



Reasonable Voice

Crisis Communications for a 24/7 News Cycle

It's not a matter of *if...* but *when*.

Today, every organization operates in a complicated world, and the chances of something going wrong, and needing a carefully worded and positioned response at some point is inevitable. To help prepare for this eventuality, consider these five key factors which organization leaders need to successfully navigate crises and sensitive issues. You won't find these factors in any textbook or case study; rather, they come from decades of experience (and a fair share of learning from mistakes) managing real-world situations.

1. Take the "Critical 10"

Answering any inquiry in haste during a crisis may exacerbate the problem. And being on the receiving end of a phone call or urgent message always puts you at a disadvantage, as you may not only be unprepared, but also operating on someone else's timetable. In these situations, always defer your availability and offer to call back. And then be sure to do it.

These 10 minutes (or however long it takes) can make the difference between managing a sensitive issue and a full-blown crisis. Always give yourself time to digest, reflect, and analyze before responding. Then, when you get back to the inquirer, you have a much better chance of being prepared and in control of the conversation... and you are better suited to provide valuable information and answers.

When negative digital media is employed by others seeking a response from you, don't engage in the online battle – try to get the person into a conversation offline as soon as possible. Taking the "Critical 10" can keep you from firing back and later regretting it.

2. Think in 140

Don't literally think in tweets; rather, keep all messaging consistent and concise. When a crisis occurs and all the information is not available, organizations should have prepared holding statements until more information becomes available. These consistent and concise statements are best when containing the following three components: fact, empathy, and what's next. There's no room for speculation.

The same process is necessary when crafting “key messages” later on. Limit yourself to one-page and 14-point font, and craft 5-7 messages that are useful for all audiences. This ensures a consistent and clear voice and enables you to provide valuable and transparent information for all of your information partners (e.g., journalists, regulators, customers, employees, etc.) in disseminating your key messages to larger audiences. And even as you prepare for digital first responses (or even on-camera), prepare your key messages in writing first. Too many situations have gone poorly when messages weren’t committed to writing for everyone to use and reference.

3. Who speaks... and who is the designated backup?

While one person should be designated as the primary spokesperson for your organization (often the CEO or other executive) be sure you train and prepare subject matter experts and other backups to step in as needed as your designated spokesperson. Training can be effectively done by both in-house and outside staff – just be sure you are objective about the training you are getting. Sometimes the CEO wants to be the spokesperson, but this doesn’t automatically make him/her the best choice. In this instance, an outside consultant can help with an objective opinion.

Unforeseen circumstances may prevent the designated speaker from continuing, and while it is preferable to only have one spokesperson, not having an appropriate replacement is unacceptable. And remember this: “You can always go up, but you can’t go down.” If you put your senior leadership person out in front of an incident, be sure she stays there until the situation has been resolved.

4. Bridge with your ATM

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5. Always take dessert

This seldom used technique is one of the easiest; yet often forgotten or dismissed. At the conclusion of most interviews or inquiries, an opportunity is almost always offered and seldom taken. The answer to a concluding question “is there anything else you would like to add?” should always be an emphatic “yes.” Use this gift to reiterate one of your key messages and potentially save the interview. Do not use this opportunity to offer new, additional messages. Keep it simple and prepared.

If you keep these five critical response steps in mind the next time you have to respond to a sensitive or crisis situation, you will most assuredly be better equipped with a reliable compass to more successfully navigate the storm.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Meath'.

Michael Meath
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