



# Crisis Communications Playbook & Strategy

Recommended response protocol & tips



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To be prepared for crisis situations, A.wordsmith recommends developing a playbook and customized communications strategy. The playbook summarizes recommended communications vehicles, spokesperson training best practices, response protocol and social media and media management. Additionally, it outlines low, medium and high-risk scenarios, how to know which level you're actively in, and a checklist for tactical assessment and management. Beyond the playbook, a customized strategy includes key materials designed to respond to crisis situations (e.g., talking points, FAQs, audience communications, statements, press releases, social media posts, etc.) and spokesperson training.



## RESPONSE PROTOCOL

# Level One: Caution



### EVENT CLASSIFICATION

Issue presents a low-level threat to company reputation.



### ISSUE

Some negative banter online creating discussion/speculation.



### KEY AUDIENCES

Communications are largely reactive and initiated only when necessary. Audiences include media (reactive), business partners, customers, employees, investors, etc.



### RESPONSE STRATEGY

Take no immediate action; hold steady but maintain vigilant monitoring of issue for new developments or escalations. In the meantime, concentrate on ensuring incoming customer queries (or those from key stakeholders) are answered personally, quickly, clearly and succinctly. A minor customer services issue can typically be resolved with a discount or rate adjustment sent directly to the customer, accompanied by a personal, heartfelt letter.



### THIRD PARTY ALLIES

Have community advocates on hand to come to company's defense by sharing their positive stories and lived experiences.



## RESPONSE PROTOCOL

# Level Two: Warning



### EVENT CLASSIFICATION

Issue presents a threat to brand and has potential to escalate to a level three situation. Media attention is confined to blogs, but with potential to grow.



### ISSUE

Audiences (via forums, Reddit threads, discussion groups, social channels, etc.) begin to question the situation.



### KEY AUDIENCES

Communications are largely reactive and initiated only when necessary. Audiences include media (reactive, potentially proactive), business partners, customers, employees, community members, investors, government agencies, etc.



### RESPONSE STRATEGY

Crises affecting larger audiences require special response to prevent escalation. Engage reactively with tailored messaging, determining on a case-by-case basis if proactive communications are required to neutralize dialogue. Proactive tools include: social media campaigns, heartfelt statements posted to community sites (those active in spreading rumors and speculation), exclusive media interviews, etc.



### THIRD PARTY ALLIES

Leverage community advocates and local stakeholders to convey company mission and commitments.



## RESPONSE PROTOCOL

# Level Three: Severe



### EVENT CLASSIFICATION

Issue presents a threat of long-term damage to brand and reputation; traditional and social media coverage is widespread and public attention to the issue is high and sustaining; relationships with customers and business contracts affected; sales compromised.



### ISSUE

Employee or partner comes under fire. Widespread issues, public outcry, etc.



### KEY AUDIENCES

Audiences include media (proactive and reactive), business partners, customers, employees, investors, etc.



### RESPONSE STRATEGY

Initiate comprehensive response engagement to mitigate and contain issue. Activate third party support, initiate full-scale communications campaign (public statement, media interviews, message training, social media campaign). Other considerations include an infographic, an op-ed in the local paper, etc.



### THIRD PARTY ALLIES

Show feedback from community advocates and demonstrate how the brand puts the best interests of their customers at the heart of every decision.

# Checklist for Success

- ✓ Determine the Crisis Level
- ✓ Identify Key Stakeholders
- ✓ Define General Crisis Communications Strategy
- ✓ Develop Transparent, Thoughtful and Authentic Messaging
- ✓ Provide Rapid, Direct Communication Updates
- ✓ Rally Third Party Advocates
- ✓ Involve Internal Stakeholders in the Solution

Let's get started →



## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Determine the Crisis Level

- Determine the severity of the issue. Ask yourself: is the situation dire? Will the news impact sales or business relationships? Is the situation disparaging, unduly biased, and/or spreading factually inaccurate rumors or propaganda?
- If the answers to the above questions are uncertain, then the best initial response is to hold steady and continue to monitor the situation. By not responding, you limit the attention given to it, whereas responding publicly can validate unfair claims and add fuel to the fire.
- Collect relevant information to inform decision-making as circumstances evolve. If audiences are already posting, assess the damage. Determine what social media accounts it's affecting and identify any trends in the comments.
- It's imperative to keep a level head and follow procedures to deal with the situation most effectively.

Next →







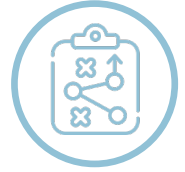
## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Identify Key Stakeholders

- Assemble a cross-functional crisis communication team and assign roles.
- Assign a spokesperson responsible for delivering a statement to internal and external audiences, and ensure they're equipped with detailed messaging and interactive practice sessions (as time/urgency allows) needed to be successful.
- Develop or update a notification tree with contact information and outline decision-making processes.
- Overall, crisis move exceedingly fast, so it's important to ensure your spokesperson can make important decisions quickly.

Next →





## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Define General Crisis Communications Strategy

- Take inventory of impacted stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, shareholders, partners, affiliates, investors, regulatory officials, etc.)
- Identify potential impacts on each stakeholder group.
- Determine avenues for rumors and speculation to arise.
- Decide what warrants a reactive vs. a proactive communication.
- Review and possibly pause your upcoming social media calendar.
- Ensure employees are aware of the situation and the company's position.
- Agree on a streamlined review and approval process for communication materials and ensure the leadership team are aligned.

Next →





## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Develop Transparent, Thoughtful and Authentic Messaging

- Messaging should exude honesty, openness and compassion. Empathy is everything! Take a humble tone and demonstrate that you're listening.
- Reiterate deep support of community development.
- Reassure the community that the company's purpose-driven mission remains intact, while igniting customer confidence in the future direction of the company.
- Reiterate the mission of the company.

Next →





## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Provide Rapid, Direct Communication Updates

- Determine if/when a public response is necessary.
- If so, issue a statement on the company website, newsletter or blog, although the latter invites public commentary that may be continuous and possibly inflammatory.
- Another possible approach is to write an op-ed to address the situation in a factual, non-emotive and balanced way.
- Stick to the facts and let them speak for themselves (stick with the data, not the drama).

Next →





## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Rally Third Party Advocates

- Have community advocates (friends of the company) share their stories and lived experiences of the company's positive impact.
- Your customers, employees and stakeholders are those that will defend the company and the organization's account of events – they're your greatest advocates. Their endorsement and defense can often be more powerful and believable than any comment the company issues itself.

Next →





## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

# Involve Internal Stakeholders in the Solution

Create tools to address and drive feedback (via pulse surveys, integration barometers, etc.) with employees, partners, stakeholders, board members, etc. to identify baseline concerns, areas of confusion and questions.

Way to go! Remember... →



“By failing to prepare,  
you are preparing to fail.”

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



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