



BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER: HOW TO PREPARE FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

It is only a matter of time – a crisis will come to your community. The pandemic made that clear. What's next could be a disaster, natural or human-made. Or a mass shooting, terrorist event, or civil unrest. Or a City Hall scandal or budget crisis. Or maybe an issue with your water supply – or any number of things almost impossible to predict.

No community can prevent adversity. Change is inevitable. Things happen. Issues arise. But it is that moment when all eyes are on you – those of your neighbors, your business owners, your visitors, your employees, the state, the country, even the world – when you must be at your best as a communicator.

How will you prepare? How will you respond? And what comes next?

There are no easy answers. But how you handle adversity is a matter of character. How others perceive your management of a crisis determines your effectiveness as a government and as a leader. It shapes your reputation. Do it well, and you earn the trust of your community and drive the actions necessary to emerge stronger on the other side. You might save lives. Do it poorly, and the opposite happens.

Your work should start now.

Before the Crisis

You just received a text from the police chief: There is an active shooter at the high school. TV crews are already pulling up, and social media is full of worried parents sharing misinformation. What do you do?

City Hall is on fire. Everyone is safely out, but what now?

An internal audit has revealed a massive case of fraud involving one of your employees. Hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars are missing. How do you initially share this news with the community? Then how do you communicate it?

A massive water main just broke, and you are not sure your drinking water is safe. A boil advisory is coming. How do you let your residents and business owners know what's happening – and keep them informed in the days ahead?

The best time to think about answers to such questions is before they are asked. Be proactive and prepared for crisis situations before they occur. Identify potential

situations that could pose a threat and develop strategies to counter those threats. Know your core values, so they come through, even during a crisis – *especially* a crisis. Doing so requires:

- Having a thorough understanding of your organization.
- Employing that understanding to draft broad scenarios of potential situations under which a response protocol would be engaged.
- Developing a detailed action plan for responding to the situation.
- Training/practice sessions to ensure you and your team are comfortable and familiar with your roles and the messages you will deliver.

Not every potential challenge may be identified in advance. And there is no such thing as a typical crisis. Whatever you may be dealing with, you must establish the government as the authoritative source of accurate, confirmed information. You should plan for that vital role as a communicator.

During the Crisis

It's happening, or just happened. The tornado just tore through town, and there is damage as far as the eye can see. The flash flood wiped out a mobile home park, and people are missing. Waters are rising, and it's still raining. Police took down the shooter, but there are still injured kids in classrooms and parents looking for answers.

And they want them now.

This is the new reality. Technology has forever changed communications. We live in a world that allows almost everyone to communicate with almost everyone else in a matter of seconds. Most people have instant access to digital media and the know-how to easily obtain and disseminate information quickly. Communicators must realize and accept as fact that news will break quickly through nontraditional and unvetted methods. Therefore, the ability to drive the message, a critical key to success in a crisis, must be accomplished quickly and executed through the right channels.

Minutes matter. And you should be thinking about how you will deliver the right message to the right audience at the right time (and using the right platforms). What is your plan 10 minutes out, 15 minutes out, 60 minutes out? Then what about the hours and even days after that?

Ideally, you've already developed guidelines to address these scenarios now. The key messages about your organization – the values you stand for, the commitments you will keep – already have been identified; they will only need to be crafted into statements that fit the situation. The key audiences for your messages, and communications channels for reaching each of them, already have been spelled out. Your potential spokespeople have been media trained.

The process just needs to be engaged and executed.

After the Crisis

It's been two weeks since the shooting. The fire was put out 48 hours ago. The water is flowing again. The roads are clear after the storm. The mess from the derailed train has been cleaned up. The mayor, who was arrested, is now out of jail.

The immediate crisis has passed. Your role as a communicator is far from over.

Even as the situation unfolds and the plan is being executed, you should be making observations and developing insights on ways you can emerge stronger on the other side – and position your community to better respond next time. Once the immediate communications challenges have been defused, you should be maintaining communication with key audiences, reinforcing ties and gauging the level of satisfaction with the way the situation has been handled. A thorough debriefing should identify:

- Lessons learned and weaknesses corrected.
- Any inaccuracies or misunderstandings in media coverage.
- Ways in which the community's response illustrated its values or demonstrated its key messages in a particularly effective manner.

Those elements will drive the creation of a new communications plan designed to focus on the future after the crisis and tell the stories that reflect the character of your organization and its people. Decisive action, combined with a demonstrated commitment to openness and an effective execution of a crisis communications strategy, will allow you to endure the crisis and drive positive perceptions.

Start planning for that today.

Let's Get to Work

We are ready to step up on your behalf. If you haven't adequately planned for crisis communications, or if you need a fresh set of eyes on this, **we want to help.**

Let's start the conversation today.

1. Let's meet. We'd welcome a chance to discuss your situation, offering initial feedback on your crisis communications plan (if you have one) – and how we might be able to help your community.
2. Let's plan. Have a plan, work the plan. That is our philosophy, and we have decades of experience working with partners to do just that. Let's work together to ensure you are prepared for the next crisis in your community.
3. Let's train. Media training can be a good place to start our relationship – us working with you to identify your top crisis spokespeople and make sure they are equipped to communicate effectively when it is needed the most.

Facing a crisis now? We also respond rapidly to crises that erupt without warning. Carl Collective offers 24/7/365 availability and a commitment to stand with you providing advice, counsel and support for the duration of the situation.

We are ready to step up. We are a phone call, text or email away.

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