

DO'S AND DON'TS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

The key to smart, strong and strategic crisis communications is to convey the right message to the right audience, and do it the right way. Preparing for a potential crisis isn't just smart – it's absolutely essential, allowing city leadership to respond to a real event quickly, effectively and thoughtfully.

Whether the crisis is one that threatens public safety or undermines public confidence, each crisis must be dealt with wisely. Here are some Do's and Don'ts to help you combat negative news, fight false rumors, correct misinformation and push out positive messages and stories.

DO

1. IMPLEMENT YOUR PLAN.

Hopefully, you already developed an effective plan to deal with any potential crisis. Now, activate the plan, relying on your crisis team, spokesperson and trained staff. Establish who is speaking on the record, and make sure that person has all relevant information at his/her disposal.

2. COMMUNICATE WITH ALL AUDIENCES.

Be upfront and let the public know what is happening. This is especially important if the crisis involves an immediate threat to public safety. Make sure you communicate with internal audiences, such as employees and appropriate vendors, as well as external audiences, including the media and, through them, the general public. If incorrect information is provided to the media, admit the mistake and correct the record ... FAST!

3. BREAK YOUR OWN NEWS.

Get in front of the story and drive the information yourself. Control your story, on your own terms. You need to publicly say: Here is what we know and what we are doing about it. Define the crisis in your own terms and on your own turf – don't let someone else define it for you.

4. TAKE REAL ACTION STEPS.

It is important that you communicate steps you've taken to all audiences and be able to assure the public that everything possible is being done to respond to the immediate situation. If appropriate, describe what is being done to prevent it from happening again. If other public entities are involved, let it be known that you are working closely with them.

5. POINT TO THE POSITIVE.

Identify positive developments that show movement forward, paving the way for the city and its residents to get past the crisis. Develop a way to protect your city's "brand" and focus on the positive rather than the negative.

DON'T

1. NO COMMENT = YOU'RE GUILTY.

Do not – DO NOT – say "no comment." Ever. It's important to understand the difference between a court of law (where you would enjoy a presumption of innocence) and the court of public opinion

(where you will be presumed guilty if you are seen as hiding behind “no comment”). Be as responsive as possible, without trapping yourself by saying more than you intend to make public. Don’t let the phrasing of a reporter’s question trap you – respond to the question the way you would have wanted it asked. Remember to have confidence in your own competence; don’t fall into a “circle-the-wagons” mentality.

2. DON’T STALL WITH INFORMATION, AND NEVER LIE.

Don’t allow numerous people to be in charge of collecting and disseminating information. Prevent leak-driven media free-for-alls by creating an information funnel to ensure that one city spokesperson receives all relevant information and controls the message. Never lie – eventually the media and public will find out, and your credibility (and that of the city) will be blown apart.

3. DON’T ASK THE PUBLIC TO “TRUST ME”

Crises can shake the public’s confidence, and they will want to see proof that their interests are being cared for. Work with third-party validators – outside experts who can evaluate the situation – to provide expert advice and best correct any missteps. Don’t give the public any reason to believe you fail to take the crisis seriously.

4. DON’T CREATE NEWS VACUUMS.

Don’t keep information to yourself any longer than is necessary to protect public safety. Keep the media machine fed – early, regularly and truthfully. Make sure you provide regular statements that reflect genuine sensitivity and concern. Otherwise someone else will fill the void, and you will lose control of the city’s message and its reputation.

5. DON’T BE AFRAID TO CHALLENGE THE MEDIA.

When media reports get it wrong or are unfair, don’t stay quiet and let the mistake take on a life of its own. Set the errant reporter straight – and if necessary, climb higher on the newsroom hierarchy. Even if the error isn’t corrected now, you could lay the foundation for a follow-up story. Do not attack the reporter or the story in a public setting (such as at a press briefing), because then your response will become the newest story. But be sure to provide the correct information when you speak to other reporters.