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A Guide to Crisis Communications for Business Events Strategists

Created by davies tanner in partnership with PCMA



foreward

PCMA exists to support the global conferences, meetings and events sector, with strategic focus on education, skills development and networking. By working together, our community of events strategists has used these resources to build strong brands and lasting relationships, and it is therefore the logical next step for PCMA to produce a resource that helps you protect these powerful business assets.

We bring this toolkit for crisis communication planning to you at a time when increased risk has, sadly, become a way of life. On an almost daily basis, we hear of global threats from terrorists, state sponsored computer network hackers and widespread political unrest, even in areas where political stability has long been taken for granted. These are all poignant reminders of the need for crisis communication planning within our own businesses, a need that has perhaps, never been so great.

Our industry is at its best when all within it are moving forward. A crisis for one business can damage the reputation of the entire sector, creating negative effects for us all. We are therefore entirely grateful to our global PR partner, davies tanner, for sharing their considerable expertise in crisis communication and working with us to make this essential business guide available to you.



Sherrif Karamat, CAE | President & CEO
Professional Convention Management Association

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1. introduction

PCMA invited davies tanner to share its expertise in crisis communication to empower you to protect your brands and reputations should the unthinkable happen in your business. In the digitally connected world, a negative news story spreads rapidly and can quickly become uncontrollable. The nature of events and sheer volume of people that pass-through hotels and venues, mean our industry is particularly vulnerable. By following the steps of a cohesive crisis communication plan, your ability to protect yourself, your business and to control a crisis situation will be considerably improved.

PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association) educates, inspires and listens, creating meaningful experiences where passion, purpose and commerce come together. It is the world's largest community for Business Events Strategists, providing senior-level education and networking for the business events sector. PCMA crafts and shares knowledge and market intelligence, enabling organizations to make informed business decisions while providing a platform for peer-to-peer exchange.

davies tanner is the leading independent PR agency for the business events, travel and tourism sector. With a global footprint and extensive influencer network, davies tanner has have successfully served the conference, meetings and events industry since 1997. Since 2012 davies tanner has worked with PCMA as its Global Agency of Record, across all its international markets. This guide was prepared by Ken Kelling who is an Associate Director at davies tanner.

2. overview

Crisis communications is now an integral part of the event landscape and yet should something unexpected occur, many businesses in the field of event strategy still have no crisis plan in place. If that sounds like you, perhaps the following statements are familiar:

“We don’t have the time or resource to put into planning for a crisis.”

“We’re only small – nothing major is likely to happen to us.”

“If something happens, we’ll deal with it.”

Any business, anywhere, at any time, can find its reputation ruined and business lost simply because of how it is perceived. As the American business magnate and investor, Warren Buffet, once said:

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”

Being prepared for something to go wrong is essential for any business in today’s unpredictable world.

This guide focuses on communications (not operations) although the two are obviously inexorably linked and it is vital that they are joined up. We highlight the two “Rs” – Resilience and Reputation – that should be core to what you do.

At the heart of this document is “A 15 Point Toolkit for Crisis Communications Planning” that will enable you to self-assess your business’s approach to handling crisis communications. The toolkit is a first stage for anyone who has never thought about these issues before or is unsure where to start.



3. the only certain thing is uncertainty

As far back as 500 BC, the ancient philosopher Heraclitus reminded us that the only constant thing was change. Today this message is even more prescient.

Our frenetic, digital age is transforming our lives at an unprecedented rate and “VUCA” is now a commonly used acronym to describe or reflect on the **V**olatility, **U**ncertainty, **C**omplexity and **A**mbiguity of the world.

By the nature of their work, event strategists are often at the cutting edge of these issues thanks to business meetings, technological innovation and digital communication. The modern working life of event strategists is perhaps more uncertain and more fast-changing than ever before.

We are also experiencing the fastest speed of communication of any other time in history. Stories (both true and false) rapidly go viral and fragment almost as soon as an incident takes place and we are very rarely in control of them.

Despite the many benefits of social media, businesses now also face a quadruple challenge in managing their corporate reputation online, namely:

- Increased accountability
- Increased scrutiny
- Increased scepticism
- Increased confusion over reliable sources of “truth”

With all of this in mind, we should be doing our utmost to expect the unexpected.



4. what is a crisis?

A crisis to some may just be a normal day to others. As an example, our team deal with a wide range of crisis issues on behalf of clients on an almost daily basis. For us, a crisis is all part of a normal day.

In reality, we tend to associate a crisis with a major incident that may or may not be of our own making. Erupting volcanoes, airplane crashes, bankruptcy, terror attacks and fatalities are all obvious crisis situations. And these types of incident have defined much of the development of the concept of crisis communications over the last few decades.

Being very clear about what constitutes a potential and likely crisis in your own field of work is an essential starting point. A crisis to your business may be something less obvious. It's also important to remember how something seemingly small can be built up and exaggerated by the viral nature of social media if it is not dealt with appropriately. A robust monitoring and decision-making process is essential. "How could this play out?" is never a bad question to ask.

On the flip side, being proportionate in your response can also avoid turning a minor incident into a full-blown "crisis". "Don't worship the crisis" is a common mantra, meaning there are many different strategies to calming a situation and preventing the drawing of any further unwanted attention. It's a delicate balance.

Continually thinking about the ongoing "resilience" of your business may help to tease out and even predict where "a time of intense difficulty or danger" may arise. Part of this is to ensure you and your team find time to fully consider all the potential risks, many of which may not be so obvious, and plan for the worst while hoping for the best.



5. where do we start?

If crisis communications have not been something you've thought about before, then you may be wondering where to start. It's a simple beginning – give it attention and make it a priority.

Your first actions should be scenario planning, idea generation and listing the potential for things to go wrong.

“What would happen if.....” is a guiding thought together with “How could it be perceived if we.....?” and “Who has responsibility for.....?”

Using professional expertise to help facilitate this process can be very valuable as it adds independent insight. Your business's strengths and weaknesses will soon be revealed, allowing you to think about what resource you may need to allocate if and when an incident occurs. Even if you never face a major crisis, then the planning and thinking involved in preparing for one will give you insights into your business that you hadn't thought about before.

6. how to build a crisis communications plan

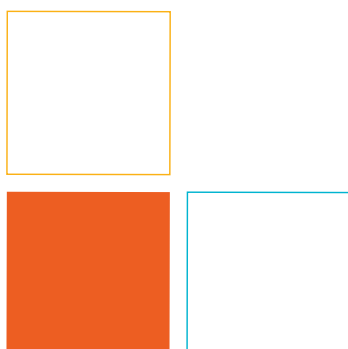
The following section provides a starting point for building a crisis communications plan. It's a series of fifteen points that will help you begin to map out an approach for your business.

At the end of this guide, you will be able to score yourself against “A 15 Point Toolkit for Crisis Communications Planning”. Your final score reveals your current level of preparedness, which again will help highlight which areas you need to focus on.

The questions are designed to be as simple as possible. Each is only a starting point for building a robust plan. You are encouraged to examine them in greater depth than can be covered here.

The section is divided into three, focussing on questions that are relevant to communications pre, during and post crisis. However, the planning of all three stages should be viewed holistically. For example, thinking about how you'd like to be perceived by your customers and the public after a crisis is over, will influence how you may act when it's underway.

How confident are you that the following fifteen statements apply to your business?



pre-event

1. If a crisis hit today, we would be ready to communicate to all our internal and external stakeholders with tailored, targeted messages.

If you begin to think about how you communicate with your key stakeholders at the point a crisis hits, it's already too late. Your communication channels should be regular and clear. You should be aware of differences in tone and style; what you say to your team may be different to what you say to the media and shareholders, for example. The more you are attuned to this in advance – and the more practice you have put in – the easier this will be to put into action.

2. We rehearsed a crisis scenario within the last 12 months.

Nothing prepares you and your business for handling a crisis better than rehearsing. Rehearsals can range from full-blown role playing through to planning around a meeting table. Either way, the most important thing to remember is to keep rehearsing. Information, processes and people can all change easily within a year and the world moves on. It's an easy exercise to neglect, leave on the shelf or simply forget about.

3. Our senior leaders / spokespeople have been media trained in the last year.

Professional media training is often dismissed as a “nice-to-have”, unnecessary or just not worth the money. But if the first time you or your boss appear in front of a camera is in the middle of a crisis, don't expect it to go well. Delivering the right message in the right tone with the right degree of authority when the media spotlight is on you is a honed skill. Investment in media training is never a waste – not least because of the confidence and communication skills it inspires in senior leaders.

4. We have a clear system for deciding what triggers a crisis response – whether it be an actual event, perception of the company, damage limitation or reputation management.

Deciding when and how to treat an incident as a crisis is sometimes very clear and at other times something of an art form. You should be sure about when and how those decisions are made, who is responsible for making them and who is accountable. Everyone in your team and organisation should be aware of these processes and their own role in them.

5. Our clients are aware of our crisis procedures, so too are our devolved or overseas offices and our supply chain.

Talking openly and honestly with key stakeholders about your procedures for dealing with a crisis can help to cement relationships and boost trust. Your reputation is linked to their own and when a crisis hits, you'll want them onside. Make sure that your communication channels with clients, suppliers and any key staff overseas are open, up to date and used regularly.

during-event

6. We have a clear crisis “command centre” (including out of hours and virtual) where decisions are made and messages agreed.

You may not feel grand enough to have a “command centre” and sophisticated communication networks like some multi-national companies. However, you should create a dedicated space which includes a landline phone with reliable connection and a PC or laptop with a reliable internet connection, that can act as the centre of any communication planning when a crisis hits.

You should also think about how you connect your senior team if they are overseas, as communication decisions will need to be made quickly. Sometimes in a crisis, your own building or headquarters may be unavailable to you. Where else could you host a dedicated communications control office if that were the case?

7. We are clear on who forms a crisis team and on each person’s role within the team.

In dealing with a crisis, it’s helpful to use the RACI model. Who is **R**esponsible for decisions? Who is **A**ccountable? Who should be **C**onsulted? And who should simply be **I**nformed?

Communicating in a time of crisis can be overwhelming – many people will make demands on you to be told “what’s going on?” The clearer you are in advance about everyone’s role and who needs to know what, the quicker your decision-making is likely to be.

Your core crisis team must also include decision-makers at the right level and across your organisation – operations, finance and human resources as well as communications. Your media or PR team may lead on messaging and communications, but they will need the latest information, updates and briefings from experts and those closest to any unfolding crisis.

8. We have a robust system for monitoring / analysing social media coverage and sufficient resource to respond.

Social media is now the key driving force of crisis communications. Members of the public who are close to an incident can post videos, photos, information and opinions the moment they occur. Uncorrected or misleading stories can spread like wildfire during a time of crisis as people speculate or “fill in” with their own opinions, especially when facts are hard to come by or a situation is still unfolding.

Social media is often the first place journalists will look for information, quotes and reaction to a story because they are under pressure themselves to create news content very quickly. They can't always wait for official statements to be agreed or interviews to be lined up. They are writing stories immediately.

Setting up social media channels to proactively deal with crisis-handling messages is a time consuming and resource-heavy process. When a crisis hits, it's too late to set up social media channels from scratch or to allocate the role of social media champion. Both should be in place and sufficiently resourced as part of your crisis communications planning.

9. We have pre-scripted, targeted messages covering different crisis scenarios which can be used or adapted whenever a crisis arises.

Although a crisis is usually unexpected, a large part of being prepared is predicting what the issue is likely to be. Rehearsing the most appropriate messages at the right time will bring a sense of confidence should a crisis affect your business.

Pre-arranged messages will also help with continuity and training, especially if your business has a high turnover of staff. They are a vital crisis communications resource providing knowledge, guidance and practical instruction, that should be readily available to the most appropriate team members.

10. We know what work streams can be altered, pulled or changed in the event of a crisis.

When a crisis hits, everything your business is doing comes under intense scrutiny. So something that you were already planning to do – such as launching an advertising campaign – may suddenly look insensitive or inappropriate.

You should be aware of how public perception may impact your day to day business and therefore what may need to change.

You may also need to reallocate people and resource to deal with a crisis – how will this impact on other parts of the business?



post-event

11. We have clear systems for learning from a crisis and communicating what we've learned to our stakeholders.

How you behave as a business during a crisis is important, but so too is what you learn from it.

As the immediate crisis abates and you reach the post-crisis stage, there are some questions to ask: Was it beyond your control, or could you have handled things differently? What feedback have you received? What does hindsight tell you?

Your stakeholders will want to know what you have learned and what – if anything – you intend to change. Being open and transparent about the lessons you've learned can enhance your reputation. Things can go wrong for any business, people understand this, often you will be judged more on how you react to a crisis, than the crisis itself.

12. When we look back on a crisis, we can be sure that we will have communicated to the highest standards expected.

Considering how you would like to be perceived after a crisis will provide insight into how you should behave both before and during it.

Surveys of journalists, politicians and businesses* show that those organisations who are respected most for their handling of a crisis nearly always demonstrate some or all the following:

- Admitted responsibility (if appropriate)
- Acted with openness and transparency
- Talked straight
- Made things right with clients
- Changed corporate culture if required
- Fixed the problem
- Acted with honesty and integrity
- Were clear about the extent and nature of the problem
- Showed authenticity
- Referred to their wider purpose as a company

It's worth considering whether these are qualities you will be able to demonstrate if a crisis hits your company.

13. We have enough resource to allow us to work on rebuilding confidence / finding solutions even as the crisis is unfolding.

A core team of people who are dealing with a crisis have very little time to do anything else. The overwhelming feeling can be “let’s get through this, then we can think about repairing any damage to our reputation”.

However, this is a short-sighted approach. Your business and its reputation will benefit immensely from allocating resource and people outside of the day to day crisis management team. They can begin planning for recovery straight away. Unaffected by the immediate need to tackle the crisis, they will be more objective and clear-headed about the steps you can take immediately to protect your reputation from the inevitable post-crisis fallout.

This will improve your business’s ability to put a recovery plan into action immediately after the crisis is over.

14. We understand what rebuilding trust means in our business.

Trust – between clients and agencies, between the public and institutions and between one organisation and another – is perhaps the most important quality in business. Just like reputation, trust takes a long time to build and a very short time to lose. A crisis can put pressure on the levels of trust you enjoy with your stakeholders.

The ways in which trust is built varies from sector to sector. Personal relationships, the timely fulfilment of orders and the quality of customer service are all factors in building trust. Only you will know the elements that matter most to your own business. Considering in advance what you may need to do to rebuild trust following a crisis will yield important insights and enable you to create a cohesive plan quickly.

15. We can be confident that dealing with a crisis would help to make our company even more resilient. Resilience is a core company value.

As we have seen, in an increasingly uncertain world, resilience is a key value of any company culture. If you can imagine your business as stronger and tougher following a crisis, this implies a healthy confidence in your teams, your systems and your communications. Is it justified? If not, what should you change?



7. 15 point toolkit for crisis communications planning

On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree, how far do you agree with the following statements about your company?

pre-crisis	mark out of 10	action we can take to improve our score
If a crisis hit today, we would be ready to communicate to all our internal and external stakeholders with tailored, targeted messages.		
We rehearsed a crisis scenario within the last 12 months – either physically or table top.		
Our senior leaders / spokespeople have been media trained in the last year.		
We have a clear system for deciding what triggers a crisis response – whether it's an actual event, perception of the company, damage limitation, prevention or reputation management.		
Our clients are aware of our crisis procedures, so too are our devolved or overseas offices and our supply chain.		

during a crisis	mark out of 10	action we can take to improve our score
We have a clear crisis “command centre” (including out of hours and virtual) where decisions are made and messages agreed.		
We are clear on who forms a crisis team and on each person’s role within the team.		
We have a robust system for monitoring / analysing social media coverage and sufficient resource to respond.		
We have pre-scripted, targeted messages covering different crisis scenarios which can be used or adapted whenever a crisis arises.		
We know what workstreams can be altered, pulled or changed in the event of a crisis.		

post-crisis	mark out of 10	action we can take to improve our score
We have clear systems for learning from a crisis and communicating what we've learned to our stakeholders.		
<p>When we look back on a crisis, We can be sure that we will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admitted responsibility (if appropriate) • Acted with openness and transparency • Talked straight • Made things right with clients • Changed our corporate culture if required • Fixed the problem • Acted with honesty and integrity • Been clear about the extent and nature of the problem • Showed authenticity • Referred to our wider purpose as a company 		
We have enough resource to allow us to work on rebuilding confidence / finding solutions even as the crisis is unfolding.		
We understand what rebuilding Trust means in our business.		
We can be confident that dealing with a crisis would help to make our company even more resilient. Resilience is a core company value.		
Total score (out of 150)		

help when you need it

PCMA

Headquartered in Chicago, PCMA has 17 chapters throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico with members in more than 40 countries.

For more information on the PCMA family of brands, visit PCMA at pcma.org, PCMA Education Foundation at foundation.pcma.org, PCMA Convene magazine at pcmaconvene.org, Digital Experience Institute (DEI) at digitalexperienceinstitute.org and the Incentive, Conference & Event Society Asia-Pacific (ICESAP) at icesap.org.

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davies tanner has been supporting clients and brands across the global business events sector for over 20 years. To find out how we can help you and your business, simply contact us for a free consultation:

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