

# Crisis Management in Media: Strategies for Handling Public Relations Disasters

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## Abstract

This paper examines best practices and strategies for crisis management within media and public relations contexts. Rapid response planning, clear internal coordination, thoughtful communication with stakeholders, and effective use of both traditional and social media channels are imperative when unexpected disasters or scandals threaten an organization's reputation. By developing comprehensive crisis readiness plans, media relations teams can respond quickly and work to repair damaged brands through sincere apologies, policy changes, and transparent communication. Detailed case studies of both effective and ineffective crisis management provide important lessons for PR professionals seeking to navigate public relations nightmares. Ultimately, advance planning and rapid response coordination limit cascading failures while long-term recovery efforts focused on responsibility, reform, and reconciliation facilitate the rebuilding of organizational trust and credibility over time.

**Keywords:** Crisis management, public relations disasters, reputation management, brand management, scandal response, media relations, crisis communications, emergency planning, disaster recovery, image repair

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background on the prevalence of organizational crises and PR disasters

Organizational crises that turn into public relations nightmares have become ubiquitous in recent decades. One analysis of over 300 businesses found that more than 80% had dealt with a crisis situation in the last 5 years alone (Barton, 2019). As Constantinides (2014) observes, "crises know no boundaries" and can create extreme threats to organizational stability and reputation regardless of industry, size, location or prior performance (p.40). From product defects and massive cybersecurity breaches to internal frauds and viral scandals, crisis drivers range from preventable internal failures in oversight and strategy to sudden external disasters fully outside managerial control (Coombs, 2019).

Global connectivity via digital media serves to intensify organizational crises. As Kulpa and Bludnik (2020) detail, "social media tends to not only disseminate information about a crisis rapidly, but also to exponentially inflate and distort it" (p. 1156). Within mere hours, local incidents can transform into international scandals. Reputations built steadily over decades can disintegrate rapidly during crises that spiral out of control. Thus, fast and smart crisis management matters more now than ever before.

### 1.2 Importance of effective crisis management and response

While organizational crises vary widely in origin and severity, research clearly demonstrates the potential value of advanced planning and coordinated response. Models of effective crisis management emphasize readiness structures that enhance detection capabilities while allowing rapid response mobilization across departments (Ha & Riffe, 2015). As McDonald et al. (2010) note in their international study, the presence of crisis management teams directly links to mitigating reputation damages during scandals and disasters. Additionally, crisis responses perceived as fast, sincere and substantial by the media and other stakeholders limit negative impacts compared to slow, confusing or dishonest reactions (Schultz et al., 2011).

Likewise, offensive versus defensive response strategies prove critical. Organizations that assume full responsibility for failures and shortcomings recover reputations and trust far quicker than those attempting to deny, diminish or evade culpability during crisis (Ma & Zhan, 2016). The classic recommendations for smart crisis management include quick admissions, corrective plan commitments and credible assurances of non-recurrence (Seeger, 2006).

### **1.3 Overview of paper contents**

This paper explores crisis management within media and public relations contexts in depth. The causes, types and unique challenges inherent to public relations crises are reviewed first. After discussing necessary elements of effective crisis management plans, initial and ongoing response strategies are detailed utilizing scholarship and real-world cases. Finally, post-crisis phases focused on learning, brand repair and organizational renewal are analyzed as the media spotlight fades. Recommended practices and processes emerge across each stage of scandal and disaster readiness and reaction.

## **2. Causes and Types of Public Relations Crises**

### **2.1 Categories of PR crises**

Organizational crises causing public relations disasters generally cluster into a few primary categories. Coombs (2019) provides a framework dividing crises by source - either internal or external origins - and then by specific types under those drivers. Internal crises most often stem from human failures or technological breakdowns.

Externally driven public relations crises, while still profoundly threatening reputation and finances, tend to be viewed somewhat more sympathetically by observers based on attribution of responsibility (Schwartz, 2012).

Illegal actions around corruption, fraud or purposeful wrongdoing inflict massive legal, regulatory and reputation damages. Meanwhile workplace safety, discrimination and ethical labor practice incidents create internal discord and emotional public backlash (Lenartowicz et al., 2018) and cybersecurity attacks and data breaches threaten customer loyalty and trust for years after events.

### **2.2 Preventable vs unexpected crises**

As Coombs (2019) details, "preventable crises are strongly attributed to internal causes that the organization knowingly allowed to happen. Unexpected crises are strongly attributed to external causes no one could reasonably have seen coming" (p.79). Naturally preventable internal failures harm reputation far more severely based on attribution of blame and avoid ability (Ma & Zhan, 2016).

Unexpected external crises still damage credibility and finances but provoke more public patience around complicated recoveries. Striving to categorize each crisis appropriately represents an early communications challenge.

### **2.3 Role of social media and speed of viral crises**

As Kulpa and Bludnik (2020) explain, "A crisis is no longer limited to physical and geographic boundaries due to the onset of advanced information technology means, specifically the social media which carry the capacity to exacerbate crisis dynamics" (p.1155). Where organizational risks once remained obscure or localized, today's interconnection allows small, early internal incidents to transform rapidly into viral catastrophes (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Employees venting frustrations on Facebook or Twitter get noticed by activists and media alike. Hashtags created spontaneously during emerging scandals soon dominate online discourse and focus frenzied attentions.

Schultz et al. (2011) demonstrate in their seminal study; stakeholders anticipate quick response and real transparency via online engagement from leaders during disasters and controversy. For modern organizations, avoiding calamity means over-investment in monitoring, analytics, coordinated workflows and practiced capabilities around mass communications especially on social media.

### **3. Crisis Management Planning**

#### **3.1 Components of a crisis management plan**

Seeger (2006) emphasizes, "the time to prepare is before disaster strikes" (p. 240). Effective crisis plans contain several core components centered on detection, mobilization, delegation, analysis and communications workflows. Initial planning identifies and vets' key roles, with backups defined across internal teams and external partners like PR agencies and law firms. Response blueprints codify procedures for corralling facts, notifying successors, coordinating messaging, interfacing with government authorities, and activating channels like social media, websites and press release processes during turmoil.

Crisis plans detail containment strategies through steps like recalls, suspension of operations, employee training on public interactions and protection of assets (Massey & Larsen, 2006).

#### **3.2 Crisis management teams and designation of roles**

Given the unpredictability of crises, crisis management plans must designate roles and responsibilities clearly without overdependency on a few leaders. Organizations should detail both core Crisis Management Team (CMT) handling internal tactics as well as a larger Crisis Response Team (CRT) focused externally on media and community outreach.

#### **3.3 Scenario planning for potential issues**

Especially for large or very public organizations, undertaking scenario analyses facilitates identification of pressure points missed during routine operational planning. The goal involves safe "pre-mortem" assuming various crises erupt suddenly (Seeger, 2006, p.240). Exploring a spectrum of possible scenarios illuminates overlooked people, processes and communications needs activating appropriately when disaster strikes.

#### **3.4 PR and communications strategy**

Given modern realities, crisis management requires sophisticated communications strategies engaging media, employees and the public simultaneously. Widely adopted principles like assuming responsibility quickly, correcting known mistakes rapidly and reassuring stakeholders convincingly remain essential as scrutiny swirls externally (Seeger, 2006). Massey and Larsen (2006) outline, "a crisis communication plan includes strategies and tactics for getting the [internal] workforce on board...and turning them into capable spokespeople when interacting with external stakeholders" (p.9).

Thus, crisis planning necessitates strong internal infrastructure for quickly cascading verified updates, dispelling rumors and ensuring accessibility across all levels in chaotic times. Increasingly PR disaster management depends upon executing a coordinated defense spanning across digital, broadcast and print channels simultaneously.

### **4. Initial Crisis Response Strategies**

#### **4.1 Gathering information quickly**

Seeger (2006) declares, "it is imperative that crisis managers have access to the most complete, accurate, and current information possible. Information will always be incomplete, but failing to reduce uncertainty can be deadly" (p. 239). Reducing the fog and friction innate to sudden disasters allows leaders to determine substantive next actions around containment and messaging.

Simultaneously media monitoring, employee help lines and coordination with technical staff unlock greater context urgently. The CEO's task focuses upon absorbing themes and probing around remaining uncertainties versus micromanaging specifics. Verifying knowns then detailing unknowns constitutes the first deliverable to stakeholders (Seeger, 2006).

## **4.2 Assessing severity and reach**

With basic situational awareness established, crisis leaders next determine likely severity and reach based on issue type and organizational factors. Speed matters greatly but rushed assumptions risk botched responses. Was the explosion due to faulty supplies or employee sabotage? Did hackers access customer data? Will deaths occur from contamination? Understanding root causes, human impact and legal exposures steers resource allocation fittingly. Furthermore, does the crisis remain highly localized and contained or steadily metastasize across geography and channels? Has mainstream media picked up the story yet or do warning signs still only flutter within niche communities online? Real-time analytics inform such threat modelling dynamically for leaders balancing inevitable uncertainty (Seeger, 2006).

Furthermore, assessing organizational factors like prior reputation, crisis history in the domain and available financial reserves signals probable public patience if quick resolutions seem unlikely. Does social media chatter suggest lingering resentment toward the brand? Do past safety incidents make new ones feel clustered and familiar? Setting realistic expectations around backlash, recovery trajectories and stabilization timelines then positions leaders to endure emotionally and tactically.

## **4.3 Determining appropriate response level and timing**

Once basic situational inputs coalesce, crisis teams determine appropriate responses balancing speed, substance and severity considerations. Crisis communications research clearly shows perceived timeliness and sufficiency correlates to reputation protection throughout events.

The transparency around known specifics and unknown variables demonstrates credibility even when investigations and technical reviews only commence. Stakeholders focus acutely on responsibility assumed, reforms pledged and sincere empathy expressed more than immediate problem-solving prowess per se (Seeger, 2006).

Messaging too proves critical in setting the tone around accountability and values protections going forward. Humility and resolve reassure while arrogance or defensiveness inflames during disasters. Public statements committing to customer compensation, executive departures or upgraded safety protocols loses impact unless correlated to real delivery and outcomes over ensuing weeks.

## **4.4 Communicating with stakeholders**

Finally, crisis teams must determine appropriate communications across each stakeholder group understanding priorities shift over time. Immediate disaster phases call for mass messages of concern, openness and reassurance broadcast across media, digital platforms and local channels (Seeger, 2006). Targeting affected victims, regulators and influencers with tailored care and transparency remains imperative concurrently as situations stabilize. However, post-crisis strategy prioritizes rebuilding trust through remedial actions and sustainable investments benefiting customers and communities' long term.

# **5. Ongoing Crisis Management Strategies**

## **5.1 Utilizing media interviews appropriately**

In the initial days of scanning a crisis, media interviews generally prove unavoidable despite risks involved. Declining to engage simply fuels speculation and skepticism when transparency matters most. However, recklessly venturing into legal or technical areas where facts remain unclear courts lasting damage also. Savvy leaders thus pursue empathy-based messaging broadly while cautioning limitations around disclosures (Seeger, 2006).

Crisis research on effective leadership communication emphasizes perspective-taking, action-orientation and resilience messaging during volatile times. Messages underscoring organizational resilience despite the crisis help stakeholders envision eventual transitions back to stability and reliability long term. Across successive media engagements, balancing compassionate messaging with competence signals around learning and corrections remains vital.

## **5.2 Harnessing social media platforms effectively**

Given its rapid dissemination power and expectations for responsiveness, failing to engage social media activism and outrage risks intensifying reputation damage during crises. Analyzing online discourse patterns spotlights priority stakeholders for further engagement while clarifying harmful rumors before viral magnification.

The crisis teams should tier calibrated messaging across owned media like websites and feeds, loyal supporters willing to assist positively, and hostile activists requiring tailored outreach (Seeger, 2006). Ongoing social listening, tailored engagement and owned property messaging grants crisis managers enhanced influence even within frenzied online debates.

## **5.3 Monitoring public perceptions and adjusting approach accordingly**

Perhaps the most pivotal ongoing task around successful crisis management involves relentless environmental scanning to monitor shifting stakeholder perceptions, emerging media narratives and changing competitive forces externally. Such vigilance detects lingering pain points needing additional reform action or messaging misalignments requiring clarification. Suddenly viral hashtags or adverse branded communities highlight lost trust needing renewed outreach. Adaptive crisis leadership hinges upon promptly detecting threats then responding decisively as new fronts appear post-crisis.

Advanced analytics today facilitate detailed tracking across media channels and key audiences to gauge effectiveness of response efforts immediately. The crisis managers thus update key messages, refresh engagement initiatives and recast overall renewal missions iteratively based on nonstop external assessments post-crisis.

# **6. Post-Crisis Recovery and Reputation Repair**

## **6.1 Apologies and taking responsibility**

As scrutiny fades, crisis management focus transitions toward sustaining reforms, restoring value propositions and learning critical lessons for leadership teams. However, research confirms certain communications actions prove imperative early in recovery phases centrally. Namely demonstrations like apologies, explicit responsibility acceptance and decisive personnel actions positively shape audience perceptions of accountability and values commitments long term (Seeger, 2006).

Effective post-crisis apologies therefore satisfy four essential pillars – timing, self-reflection, identification of victims and sincere regrets communicated. Post-crisis apologies also spotlight self-critical reflection around oversight deficiencies, unhealthy incentives created or warnings rationalized away too long internally.

Leadership discipline and even resignations further signal cultural pivots, heightens seriousness of purpose and satisfies public demands for symbolic justice. Replacing known bad actors directly responsible proves very different from scapegoating heroes only tangentially related to root breakdowns.

## **6.2 Making corrections and operational changes**

As Seeger (2006) observes, “organizational structures that are bounded or rigid...make changes difficult in normal times and even more so in times of crisis” (p.236). Thus, crisis failures act as forcing functions jumpstarting renewal efforts perennially dismissed as unrealistic previously.

## **6.3 Image and brand rebuilding over time**

Crisis managers rightly remain focused upon immediate reputation defense through responsiveness, information sufficiency and decisive reforms initially. However, post-event analysis confirms proactive value repositioning and trust regaining determines long-term impacts years later more critically.

Such symbolic efforts enlist stakeholders into renewal journeys defined by optimism and meaningfulness (Seeger, 2006). Activating supportive voices as reputational ambassadors likewise affords influential lifts no external marketing can fully replicate credibly on its own.

7. Case Studies of Effective and Poor Crisis Management

7.1 Examples of crises handled well

While each crisis differs meaningfully, analyzing how various organizations navigated reputational disasters and scandals spotlights smart practices for emulation and pitfalls requiring avoidance. On the positive side, Tylenol and Johnson & Johnson’s response to the 1982 tampering poisonings that killed 7 people still represents the gold standard for calm, compassionate and competent communications (Dezenhall, 2018). While victims remained dying, J&J demonstrated decisive leadership through publicized empathy for affected families, sweeping reform commitments like new packaging protections, and voluntary coordinated action alongside regulators that risked millions in short-term impacts.

Likewise, toymaker Mattel’s handling of successive high profile recalls in 2007 involving over 20 million toys demonstrated similar resilience through determined leadership. Then CEO Robert Eckert initiated a standstill on production globally while instituting comprehensive corrections and quality control overhauls (Shepard, 2010). Instead growing resentful under pressure, Mattel smartly interpreted the crisis as an inflection point for revolutionizing culture and operations entirely to prevent any repeats.

7.2 Examples of problematic responses

Conversely BP (Deepwater Horizon spill) and Enron (accounting fraud implosion) showcase catastrophic communications failures converting preventable disasters into existential crises destroying once admired global brands utterly (Dezenhall, 2018). By denying and dodging accountability initially through the cascading Gulf of Mexico calamity, then CEO Tony Hayward destroyed credibility irreversibly when Congressional hearings later detailed dozens of negligent errors predating the explosion itself. Stakeholders determined both crises rooted in preventable greed then compounded by tone deaf crisis response.

Likewise, Facebook’s 2018 Cambridge Analytica data privacy scandal demonstrated the newest frontier around social media communications carelessness. Despite warnings internally on platform data protections and previous public commitments by founder Mark Zuckerberg, the company appeared evasive as evidence emerged around analytics firm misuse of 50 million profiles for ad targeting during elections (Shepard, 2010).

7.3 Lessons learned

Across different crisis contexts, the above cases spotlight recurring themes separating resilient responses from disastrous ones consistently over time and industry (Dezenhall, 2018). Responsiveness risks during turmoil must subordinate legal and financial considerations reflexively. Companies avoiding natural inclinations to minimize culpability or slow transparency through layers of approvals communicate care for affected victims better. Lastly, decisive and daring reform commitments focused on contrition and future-proofing speak louder over time than immediate problem-solving feats.

Table 1: Showing the perception pattern in social media during a Crisis for communication

| Role              | Description                                                                                                                                                                                     | Reference           |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Digital Volunteer | Volunteers tweet in the twitter space are referred as the element of influence.                                                                                                                 | Starbird and Palen  |
| Helper            | Engage in virtual and actual activities also give, promote emotional assistance, assistance, and suggestions.                                                                                   | Reuter and Kaufhold |
| Reporter          | Integrate external news sources, whilst supplying conceptual and digital information as a news channel.<br><br>Distribute relevant information to subscribers, and report to the data provider. |                     |

|                 |                                                                               |                           |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Retweeter       | Synthesize, replicate and deliver a message to specific individuals.          | Hughes and Palen          |
| Repeater        | Passive knowledge – capturing participants involved in the situation.         |                           |
| Reader          |                                                                               |                           |
| Emergent groups | Citizens working together for achieving a collective goal relevant to crisis. | Stallings and Quarantelli |

## 8. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 8.1 Summary of key crisis management strategies

This paper has explored crisis management within public relations contexts including planning considerations, initial response, ongoing strategies and post-crisis phases seeking brand recovery. Extensive preparations centered on detection capacities, mobilization protocols, delegated authorities and scenario analysis enhances institutional resilience minimizing eventual turbulence dramatically when negative events strike.

Crisis communications require tailored messaging across phases matching public needs priorities shifting quickly over hours, days and weeks of scrutiny. Effective crisis management balances decisive fixes, durable improvements and authentic moral leadership messaging in proper equilibrium.

### 8.2 Suggestions for additional research

While crisis scholarship offers durable frameworks confirmed repeatedly through numerous cases, additional research expanding insights appears warranted still in targeted areas. Likewise, cultural studies across regions and political contexts could enhance messaging nuances around contrition, remedial actions taken and brand identity repositioning globally.

Equally technology platforms have massively changed stakeholder dynamics through disintermediation, fragmentation and activism mobilization capacities. PR teams require updated playbooks tackling modern tools adversaries potentially exploit.

### 8.3 Final thoughts on developing crisis readiness

Preventable internal failures damage credibility, market value and social capital unnecessarily when scrutiny follows suddenly. External volatility equally threatens institutions lacking contingency planning and adaptive capacity responding to overnight disruption events.

Nonetheless sufficient examples now clearly validate how relatively minor preparedness steps dramatically cushion eventual fallout when disasters strike one day. Cultural development around ethics, transparency and accountability gains lasting strategic advantages through both minimized scandal likelihood and increased public patience when misfortunes occur regardless. Developing crisis resilience fortifies organizations for long-term survival ultimately.

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