

Students' Guide to Media Relations in Crisis Management: Using Communication Tools to Protect Company Reputation

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Lessons from the Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

Rationale

Crisis communication is an emerging field in applied communication studies and involves dealing with mediated messages and various types of audiences at moments of heightened pressure. Crisis communication skills are becoming more and more important for public relations professionals in both the corporate world and the non-profit sector. During times of crisis, handling media inquiries and taking proactive approaches to communicate with the public are crucial for protecting the reputation of the organization.

Overview

This teaching module aims at enhancing your understandings of theoretical conceptualizations of the process of crisis communication by looking at crisis communication practices from practitioners' views. It focuses on the issues relevant to planning, development, and execution of crisis communications programs for businesses and organizations, as well as media relations techniques for communication with stakeholders. A particular emphasis will be placed on the need for transparency and sincerity, and an audience-oriented approach in practicing crisis communication.

This teaching module is designed to help you visualize various crisis scenarios facing a large organization, and guide you through the vital steps necessary for effective media relations. It also teaches you the importance of following ethical guidelines and professional standards in crisis communication.

Module Format

In this one-week teaching module, you will watch the videos in the Page Center oral history collection to learn how organizations create and present messages to specific audience segments using multiple media for crisis communication. The module can be used for both online courses and hybrid courses. Meanwhile, through finding additional materials and analyses of the crisis cases, you will be able to learn how effective and ethical crisis communication can promote understanding, compassion, and sense of responsibility. By comparing the uses of press releases, news conferences and other media

methods in different crisis contexts, you will be able to understand the role of various public relations tactics.

Learning Objectives

By using materials from the Page Center oral history collection, you will achieve the following learning objectives:

1. Examine a combination of corporate insider accounts and media reports to understand the process of stakeholder communication during crisis
2. Identify the difference of controlled and uncontrolled media, and how public relations professionals use them ethically and effectively in crisis management
3. Compare how tools such as press releases, news conferences, and executive interviews are used to convey key messages to the media and the stakeholders

Key concepts

1. Media relations: Building a positive relationship with the news media so they know your organization is reliable, professional, accurate, and ethical. Tactics for the news media include news releases, pitch letters, backgrounders, media advisories, media tours, news conferences, and others. (Fearn-Banks, 2010, p.3)
2. Crisis communication: The dialog between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialog details strategies and tactics designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization. (Fearn-Banks, 2010, p. 2)
3. Stakeholders: People who are linked to an organization or who are interested in an organization and are affected by the decisions made by that organization. Examples of company stakeholders are employees, stockholders, communities, and government officials. (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 58)
4. Communication process: A communicator encodes (e.g., puts thoughts into words and gestures), then transmits the message via a channel (e.g., speaking, email, text message) to the other communicator(s) who then decode the message (e.g., take the words and apply meaning to them). (National Communication Association website <http://www.natcom.org/discipline/>)
5. Uncontrolled media: The use of uncontrolled media involves the communication of news about the organization to the mass media and to specialized media outlets. The objective of this form of communication is favorable news coverage of the organization's actions and events. They are called uncontrolled media because the public relations practitioner loses control of the

communication materials at the media outlet itself. The decisions are made by the editors of the media outlet. (Hendrix, p.31)

6. Controlled media: The use of controlled media involves communication about the organization that is paid for by the organization. The wording choice, format, and placement in the media are all at the discretion of the organization. Examples include brochures, newsletters, films, DVDs, company meetings, and speeches. (Hendrix, p.31)
7. Public relations tactics: Public relations professionals rely on a toolbox full of varied tactics to achieve their communication objectives. News releases, public service announcements, media conferences, and special events are some of the best-known and time-honored tactics. (Wilcox, 2011:250)

Module Activity: Watch Video Clips

The following video clips are portions of interviews with public relations practitioners commenting on subjects related to crisis management. These video clips are available on the [website](#) of the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. First, please visit the Center’s website, and then go to the [Oral History Collection](#). Please select the [Oral History – Ethics in Public Relations](#) tab. On that page, you can see the index where you can easily access material within and across interviews organized by topic or issue. Among the various topics, please click [Crisis Management](#), and then you can access video clips of interviews with:

Anne Barkelew	Peter Debreceeny	Jon Iwata	Tim O'Brien
Ed Block	Richard Edelman	Jack Koten	Charlotte Otto
Harold Burson	Larry Foster – Dick Martin Interview	Marilyn Laurie	Ron Rhody
Ron Culp	Joyce Hergenhan	Jim Murphy	Kurt Stocker

Module Activity: Locating and Reading Media Reports

The instructor will assign selected video tapes to you, and guide you in methods of finding additional sources relating to the crisis cases described in the oral history, such as library databases (e.g. Lexis-Nexis database) on business news reports, or New York Times website. When you are locating the articles, please make sure that the additional source event(s) match that of the oral history case.

Module Activity: Video Clip Questions

The following discussion questions are designed to encourage critical thinking on crisis management. After viewing one of the selected video clips and reading the media report(s) found about the crisis event described in the video, please answer the following questions:

1. Find at least one additional source reporting on the crisis. Summarize the main points of the media story you found about this event.
2. Identify the main stakeholders involved. Who are the groups involved, directly and indirectly?
3. Explain why the situation qualifies as a crisis. What are the key issues? How would the incident affect the company reputation?
4. Identify at least four communication activities that occurred, including the sender(s) and receiver(s) of the messages, and the channels of communication. What were the communication tools the public relations professionals or company management used? Give examples of the use of controlled or uncontrolled media.
5. What were the objectives of these communication activities? What kinds of ethical or legal considerations were involved in the communication process? How do you evaluate the company's crisis communication methods and activities?

Additional Readings

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.

Dowling, G. (2002) *Creating Corporate Reputations: Identity, Image, and Performance*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Seeger, M. W. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: An expert panel process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 232-244.

Sturges, D. L. (1994) Communicating through crisis: A strategy for organizational survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7, 297–316.

References

Fearn-Banks, K. (2007). *Crisis communications—A casebook approach* (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fearn-Banks, K. (2010). *Crisis communications—A casebook approach* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hendrix, J. A., & Hayes, D. C. (2009). *Public relations cases*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
National Communication Association. (2013) “What is communication?”
<http://www.natcom.org/discipline/>

Wilcox, D. L., Cameron, G. T., Reber, B. H., & Shin, J. H. (2011). *Think public relations*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.