

Appendix 4

Sample Crisis Communication Plan

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When an emergency occurs, the need to communicate is immediate. If business operations are disrupted, customers will want to know how they will be impacted. Regulators may need to be notified and local government officials will want to know what is going on in their community. Employees and their families will be concerned and want information. Neighbors living near an incident may need information—especially if they, their residence or their business could be impacted. All of these “audiences” will want information before the business has a chance to begin communicating.

An important component of an organization’s planning effort is the creation of a crisis communications plan. A business or organization must be able to respond promptly, accurately and confidently during an emergency in the hours and days that follow. Many different audiences must be reached with information specific to their interests and needs. The image of the business can be positively or negatively impacted by public perceptions of the handling of the incident.

This document provides direction for developing a crisis communications plan. Understanding potential **Audiences** is key, as each audience wants to know: “How does it affect me”? Guidance for scripting **Messages** that are specific to the interests of the audience is another element of the plan. The **Contact & Information Center** section explains how to use existing resources to gather and disseminate information during and following an incident.

Audiences

Understanding the audiences that a business or organizational needs to reach during an emergency is one of the first steps in the development of a Crisis Communications Plan. There are many potential audiences that will want information during and following an incident and each has its own needs for information. The challenge is to identify potential audiences, determine their need for information and then identify who within the business is best able to communicate with that audience.

The following is a list of audiences that a parking program should consider as they create a crisis communication plan:

- Patrons
- Those directly impacted by the incident, and if applicable, their families
- Parking program employees, and if applicable, their families
- News media
- Community stakeholders—especially those living near or directly impacted by an incident
- Program management, Managers and other financial stakeholders
- Government elected officials, regulators and other authorities
- Suppliers, if applicable

Contact Information

Contact information for each audience should be compiled and immediately accessible during an incident. Existing information such as customer, supplier, and employee contact information may be exportable from existing databases. Include as much information for each contact as possible (e.g., organization name, contact name, business telephone number, cell number, fax number, and email address). Lists should be updated regularly, secured to protect confidential information and available to authorized users for use by members of the crisis communications team. Electronic lists can also be hosted on a secure server for remote access with a web browser. Hard copies of lists should also be available at the alternate location.

Customers

Customers are the life of a business, so contact with customers is a top priority. A crisis communication (business continuity) plan should include action to redirect incoming telephone calls to a second location (if available) or to a voice message indicating that the organization is experiencing a temporary problem. This plan should also include procedures to ensure that customers are properly informed about issues that may impact them directly and indirectly.

Front line parking staff who are normally assigned to work with customers should be assigned to communicate with customers during a crisis as well. If there are a lot of customers, then the list should be prioritized to reach the most important customers first.

Remember, in the case of a crisis: communicate early, communicate often, and communicate as honestly as possible.

Suppliers

The crisis communication plan should include documented procedures for notification of suppliers, for example technology providers, other city departments who directly supply support or services to a parking program, contracted staff, etc. The procedures should identify when and how they should be notified.

Management

Protocols for when to notify management should be clearly understood and documented. Consider events that occur on a holiday weekend or in the middle of the night. It should be clear to staff what situations require immediate notification of management regardless of the time of day. Similar protocols and procedures should be established for the notification of managers, investors, and other important stakeholders. Management does not want to learn about a problem from the news media.

Government Officials and Regulators

Communications with government officials depends upon the nature and severity of the incident and protocol for notifying upper level City management should be discussed as part of the crisis communication planning process. Businesses/organizations that fail to notify a regulator within the prescribed time risk incurring a fine. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations require notification to OSHA when there are three or more hospitalizations from an

accident or if there is a fatality. Environmental regulations require notification if there is a chemical spill or release that exceeds threshold quantities. Other regulators may need to be notified if there is an incident involving product tampering, contamination or quality. Notification requirements should be documented in the Crisis Communications Plan. A major incident in the community will capture the attention of elected officials. A senior manager should be assigned to communicate with elected officials and public safety officials.

Employees

Human Resources (HR), or another designated management level staff person, are responsible for the day-to-day communications with employees regarding employment issues and benefits administration. HR management/designated management should assume a similar role on the crisis communications team. This designated person/people should coordinate communications with management, supervisors, employees, and families. They should also coordinate communications with those involved with the care of employees and the provision of benefits to employees and their families. Close coordination between management, designated organizational spokesperson, public agencies, and HR is needed when managing the sensitive nature of communications related to an incident involving death or serious injury.

The Community

Parking programs and their services are very customer-oriented so in addition to internal/organizational audience, the community at large can become an important audience. As such, community outreach should be part of the crisis communications plan. The plan should include coordination with public safety officials to develop protocols and procedures for advising the public of any hazards and the most appropriate protective action that should be taken if warned.

Positioning

To decide on how you position your communication to the community at large, it is important to step out of your role in the business/organization and put yourself in the situation of whom ever was involved in the crisis or try to view the crisis from the eye of the public. Ignoring the situation will only make things worse.

Examples of categories to consider for positioning are:

- Human error
- Clerical error
- Unauthorized procedures
- Inadequate supervision
- Inadequate quality control
- Misuse of confidential information
- Errors of judgment
- Inadequate standard operating procedures

As you are considering your “position” it is important to consider the wide range of consequences (e.g., legal, financial, public relations, effects on administration, and effects on operations). Keep in mind that people tend to remember what they hear first and last.

News Media

If the incident is serious, then the news media will be on scene or calling to obtain details. There may be numerous requests for information from local, regional or national media. The challenge of managing large numbers of requests for information, interviews, and public statements can be overwhelming. Prioritization of requests for information and the development of press releases and talking points can assist with the need to communicate quickly and effectively.

Develop a company policy that only authorized spokespersons are permitted to speak to the news media. Communicate the policy to all employees explaining that it is best to speak with one informed voice.

Determine in advance who will speak to the news media and prepare that spokesperson with talking points, so they can speak clearly and effectively in terms that can be easily understood.

Designated Spokesperson

One individual should be designated as the primary spokesperson to represent the City, make official statements, and answer media questions throughout the crisis. A backup to the designated spokesperson should also be identified to fill the position in the event that the primary spokesperson is unavailable.

In addition to the primary spokesperson and the backup spokesperson, individuals who will serve as technical experts or advisors should be designated. These resources might include a financial expert, an engineer, a leader in the community or anyone your organization deems necessary during a specific kind of crisis. This will take some brainstorming by the crisis communication team since what is needed may not always be apparent. There should be an authority or technical expert in their field and be available to supplement the knowledge of the spokesperson.

Criteria for the spokesperson, backup spokesperson, and crisis communication expert is:

- Comfortable in front of a TV camera and with reporters. Preferably, skilled in handling media, skilled in directing responses to another topic, skilled in identifying key points, able to speak without using jargon, respectful of the role of the reporter, knowledgeable about the organization and the crisis at hand.
- Able to establish credibility with the media, able to project confidence to the audience, suitable in regard to diction, appearance and charisma, sincere, straightforward and believable, accessible to the media and to internal communications personnel who will facilitate media interviews, able to remain calm in stressful situations.

In addition to the designated spokesperson and backup, it can be anticipated that other parties involved in the crisis; police, fire department, health officials, etc., will also have a spokesperson. It is important to obtain the identity of that individual as early as possible so all statements and contacts with the media can be coordinated between the two individuals and their organizations/interests whenever possible.

Practicing Tough Questions

A crisis situation is always difficult when dealing with the media. Therefore, tough questions and rehearsals are necessary to help the spokesperson prepare.

It is important, at the onset of the crisis, that the spokesperson, backup, and advisors spend some time rehearsing prepared statements and answers to possible "tough" questions that may be asked by reporters. If possible, similar rehearsals should be conducted prior to each media interview, briefing, or news conference. It is also important to anticipate and practice new questions as the story evolves. It is better to over prepare than to be surprised by the depth of questioning by the media.

The designated spokesperson should prepare questions and answers for the practice sessions. These questions and answers should be for internal use only and not for distribution outside the organization. Don't volunteer information unless it is a point the organization wants to make and the question hasn't been asked. Don't talk off the record.

Prepared Statements

If you don't communicate immediately, you lose your greatest opportunity to control events. Your first news release should include at a minimum the who, what, when, and where of the situation.

You must give the facts that have been gathered from reliable sources and confirmed. Don't over reach and don't speculate. If you do nothing more than show concern for the public and for your employees in your first press interaction, you are already on the right track. The corollary of expressing concern and generating good will at the consumer level is securing the loyalty of your customers and employees by taking the initiative to share information with them. If your employees and customers don't feel like insiders, they are going to act like outsiders.

You must have a prepared statement on hand that can be used to make an initial general response to the media when knowledge about the crisis first becomes known on a widespread basis or by reporters. As the crisis progresses and new information and facts become available, it is also advisable to develop prepared statements to be made by the spokesperson at the onset of any media interview, briefing, or news conference. These prepared statements also can be read over the telephone to reporters who call to request information but are not represented at news conferences or briefings. The statement can also be sent by e-mail or posted on the organization's website or appropriate social media account.

Messaging

During and following an incident, each audience will seek information that is specific to them. "How does the incident affect my order, job, safety, community...?" These questions need to be answered when communicating with each audience.

After identifying the audiences and the spokesperson assigned to communicate with each audience, the next step is to script messages. Writing messages during an incident can be challenging due to the pressure caused by "too much to do" and "too little time." Therefore, it is best to script message templates in advance if possible.

Pre-scripted messages should be prepared using information developed during the risk assessment. The risk assessment process should identify scenarios that would require communications with stakeholders. There may be many different scenarios but the need for communications will relate more to the impacts or potential impacts of an incident:

- Accidents that injure employees or others

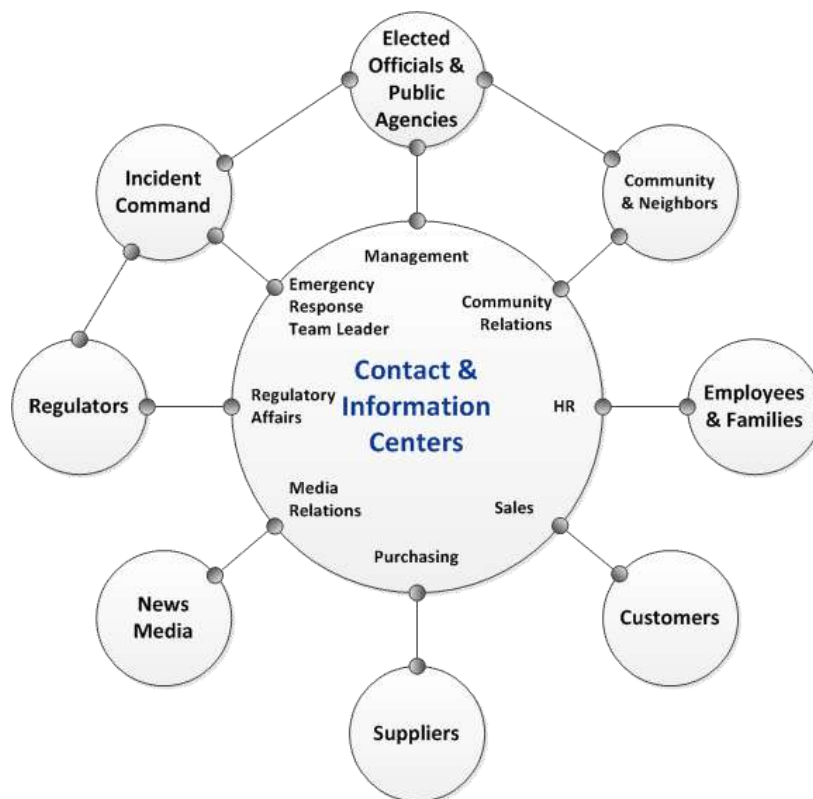
- Property damage to company facilities
- Liability associated injury to or damage sustained by others
- production or service interruptions
- product quality issues

Messages can be pre-scripted as templates with blanks to be filled in when needed. Pre-scripted messages can be developed, approved by the management team and stored on a remotely accessible server for quick editing and release when needed.

Another important element of the Crisis Communications Plan is the need to coordinate the release of information. When there is an emergency or a major impact on the business, there may be limited information about the incident or its potential impacts. The “story” may change many times as new information becomes available.

One of the aims of the Crisis Communications Plan is to ensure consistency of message. If you tell one audience one story and another audience a different story, it will raise questions of competency and credibility. Protocols need to be established to ensure that the core of each message is consistent while addressing the specific questions from each audience.

Another important goal of the Crisis Communications Plan is to move from reacting to the incident, to managing a strategy, to overcoming the incident. Management needs to develop the strategy and the crisis communications team needs to implement that strategy by allaying the concerns of each audience and positioning the organization to emerge from the incident with its reputation intact.



Communications before, during, and following an emergency are bi-directional. Stakeholders or audiences will ask questions and request information. The City will answer questions and provide information. This flow of information should be managed through a communications hub.

Contact and Information Centers form the “hub” of the Crisis Communications Plan. The centers receive requests for information from each audience and disseminate information to each audience. Employees from multiple departments may be assigned

to communicate with a specific audience.

The “contact center” fields inquiries from customers, suppliers, the news media and others. The contact center should be properly equipped and staffed by personnel to answer requests for information. The staff working within the contact center should be provided with scripts and a “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) document to answer questions consistently and accurately.

The “information center” consists of existing staff and technologies (e.g., Website, call center, bulletin boards, etc.) that field requests for information from customers, employees and others during normal business hours. The information center and its technologies can be used to push information out to audiences and post information for online reading.

The crisis communications team, consisting of members of the management team, should operate in an office environment to support the contact and information centers. The goal of the crisis communications team is to gather information about the incident. This should include monitoring the types of questions posed to call center operators or staff in the office; emails received by customer service; social media chatter, and stories broadcast by the news media. Using this input, the crisis communications team can inform management about the issues that are being raised by stakeholders. In turn, management should provide input into the messages generated by the crisis communications team. The team can then create appropriate messages and disseminate information approved for release.

Resources for Crisis Communications

Resources should be available within the primary business site and provisions should be made to set up similar capabilities within an alternate site in case the primary site cannot be occupied.

- Telephones with dedicated or addressable lines for incoming calls and separate lines for outgoing calls
- Access to any electronic notification system used to inform employees
- Electronic mail (with access to “info@” inbox and ability to send messages)
- Access to company Web site to post updates
- Access to social media accounts
- Access to local area network, secure remote server, message template library, and printers
- Hard copies of emergency response, business continuity, and the Crisis Communications Plan
- Site and building diagrams, information related to business processes and loss prevention programs (e.g., safety and health, property loss prevention, physical and information/cyber security, fleet safety, environmental management, and product quality)
- Copiers
- Forms for documenting events as they unfold

The sources for this outline were *Crisis Communication Plan* (www.ready.gov) and *Crisis Communication Plan: A PR Blueprint* (www.newsplace.org/crisis). Additional resources for Crisis Communication Strategies:

- 10 Steps of Crisis Communication, Jonathan Bernstein (2013)
 - Crisis Communications: A Primer for Teams, Al Czarnecki (2007)
 - You'd Better Have a Hose if You Want to Put Out the Fire: The Complete Guide to Crisis and Risk Communications, Rene A. Henry (2001)
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