



# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAYBOOK

## A Quick-Turn Crisis Plan To Help You Avoid the Most Common Mistakes

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COVID-19 has forced many businesses into crisis mode, needing to make quick decisions on how to communicate changes to employees, investors, and customers.

If you already have a crisis plan in place, great – get it out, and put it to work. But if you don't, and you find yourself needing a quick process to help you navigate your next move now, this quick-turn plan can help you avoid the most common mistakes.

Before you begin to take action, the first priority is to determine whether or not what you are experiencing is a true crisis. Our test is simple: Does this event have the potential to damage your brand or business? If the answer to that question is yes, then start treating it as a crisis.

## STEP 1: Form your team.

### Important Tips:

**Don't assume seniority = importance.** If a lower-titled employee is the one closest to the source of information, consider making them a direct part of the team to streamline information flow.

**Most crisis events evolve over time.** As that happens, continuously reassess and adjust your crisis team. For example, if you initially didn't think customer communications would be required, but now are, bring in your head of customer support.

**Establish a point of command.** Determine who the spokesperson would be, should you need to respond publicly, and make sure it's clear to all team members that any media inquiries should be directed immediately to your communications lead.

Before you ever encounter your first crisis, put some thought into who should be on your crisis response team. Ensuring you have the right people in the room at the beginning of a crisis event saves critical time.

We recommend thinking of your team in two parts.



### Part 1: The Core Team

The core crisis team is typically a small group of people who are brought together whenever there is any type of crisis. Examples of such members could include the CEO or President, Head of Communications, a member of the legal team, and often the Head of Marketing, as they are frequently central to the release of large-scale communications.



### Part 2: The Supplementing Team

The list of potential supplementary team members can be quite large, and typically includes heads of key departments. A quick way to think about this is to work through the most common crisis events and ask yourself who would likely be the best source of real-time information in those types of events. Examples for varying types of crises could include:

- Head of product: product-related crisis
- CISO/Technical lead: security crisis
- Legal: contract crisis
- HR: personnel crisis
- Head of operations: operational crisis
- Regional leads: regional crisis

The most common mistake at this phase is leaving out a critical member of the team. A crisis is not the time to play internal politics — you need access to reliable information as quickly as possible, and you need to make sure you have the right people in the room to get it.

## STEP 2: Document the facts & assess your crisis level.

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### Important Tips:

**This list of facts should not offer any tone or point of view.** It should simply be a list of things that have happened in chronological order, so any reader could get a clear view of what has occurred to date.

**Be comprehensive.** In addition to listing external events that contributed to the creation or change in the crisis event, make sure this list includes all actions you have taken, including distribution of internal or external communications.

Start a document that strictly lists the facts and assign an owner to maintain it. Typically, this would be a member of your communications team. Our recommended format is a simple, bulleted list of dates and times that specific events occurred since the start of the crisis. We often refer to this list as our “crisis fast facts.”

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**Most Common Mistake to Avoid:** *Keep this list up to date in as near real-time as possible. If it is not maintained in real-time, items tend to be forgotten that could be key in assessing the situation, should the crisis level change.*

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One thing that makes crisis events tricky to manage is that you don't want to over or under-react, as either can have consequences that make the situation worse. So, first, take a breath. Then, take a few moments to assess how big this event is, and what potential it reasonably has — based on what you know in that moment — to escalate.

Keeping in mind the goal of crisis management is to protect your brand, an early crisis assessment should consider how likely the event is to actually create damage to your brand. That means assessing both the severity of the event, and the likelihood of it garnering either large-scale external awareness or high awareness among an influential group critical to your business. To give you some guidance, here's our quick, back of the napkin, crisis assessment map.

### Do I have a minor crisis?

- Is this event likely to create a small, short-term, and/or recoverable challenge for our business?
- Is there a low likelihood this event will garner public attention (media/social media)?
- Is there a low likelihood our brand will need to publicly respond?
- Is there a low likelihood of needing to distribute mass customer communication?

If you answered yes to these questions, you currently have a minor crisis.

### Important Tips:

**Set yourself up for success.** If you have determined via your assessment that you have a serious or severe crisis, it is time to call in an expert in crisis communication. Trust us, it will be money well spent.

**Reassess along the way.** If you're finding it very hard to assess your crisis level, you may not have enough information. This is a good opportunity to pause and make sure you have the right people on your crisis team to get you the information you need.

#### Do I have a serious crisis?

- Is this event likely to create a moderate, medium-term, challenge, but is likely to be recoverable for our business?
- Is there a likelihood this event will garner public attention (media/social media)?
- Is there a likelihood our brand will need to publicly respond to a large (media, total customer base) or influential group?

If you answered yes to these questions, you currently have a serious crisis.

#### Do I have a severe crisis?

- Is this event capable of massive damage to our brand or business?
- Is this event likely to garner significant public attention?
- Is this event likely to require significant public communication from our brand?

If you answered yes to these questions, you currently have a severe crisis.

Now that you've assessed your crisis level, determine how likely the crisis is to escalate. In doing so, keep in mind a jump in crisis level typically requires that the event goes from something only a small group of people needs to be aware of, to something that either becomes known to a larger group unintentionally, or needs to become known to a larger group because knowledge of the event changes. Keeping that in mind, evaluating how likely your crisis is to escalate is a matter of determining how likely your event is to become more public and/or cause more damage to your brand and business than you currently think. This is your "escalation risk," and we recommend labeling it as high, medium, or low.



**Most Common Mistake to Avoid:** The most common mistake is simply skipping or assuming the assessment level and jumping straight into action. Don't do this. Sit down and consider what you are really dealing with. This will offer a strong guide later in the process when you will need to decide what – if any – actions you should take.

## STEP 3: Set your rules & determine your position.

### Sample rules:

- 1 We stay true to our brand and cultural values.
- 2 We strive to provide verified, factual information in a timely fashion.
- 3 Our physical appearance and presence will match the severity of the event.
- 4 Protecting our business is our top priority, but never at the expense of honest, fair, and legal response/reaction.
- 5 <business leader - typically GM/President/CEO> will be kept abreast of all information and review all disseminated communications.
- 6 Any and all information and documents are confidential.
- 7 In an event involving a person (employee, customer, etc.), names are initially withheld unless we have explicit permission or are legally or morally obligated to release them.
- 8 All press will be immediately routed to <communications team>

In a crisis, it's easy to act from a place of stress, creating the potential to undermine brand values. Instead, a crisis should be treated as an opportunity to instead lead into your values.

To help you get started, below is a sample list of rules we have used to navigate crisis events. If you aren't sure if these work for you, and feel you need to move quickly, often simply reminding your crisis team of your company's core values can serve as a guiding source for how you should behave.

Once you have the foundation for how your company will behave during a crisis, it's time to put pen to paper for what is typically the hardest part of managing a crisis – determining your company's position on the event.

Do not yet attempt to write a full piece of communication such as a customer email. Why? Because (1) you don't yet have clarity on what communication will be required, and there's no room for wasted time, and (2) by first completing a simple exercise, you can better ensure that the needed communications are easier to write and consistent across channels.

We recommend breaking this into two exercises.

**Exercise 1: Determine the tone/emotion your brand should have.** For example: Do we need to be empathetic, trustworthy, sad, cooperative, transparent? Keep in mind, more than one is possible.

**Exercise 2: Using only bullets, create a straight-forward narrative using as few words as possible.** Consider this a basic outline that will be used to create any complete communication that may be needed later. A good flow includes the following information:

- A basic explanation of what it is that was impacted. For example, if your crisis involves a malfunction in a product, you will want to say: We offer xyz product that does xyz for customers around the world.
- A simple, but factual account of what happened and when. For example, on x date, we learned that xyz happened.
- Any supplementary information you've learned since then, and the source of how you learned it.
- Your response as a company/brand.
- A concluding statement that communicates whether it is a situation you are still monitoring and reacting to, or one that has concluded.



**Most Common Mistake to Avoid:** Put some thought into ensuring you have the right tone. While this is a crisis event for your company, the source of crisis events often produce victims that are experiencing more pain than your brand will. Make sure to consider this and come to market with the right tone.

## STEP 4: Complete an audience and channel checklist.

### Important Tips:

**Keep in mind, many crises may require communication to just one customer or a small group of customers.** If that's the case, check the customer box and make note of the limited nature of communication needed.

**Critically ask if groups of people need to know.** You can always send broader communication later if something changes.

Most crisis events require no communication or communication to just a single person or small group of people. In this step, complete a quick checklist of people you might need to communicate to. This is just a starter suggestion and should be customized to match your business.

Related to this crisis, do any of the following groups **need** to be communicated to?

- Customers
- Employees
- Investors
- Partners
- Vendors

Now, consider the channels you have available and determine the best one you would use for each group, should you decide to send communication.

Frequently used channels include:



Email



Mail



Social media



Direct communication such as phone call



Website banner



Media/press



Text



Website landing page



In product



**Most Common Mistake to Avoid:** The most common mistake is communicating to more people than required and accidentally raising your crisis level by making it a much more public event. Critically ask yourself if a group needs communication related to this event.

## STEP 5: Execute – or don't.

### Important Tip:

*Most actions will create a reaction, so consider what that might be and make sure your broader team is ready. For example, if you email customers, it's likely you'll see a spike in customer support tickets. Make sure your support team knows about the event, knows about the communication that went out, is provided with responses, and is staffed to manage the increased volume.*

Now, we're finally to the most important decision – will you execute on all this work you just did, or not? Keeping in mind that most crises escalate because of something a brand does, you should seriously consider the option of doing nothing and what the likely outcome of that is.

If you decide no reaction is not an option, now you will need to bring together your company position and your audience channel checklist.

To get started, revisit your audience channel checklist and confirm who you will communicate to and where. Next, assign an owner to each of these channels. It is also good to have one central reviewer – typically a member of the PR/communications team – that will offer a final review of all communication that goes out the door to ensure consistency.

Now, working from your positioning, and remembering tone, create your emails, web banners, and social media copy you need.



**Most Common Mistake to Avoid:** *The huge majority of crises escalate because of something the brand does. Yes, you read that correctly. The most common mistake to avoid here is yourself and your team members doing something you shouldn't have done or didn't need to do. Stay calm, stay measured, and be cautious with your actions.*

For many companies, crisis events are inevitable. Being prepared to take smart, swift action is the best way to ensure your brand remains well-protected and well-positioned.

### Looking for deeper crisis support?

The team at Kickstand Communications has more than 20 years of experience navigating crisis events for brands in some of the most visible industries around the globe.

▶ LET'S TALK

Contact us at [hello@meetkickstand.com](mailto:hello@meetkickstand.com) for a free consultation.



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