Best practices in crisis communication

HOW TO COMMUNICATE When Things Go Wrong

Most seasoned healthcare company executives have encountered a crisis-level situation within their organization. These crises, particularly those that require a public response—to employees, customers, the general public, or even the government—can invoke panic in even the most cool-headed leaders.

Regardless of the type of crisis a company faces, properly handling crisis communications can minimize the negative impact and help your brand and relationships remain sound. In this report, Sage Growth Partners identifies the key steps every company should take when responding to a crisis.

The potential list of public crises a healthcare company may face is long and varied, and includes:

- Distribution of confidential patient information (such as through hacking or accidental distribution)
- Allegations of executive misconduct
- Unexpected leadership transitions
- Financial improprieties
- Public outrage over an issue connected to your company
- False accusations about your company or leadership

Step 1: Identify Your Crisis Communication Team

As soon as a crisis occurs, your organization should identify and brief its crisis communications team. This team will be responsible for leading your company through the crisis. Critical team members include your:

- **CEO**
- **Senior and legal counsel**
- **Communications team leader and, if applicable, communications agency**

The team should also include a high-level individual from the affected division(s) of your company.

Once you identify the team, you should also determine which team member will lead the response. This individual must have the ability to drive the process, understand its potential impact on the company, and coordinate efforts with all affected departments.

Step 2: Brief and Prepare Your Spokespeople

Your spokespeople will vary depending on the crisis. For example, it may need to be your CEO if the issue affects the organization at a high level. In cases where expert insight into a particular issue is required, it might also be the head of a division within your organization.

This individual must be able to address the media and the public with credibility and confidence. They should undergo media training—both as part of your advance planning and at the time of the crisis—to ensure they can properly communicate in a calm, sincere manner.

Tip: Prepare by Practicing

To ensure your crisis response team is adequately prepared for potential crises, you should conduct occasional simulated crisis exercises.

Present the team with a scenario-based crisis and see how the group responds. This will enable your team to test its processes and team structure, determine how fast it can respond, and reveal any gaps that need to be addressed.

Step 3: Outline Your Audiences

Once your team and spokespeople are assembled, begin to plan your public response. Again, the individuals to whom you will need to communicate may vary depending on the crisis, but could include:

- **Employees:** Employees are the first group that must be reassured and supported. If employees feel their employers are not being honest or responsible, they may speak out in protest or leak information to the media. Prioritize a quick response to them, and one that emphasizes the steps you are taking to remediate the crisis.
- **Direct stakeholders:** This group might include your customers, investors, and business partners. In their eyes, your company is being tested and so are they, through their investment or relationship with you. Again, reach out to them as soon as possible, and emphasize your remediation efforts.
- **The media:** If they become involved, media outlets can be of assistance in your response since they reach your stakeholders and, in many cases, you have an existing relationship that you can leverage. Begin your outreach to key journalists early to help control the narrative; otherwise, they are likely to approach the story with little context and a higher level of skepticism, potentially exacerbating the issue.
- **The public:** Even non-customers may become aware of a scandal. It is crucial to continually track social media activity to see if your crisis has morphed into a “viral sensation.”
- **Law enforcement and government:** In certain circumstances, some light investigation—or worse—will occur. Plan for it, even if it seems unlikely.

Tip: Review and Revise

While you work to respond to the crisis, you may have previously planned communications ready to deploy (such as emails to customers or social media posts). Many a well-constructed crisis response has been derailed because somebody forgot about a previously scheduled tweet or email that now seems insensitive. Assign an individual to ensure that only appropriate content incorporating approved and standardized crisis messaging is used across all channels during the response.

Step 4: Develop Your Messaging

The great news about crisis messaging is that a lot of the work can be done—prior to a crisis occurring. This will help ensure a quick response once a crisis does occur.

Proactively create crisis response messaging that includes your existing messaging framework, including any mission, vision, and positioning statements. When the crisis does occur, you can add more detailed and specific messages that relate to the unique elements of the crisis.

Tip: Don't Underestimate the Power of the Message

Often, consumers, partners, and investors will forgive companies embroiled in crises if they believe the organization has responded in a timely and appropriate manner.

Your crisis communication messaging should include:

1. **An acknowledgement of the problem.** Clear language that outlines the issue and estimated impact will help establish credibility and trust.
2. **An expression of regret.** Consult your legal and compliance teams in crafting a statement, but make it clear that you understand that people have been impacted. If you fail to demonstrate responsibility, it will likely raise red flags among your key stakeholders, including doubts about whether you are taking the situation seriously and can remediate it.
3. **An explanation of what happened.** Again, follow the guidance from your legal and compliance teams, but share as much detail as possible. Remember: If you don't, others might— and they could get it wrong.
4. **A description of your steps toward resolution.** Provide as much information as you can. Even if you are in the early stages of a reaction, it is essential to show a response.
5. **An invitation to share concerns or feedback.** Encourage stakeholders to engage in dialogue with your team. This shows you are receptive to their needs and enables you to blunt some of the criticism or false information that might be circulating.

Risk vs. Crisis Communication: What's the Difference?

Risk communication deals with situations where **something *might* go wrong**. **Crisis communication** deals with situations where **something *has* gone wrong**.

Consider cybersecurity as an example. Most companies not only implement steps to protect their clients' confidential data, but they also communicate often about those precautionary measures. In so doing, they reassure their stakeholders that they are a responsible – and worthy – protector of that data. That is **risk communication**.

Now, if a company suffers a security breach, their response is considered **crisis communication**. Every company should have a comprehensive communication strategy that encompasses both risk and crisis communication.

CASE STUDY:
Effective Crisis Communication

Recently, a Sage Growth Partners client suffered a cyberattack in which some of the data on its network was compromised. Their response, composed with our help, offers a textbook example of clear, effective crisis communication.

In issuing a public statement, which was sent to stakeholders and posted on their website, the company made several key points:

- **What Happened:** They clearly and concisely described the attack, and noted they took immediate steps to secure and restore their operations. They also indicated they brought in third-party experts to investigate and help them identify a response.

  Importantly, they did not avoid addressing a key issue: They revealed it was possible that unauthorized access to patient information may have occurred. Afterward, they communicated that their investigation was ongoing, and they would immediately notify anyone whose personal information may have been accessed.

- **How They Were Addressing the Problem:** As a sign of how seriously they take personal information security, our client outlined additional, new measures they were implementing to store patient data and prevent future unauthorized breaches.

- **How Stakeholders Could Respond:** The company encouraged all individuals to take their own steps to remain vigilant against incidents of identity theft and fraud. They recommended that patients review their account statements and monitor their credit reports for suspicious or unauthorized activity. For those looking for additional preventative measures, they provided other best practice tips via their website.

- **How Stakeholders Could Learn More:** Patients who wanted more information on the breach and its impact were encouraged to contact the company via a dedicated phone line.

By responding immediately and with full transparency, our client signaled ownership of the situation, and earned the right to rebuild trust with their customers, prospects, users, partners, and investors.

Properly responding to the crisis will also help protect your own professional reputation and that of other leaders in your company. In these moments, the reputation of everyone working for you will be at stake. Your entire organization will now be associated with the crisis and will be affected by how your company responds.

Step 5: Begin Communicating

As soon as enough information is gathered and your initial messaging is created, begin communicating with your key stakeholders. Then, share regular updates on progress and efforts being made to address issues.

For certain stakeholders, such as employees, you may need to plan for daily communication, preferably at the same time each day. This will help you demonstrate your responsibility and begin the process of gaining control.

You should also actively monitor all external communications related to the crisis, such as news or social media coverage. Work closely as a group—and perhaps consider help from an outside consultant or PR partner—to determine where, when, and how to respond.

Once the dust has settled, appropriate measures have been put into place, and the crisis is fully under control, take the time to assess your company's performance. Convene your team to evaluate what went well during your response and what didn't. Update your plan accordingly. And be ready to do it all over again.

Final Considerations

In the immediate wake of a crisis, responding publicly with a series of direct, detailed, and consistent messages imparts a clear sense of action and responsibility. You will only be able to do so quickly however, if you are well-prepared with a firm communication plan in place, a coordinated response team, prepared leaders and spokespeople, well-constructed and thoughtful messaging, a fully functioning distribution system, and processes to track coverage and commentary.

This kind of coordinated effort can enable a company to emerge with its brand image and reputation intact, and its relationships with customers and stakeholders still on solid ground.

SAGE GROWTH PARTNERS

John Gonda is vice president of PR and media relations for Sage Growth Partners (SGP). As a communications professional with nearly 25 years of corporate and agency experience, he delivers a strong marketing and PR background in the healthcare, medical group, medical device and health IT industries. During his career, John has served as both a corporate spokesperson and Public Information Officer (PIO). He is also experienced with communicating during mergers and acquisitions, and providing communication strategy and support during a variety of crisis situations. Prior to joining SGP, he held leadership roles with several academic, community, public and faith-based health systems throughout Ohio, Florida and Michigan.