



17 Commandments of Crisis Communication

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1. **Decide if it really is a crisis** – Sometimes you have to recognize something for what it is and have a sense of humor about it. For example, was the recent meltdown by a Jet Blue employee a real crisis? No. It was embarrassing, and it did inconvenience a number of passengers. But nobody got hurt or killed. The employee – Steven Slater – immediately became a cult hero to every working person in America in the social media. So Jet Blue did the smart thing – they poked some fun at themselves in a blog post and complimented their 2,300 flight attendants. This is a great example of using the social media to turn a negative into a positive.
2. **Use your crisis management plan** – Every organization needs a crisis management plan, including a complete crisis communication component. Use the plan and communicate accordingly. Results from past crises shows that organizations with a plan fare better in terms of public perception and, in the case of publicly traded corporations, in share values.
3. **Respond quickly** – If a problem is festering and members, the public, and others are framing the issue and defining the conversation, it's only going to get worse. Get out there and show you care about the problem and the people it affected – even if it's only a quick statement to say you are looking into it and will have more information soon.
4. **Don't sugarcoat the truth and downplay the problem** – That's what got BP into trouble. You don't want to create unnecessary alarm, but it's better to warn of the worst-case scenario and have it turn out better than to say it's a minor problem and then have it blow up in your face. Then you have another crisis to deal with, plus people thinking you were lying in the first place. Once you've lost your credibility, you're done.
5. **Be real and make it personal** – Don't get caught up in corporate-speak that can make your response seem cold and calculated. Speak from your heart and show some compassion. Remember the criticism of BP during the oil spill? People heard the official pronouncements but were unconvinced that the company really cared.
6. **Make sure the facts are correct** – Remember the West Virginia mining accident when the Governor of West Virginia announced that the miners were alive when they were actually dead? Not good.

7. **Identify a spokesperson** – One person should deliver updates in a crisis and the media should know who to go to. When other people attempt to speak in an official capacity (such as the West Virginia governor in the mining accident crisis), the results can be disastrous. For an association, the spokesperson is usually the chief staff executive but could be the Board Chair.
8. **Don't delegate CEO or Board Chair responsibility** – One of these key leaders must be in charge in a crisis. The only time a CEO should delegate responsibility or spokesperson duties to others is if his/her credibility is damaged beyond repair, and in that case they should also resign. Both happened to Tony Hayward.
9. **Apologize and accept responsibility** – People will accept an apology and forgive you, but just apologizing is not enough. You have to be accountable, whether it's BP acknowledging that its safety procedures weren't adequate or Tiger Woods saying it was his fault that he was unfaithful to his wife.
10. **Actions matter** – Communication is essential, but without action to solve the crisis, words mean nothing. Make sure you have a solid action plan that is likely to produce real, measurable results that you can report in future media briefings to show progress.
11. **Be brief and be clear** – We live in a sound bite world, and it's only the memorable sound bites that break through and are remembered. Distill your messages down to the essence and deliver them boldly and in an interesting way.
12. **Don't ask for sympathy** – remember the famous line from Tony Hayward of BP saying, "I'd like my life back?"
13. **Don't be afraid to admit mistakes, even bad ones** – When something really bad happens, people will think it is the result of one of two things – evil or stupidity. Which would you rather be – evil or stupid? If it was stupid, say so. You'll take a short-term hit, but people will forgive you. You can fix a stupid thing by getting smarter. But there is no defense for evil intent – real or perceived. Take Bernie Madoff, for example.
14. **Don't lie** – that never works. It seems obvious to say, but even U.S. presidents have broken this basic rule.
15. **Plan social media strategy in advance** – When a crisis breaks, social media will soon be buzzing with random facts, opinions, speculation, misperceptions, and even calls to action. A good social media strategy developed in advance with a strong crisis communication component will help you manage the waves of social media discussions that will occur. Trying to develop a social media strategy in the midst of a crisis won't work.
16. **Fix misperceptions** – If misperceptions are festering among your key audiences, do something about it. Be transparent. State the truth. Apologize again if necessary. Explain the situation further. But if exposed to the truth, the collective wisdom of the crowd will rise to the surface in the social media.
17. **Know when to let go** – No negative story lasts forever, even though it may seem like it. Even BP is fading from the news pages. Every story is different, but use your best judgment to assess when the story has run its course and you have done all you can to shape it. You don't want to prolong a problem or make it worse.