

## A 7-point checklist for crisis preparedness and management

By Bob Conrad | Posted: January 4, 2012

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Crises, by definition, cannot always be predicted.

Nevertheless, businesses and organizations can be prepared for unfortunate events, including attacks from consumers, product defects, and other crises that can damage a bottom line and personal reputations.

Crisis planning is one way to mitigate damage during controversy and heavy media scrutiny. Embedded practices, however, are also crucial. This means regular behaviors within organizations that can help mitigate damage and aid the flow of information during a controversy or crisis. Absent regular communications practices, crisis damage may be deepened by poor communication.

Here are seven tips that can benefit any organization when controversy or crisis erupts.

**Have an established chain of command, and follow it.**

Police, fire, and other emergency responders know the chain-of-command concept well—or they should. It tends to be less-familiar territory for communicators and CEOs.

During emergency exercises, it is crucial to know who is in charge and who has what role and responsibility. In some instances, the CEO or organizational leader may have to take a back seat to emergency responders. Know who are second and third in command, and follow that chain.

**Maintain key contact information in both physical and electronic forms.**

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#### Maintain accounts on social networks.

A corporate website may be useless if an organization is thrust into the spotlight. It could get hacked or its servers overloaded. Facebook and Twitter may be better options, or an alternative [WordPress.com](#) site. Be prepared to communicate in these media if you are not using these networks already.

#### Be responsive and accessible to the media.

It is amazing in the age of social media how some organizations—and worse, politicians—disavow the press because of direct-to-consumer technologies.

Though social networks are crucial for getting out messages in your own words, the media still have access to global audiences that you may not otherwise reach.

#### Maintain rapport with key journalists, particularly Associated Press reporters.

They tend to be go-to reporters, because their stories get potentially worldwide distribution in real time. Don't curry favor with them. Instead, maintain a professional, polite, and responsive relationship regardless of whether the news is good or bad.

#### Comment only on what you know.

In the absence of verifiable information, it is essential to comment only on what is known. The reality is that members of the press will often know more than the organization—it's their job. But do not feed into speculation.

Even if the media have more information about what is going on, stick with what you know for sure. Better still: Ask reporters to help you obtain and convey reliable information.

#### Never lie or spin.

Tell it like it is. Too many in the public relations arena will sugarcoat negativity, which is a surefire way to incite reporters to be more skeptical.

It's true that the press can exacerbate crises through incomplete reporting based on innuendo and allegation, but it is important for organizations to acknowledge the dynamic at hand. Some would say that this is defining the crisis, and it is usually better for an organization to define the problem than to have the press do it for you.

Are there victims? Stop victimizing them. Are you at fault or partially at fault? Take responsibility for what you can; avoid blaming others.

If a person or organization has little credibility, the press will be leery. It is even more important to take responsible when possible. In the age of social media, in which everyone has a public voice, organizations are particularly vulnerable to becoming a negative meme for previously innocuous things, such as a poor customer service incident.

Remember: People and organizations with status, money, and power almost never come across well when they play the victim card. The more popular and wealthy you are, the more vulnerable you will be. The public is rarely sympathetic to a multinational corporation that is defensive. Humility, instead, goes a long way.

*Bob Conrad holds a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Nevada, Reno, where he completed his dissertation about media coverage of crisis events. He is the author of [Spin! How the News Media Misinform and Why Consumers Misunderstand](#), available at Amazon. Follow him on Twitter: [@BobConrad](#).*

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