

Guidelines on Developing a Communications Crisis Response Plan

Corporations need to stay cognisant that disgruntled staff might, by association, use social media to potentially harm a corporation's image or tarnish a brand's reputation. For example, staff can readily vent ill-conceived grievances or post damaging comments over Twitter. It's increasingly prudent for employers to be prepared by developing explicit social media policies, establishing communications protocol, and designing damage control mechanisms.

1. Prepare a Communications Crisis Response Plan (CCRP)

<p>Describe the scope and purpose of the CCRP</p> <p>Describe the types of major communications / PR incidents that might damage the corporate reputation.</p>	<p>Brainstorm and describe foreseeable scenarios of major communications crises, particularly relating to social media. Scope to include written or verbal statements by staff of an accidental or malicious nature (e.g. subjects of defamation, racism, sexism, threat of violence, harassment, bullying).</p> <p>Outline what high-level company response should be undertaken for each type of crisis occurring and going public</p> <p>Consider establishing an off-site (nearby) command centre in case the normal building access is restricted possibly due to terrorism, flood, pandemic, network breakdown etc.</p> <p>Obtain CEO approval on the aims, scope and structure of the CCRP.</p>
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2. Appoint the CCRP team

<p>CEO and Communications or Media Director to decide who to appoint as the management team members.</p>	<p>Identify specific responsibilities of each team member for the preparation and implementation the CCRP.</p> <p>Agree on a timeline to develop and document the CCRP. Allow time for approvals per stage, and trials.</p> <p>Nominate who in the media response stage, will be the 'main media spokesperson', the second in line contact, and third backup delegate.</p> <p>Prepare a detailed CCRP Process Manual for the CCRP team. Consider engaging the services of an external agency specialist.</p> <p>Prepare guidelines for all staff, which include the</p>
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	company policy and protocol on external communications. Inform all staff about the CCRP, and arrange for them to have access to the general Crisis Response Process. Inform all staff of the management team's contact numbers.
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3. Establish a notification (alert) system

<p>Prepare suitable systems and channels for reaching:</p> <p>senior management, staff, stakeholders, business partners, suppliers, media (when appropriate)</p>	<p>Develop a detailed process, and the channels, that will be engaged when a communications / publicity crisis requires action. Document 'who to notify internally, what they will do, and by when'.</p> <p>List the internal and external contact numbers for SMS alerts, social media channels, web / portal announcements, senior management etc. Ensure that private mobile numbers of senior management are restricted to only the CCR team.</p> <p>Consider acquiring a specific mobile phone [a unique number] for each CCR team member, which is connected to a separate teleco service provider other than who they normally use for their personal mobile. Advise senior management that these numbers will be on standby to maximise the CCR members' availability during a crisis.</p> <p>Trial and test that the alert systems work well.</p> <p>In the advent of a crisis, a predetermined CCR delegate will set up (asap) a timeline document accessible to senior management. Ideally it shows verified events which led to the crisis, important incidents, actions taken, and reactions.</p>
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4. Develop draft media statements

<p>Develop crisis-ready media statements for each type of identified scenario.</p>	<p>Depending on the seriousness and significance of the crisis, a media statement should be sent within the first 60-minutes, to demonstrate trustworthiness and transparency.</p> <p>Media statements are to be clearly worded and to be factually accurate, to answer the basic questions: who, what, where, when, and the status of resolution.</p> <p>Obtain advice and approval from legal management for the statement's wording.</p>
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	<p>When little is known about the PR “crisis”, the composition of an initial media statement might resemble this:</p> <p><i>“This alert is from [company name] concerning a distressful and unauthorised message [e.g. Twitter message] which we believe was sent by one of our [staff / suppliers / clients etc.] at [the time]. As soon as we learn more information we will provide an update by [5pm] today”.</i></p>
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5. Train spokespeople

<p>Select the most articulate and qualified senior manager to be the ‘first-choice’ spokesperson.</p>	<p>Ensure there are at least three trained spokespeople in case the ‘first’ person is indisposed or on a flight etc.</p> <p>Ensure delegated staff in the media response process are trained in media relations and public speaking.</p> <p>Keep in mind that CEOs and front line staff are often the ones who are approached for initial comment.</p>
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6. Undertake a post-crisis debrief

<p>The CCR team convenes to identify and review all that happened.</p> <p>An appraisal document is prepared.</p>	<p>Document the outcomes of the overall crisis for each stage: e.g. alert stage, possible internal communications difficulties, external announcements, immediate resolutions, mitigation of adverse publicity. And were there any unresolved issues?</p> <p>Assess if the overall process was effective and robust, and identify aspects which need improvement.</p> <p>Identify training needs and technology shortfalls / constraints that were encountered. Make recommendations.</p> <p>Schedule a biannual meeting to review the CCRP for updates, scope changes, enhancements etc.</p>
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