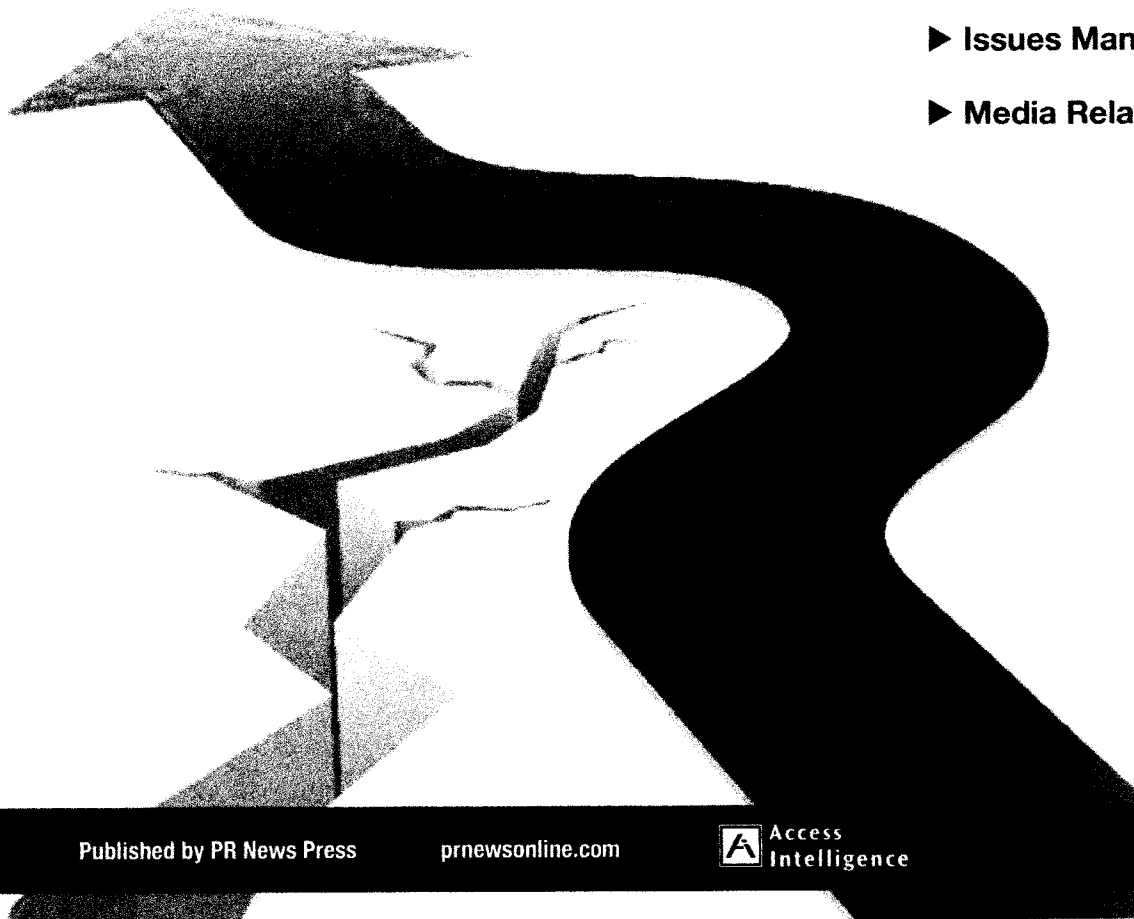


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Crisis Management

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Crisis Communications Plan: The Must-Have Preparations for Any Organization

By Dan Miller

This is the receptionist—there’s a reporter in the lobby. What should I do?”
If you’ve ever had this call, you know the feeling of helplessness that comes from a media inquiry. A crisis communication plan won’t make that feeling go away completely, but it will keep you from making mistakes in the critical first hours of a crisis.

Every company or nonprofit with ten or more employees should have a written crisis communication plan. Since you can’t plan for every possible problem, you must plan for how you communicate to the media when a crisis occurs. A

The best way to combat inaccurate information is regular, accurate communication with the media.

Crisis Communication Plan Check List

Every plan must have:

- On the cover: a list of the primary contact for media calls.
- A phone list of key personnel and all contact numbers including home, cell and work lines.
- A listing of all company locations, the manager in charge at each location, and all contact information.
- A copy of the company disaster plan, including phone numbers and location of all emergency vendors including emergency power, emergency clean up and emergency supplies.
- Organization charts, facility maps and lists of divisions, subsidiaries and major capital assets.

crisis never comes at a convenient time and is likely to come when key executives are unavailable.

First and foremost, a good crisis communication plan helps a company or nonprofit react to media inquiries during a crisis. It is an internal document that is in the hands of every employee who could conceivably come in contact with the media. Most crises are unavoidable, and the media and the public are interested in how the company reacts as much as they are the crisis itself. Oftentimes, even if a company handles a crisis well, miscues in communication can cause lasting damage to the company’s reputation. Quick, accurate and decisive communication tells the media and public that the crisis is under control and that the people in charge are doing their job.

Train and Communicate

A crisis communication plan can take any form as long as it spells out who is responsible for communicating with the media and how communication is to be handled. It should have a comprehensive and frequently updated list of everyone in the company and every possible way to communicate with them.

Crisis Plan Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- **Update you plan every quarter.** Review it with key staff, make adjustments and corrections and republish it with the date on each page.
- **Share your plan below executive staff.** If the administrative and line staff don't know the plan, it's easy to have unfortunate mistakes. Discuss the plan in meetings and roleplay if possible to be prepared.
- **Have someone test all the phone numbers and fact-check the plan.** It's best to have someone who didn't write the plan do this. A wrong phone number in a crisis can create havoc.
- **Go overboard with details in the plan.** You never know what you will need. If you can answer a media question quickly and accurately, you might be able to avoid negative press.
- **Have copies of the plan in the hands of many people.** You can't control when or where the crisis will occur—don't make headlines because you can't find your plan.

Don't:

- **Don't assume anything.** Check it out and write it down.
- **Don't think a crisis will go away or that nobody will notice.** Be prepared to communicate with the media as soon as you know the facts. Someone will give the media a comment if you don't.
- **Don't be afraid to say that you don't have the information yet but will get back as soon as you do have the correct answer.** If you do, keep your word.
- **Don't respond to issues or questions outside the purview of your company or organization.** Why or why not another company or the government does something is not for you to say.
- **Don't schedule a news conference or announcement and then miss the deadline.** Reporters will find an answer if you don't provide one when you promised.

Just as important as the plan itself is internal training and communication about the processes and responsibilities in the plan. If the receptionist doesn't know who to send the reporter to, the plan is simply a paperweight. Don't overlook line managers in a company that has many facilities. Reporters are creative and will bypass the home office and go directly to the location of the problem looking for a scoop.

Before you begin to write your plan, it's important to know how the mainstream media (TV, radio, newspaper and magazines) works and how it is different from Internet-only media like bloggers and news websites. Generally, most journalists are hard-working, conscientious professionals who are trying to get the facts right. They are also trying to get the story first. They are always on deadline and in a hurry. They want

answers now—not when you are ready to give them—and they want to beat the other media outlets.

Mainstream media outlets frequently post stories on their websites first to compete with Internet-only media who don't have to wait until the evening news or the next day's newspaper. This intense competition sometimes causes problems with accuracy and completeness. Not everyone follows the rules of good journalism. Bloggers write their opinions. Opinions are not facts, but they are still published. Regardless of the media type, all are bound by current libel and slander laws.

The best way to combat inaccurate information is regular, accurate communication with the media. Sometimes you don't know the answer right away. It is better to say you don't have an answer yet than to say that you have no comment.

The Fundamentals of a Crisis Plan

If you are creating a crisis communication plan for the first time, start out with a binder that has five tabbed sections. You can complete each section in any order. When the plan is complete, make copies of the entire plan for anyone who could possibly need it.

- **Section 1: Contact lists**

This section should have a complete internal list of all employees, their titles and responsibilities, and all possible ways to contact them. Include an organization chart, and list of all company locations, properties and subsidiaries. List the primary, secondary and tertiary media contacts and how to contact them.

- **Section 2: Company disaster information**

You should have a company disaster plan. This includes who you call in every possible emergency including local, state and national regulators. A small problem that goes unreported to a regulator can become a large problem with the media.

- **Section 3: Communicating with the media**

You should think through how you will communicate with the media. Where will you hold a news conference and who will speak? Many companies have their company spokesperson speak first while the crisis is unfolding so the top leadership can be involved in the solution. Plan for extra power outlets for the TV stations and make the room large enough for the press to work.

The media wants quick and accurate information. After that, tables, chairs, Wi-Fi and food go a long way to keeping the media happy. Also, having a copy machine nearby

helps with faster distribution of information.

- **Section 4: Details**

Find out everything you can about the people, locations and products of your organization. Bios of key company people, maps, product lists, suppliers, vehicles, aircraft or ships owned should be listed with registration and license numbers. Think about this: you get a call asking if your company owns a plane with a certain registration number. If you say no and actually do own the plane, it could look like you are hiding something rather than just being misinformed.

- **Section 5: Contingencies**

Contingencies are the trickiest. Be sure to talk to the company or organization's attorneys about this. Every organization or company is aware of likely scenarios for disaster. If you make gasoline, a spill or fire is possible. Think through your reactions in case of these likely scenarios.

Who would respond for a remote facility? Who speaks for the company? Is it the location, the division or the corporation? Thinking about it now could prevent surprises later.

No plan can prevent a crisis, but a good crisis communication plan can keep from making things worse. If you communicate clearly, accurately and quickly, the media is less likely to keep looking for the proverbial smoking gun. Sometimes, bad things happen and the best you can do is to keep things from getting worse. **PRN**

Dan Miller is president of Miller Consulting Group, a nonprofit management consulting firm.