergency you may need to rely on people from outside of your department or organization to pitch in and help.

I'm a big fan of bullet points or checklists. Basically, you are creating a to-do list for the various communications functions. In small emergencies, one person may wear multiple hats. However, in large emergencies you may have more than one person in each role.

Some common crisis communications roles include:

- **Public information officer** – managing the overall communications
- **Media monitor** – monitoring traditional and social media, identifying trends and issues
- **Website and social media editor** – posting information to your digital platforms, monitoring and replying to comments (where appropriate)
- **Copywriter** – writing press releases, speaking notes and other relevant communications materials
- **Liaison** – talking to media, elected officials, key stakeholders and relaying needs or concerns to the public information officer



Contact Information

This is about knowing who to call when an emergency hits. Who are the staff members that will be part of your communications team? What outside resources do you need to call? Consultants? Stakeholders?

You likely know how to reach them on a Monday morning, but what about after-hours emergencies? Do you know if they have their work cell phone tied to their hip or do they still have a home phone? Do they know what their role is in an emergency?

I advise going beyond a list of names, phone numbers and emails. Take the time to go for coffee with the key people on this list. Talk to them about your crisis communications plan, your top three risks and the role they play (even if it's just an FYI).



I have found the relationships I've developed prior to an emergency have been key in how I've responded during the emergency.



Living Document

Once you've written your crisis communications plan, don't file it in your computer or put it in a binder to collect dust. Rather, this needs to be a living document. Ideally you are pulling it off the shelf, reviewing it and practicing it once or twice a year.



And when you've had an emergency, in your debriefing (yes you must do this) go back to your crisis communications plan. What worked? What didn't? What needs to be revised?

Update your plan accordingly.

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Cynthia is a changemaker + communications expert.



She shifts people, teams, organizations and cultures to go from overwhelmed to clear and activated.

She does this through her writing, speaking, training, consulting and coaching.

Over the years Cynthia has worked as a

- newspaper editor
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