



# Crisis communication preparedness: are you ready?

Crisis plan written ages ago, years in fact. Job done. Guarantees an effective communications response when an inevitable crisis arrives – that surprise Will Smith Oscars' slap across your normally passive corporate face.

Well no. A plan doesn't guarantee success in any crisis – when its rarely referenced! Comedian Chris Rock wasn't prepared...and your organisation may not be truly prepared for an inevitable bump in the corporate road.

Cumbersome corporate crisis plans and weighty tomes dedicated to crisis communications do often exist – filed amongst trade encyclopaedias, reference manuals, company history books and annual reports. The plan will also most likely sit on a computer network drive. So, unless you have been the victim of a cyberattack and you can't find it, then check:

When was it last reviewed and by who?  
When was it last edited?

Chances are it has not been touched in recent times, contact details will be outdated, and the words 'pandemic' or 'social media' aren't accommodated. The problem is:

– a plan is only effective if you are properly versed with it, review and use it regularly, have stress-tested it and consistently improve it to recognise the shifting communication needs of this digital society.

## So: Is the plan REALLY fit for purpose in a digital and Coronavirus-impacted age?

### A pre-COVID survey by Deloitte found that<sup>1</sup>:

- 84% of businesses had crisis plans
- 90% were confident they would be able to respond to a problem
- Only 17% had tested that assumption through a simulation
- 80% of leaders believed they would face a major crisis within 12 months
- 60% faced more regular crises than a decade before

COVID and other health-related considerations, cyberattacks and an unfathomable war have moved the crisis dial in one direction, towards increased risk and challenge for any business.



CEOs live in fear of a career-defining post on social media – publishing a comment considered unsuitable to others!

Even before social media and the worldwide web existed (www = wild, wild, west?) businesses could be destroyed by careless comments. Entrepreneur Gerald Ratner had turned his father's jewellery business into a £ multi-million empire stretching

across every British high street in six short years. But on a major business platform a light-hearted response to an audience question quickly fell flat. His store's £4.95 sherry decanter were so cheap "because it's total crap" and earrings costing less than £1 were "cheaper than a shrimp sandwich from Marks & Spencer's but...the sandwich will probably last longer..." Newspaper presses and headlines rolled. Shares dived £500 million in a matter of days and the firm nearly collapsed. Ratner was fired and his group rebranded.

CEOs 'wanting their life back' and misreading the public mood during a major catastrophe, those still insisting their airline sales 'remained strong' despite an aircraft having just crashed, and countless others have been forced from office for saying or writing the wrong thing.

Three decades on, social media and 24-hour news presents even greater risk to companies with senior personnel whose posts can be seen as controversial. In 2022, a cosmetics giant removed an executive after he posted a racist meme on a personal social media account. A senior clothing company executive exited after criticising COVID restrictions in schools, her online presence apparently 'too problematic' to become its CEO. Very recently, the CEO of P&O Ferries has become corporate enemy No.1 after sacking his entire seagoing crew.

Loyal communications protectorates are potentially moments from a crisis – a serious reputational emergency that could make or break an organisation.

Communicators may have dealt with countless issues and kept the corporate reputation above water, but crisis preparedness? A crisis simulation? Possibly not in recent memory.

<sup>1</sup> Deloitte 2018 Global Crisis Management Survey <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/risk/articles/2018-global-crisis-management-survey.html>

## Communicators should answer these 7 questions:

1. Do you have a Crisis Communications Plan, part of your overall Company Crisis Plan?
  2. Have you reviewed and updated the plan in the past 12 months, including reviews with all relevant departments?
  3. Are you confident the plan will be useful and easy to navigate in a crisis, when time is short e.g. easy to follow check lists and/or flow diagrams?
  4. Have you tested the plan in a crisis simulation in the past 12 months?
  5. Have you personally been trained in crisis management in the past 12 months?
  6. Have you used an independent third-party to stress-test your plan and suggest best-practice improvements?
  7. Are you truly confident with your answer to these questions? Or are you being over-confident?
- Answering 'no' to any of these questions means you have work to do.

The challenge is to overcome apathy, over-confidence and the refusal of executives to prepare for a crisis that could be on the horizon. One slap or tweet, an ill-advised business connection, a risky investment or a foolish click on what first appeared as an innocuous email link can quickly challenge a positive brand reputation.

If an organisation's 'three Cs' focus on 'consumers, corporate and creative', 'crisis' preparedness and communication must be a fourth consideration.

Crisis situations are inevitable but, in many cases, also avoidable. One thing is certain, a major issue or crisis will challenge your business at some point,

whether you like it or not – threatening stakeholder and shareholder confidence, corporate finances, employee morale, brand and reputation.

### Are you prepared for such an event?

If not, RQA Group can assist you with crisis communication planning, training and simulation exercises, backed up by our experience of over 1500 real-life incidents that we have been involved with. We have expert consultants in Crisis Communications, including the author of this article, who are highly experienced and have dealt with high profile business crises.

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