Kickstand

Crisis Communications Playbook

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

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Most brands don't think they need crisis support. Until they do.

Making quick decisions on how to communicate information to your employees, investors, partners and customers during a crisis is already a challenge in and of itself. But severe or minor, internal or external, facing a crisis event **unprepared** leaves your business in reactive mode and introduces additional issues.

No matter the size of your business, you need a solid plan in place to ensure you're well-equipped to tackle any crisis that may unfold. Otherwise, you risk exacerbating the situation and causing additional damage to the brand you've so carefully built.

If you already have a crisis plan in place, great! Put it to work and keep your brand reputation intact. But if your business needs help putting pen to paper, you've come to the right place. Kickstand's quick-turn plan can help you avoid the most common mistakes of crisis communications and ensure you're navigating the situation with confidence.

What constitutes a crisis?

Before we dive in, let's make sure we're on the same page about what a crisis actually looks like. Determining whether a situation is a "true crisis" boils down to one simple question:

Does this event have the potential to damage my brand or business?

If the answer is yes, then it's time to enter crisis mode.

STEP 1: Form your team.

Before you even encounter your first crisis, you'll need to put some thought into who should be on your 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 should be a small group of people who are brought together whenever any type of crisis unfolds. Members of your core team could include the CEO or President; Head of Communications; a member of the legal team; and the Head of Marketing, as they're central to the release of large-scale communications.

Part 2: The Supplementing Team

Your supplementary team will vary from crisis to crisis depending on which area of the business stands to be the most affected. This group should be composed of key department heads. Start by thinking through the most likely crisis events, and ask yourself who in your organization would be the best source of real-time information under those circumstances.

Examples for varying types of crises and the individual(s) you'll want to loop into your supplementary team include:

- Product-related crisis: CPO/Head of Product
- Security crisis: CISO/Technical lead
- Contract crisis: Legal team
- Personnel crisis: HR
- Operational crisis: COO/Head of Operations
- Regional crisis: Regional leads

Above all else, you need to avoid leaving out any critical members of a potential crisis team. This 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.

Helpful 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.

Most crisis events evolve over time. As that happens, continuously reassess and adjust your crisis team. For example, if a crisis starts small and doesn't require customer communications at the onset, that doesn't mean they won't need to be brought in as the situation develops.

Establish a point of command. Determine who your spokesperson would be should your brand need to respond publicly. Make it crystal clear to all team members that any media inquiries should be directed immediately to the communications lead.

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

In the midst of a crisis, your team needs to operate from a single source of truth. This will keep everybody aligned on goals, messaging, and your action plan. 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."

Most Common Mistake to Avoid:

Taking a 'set it and forget it' approach to your list. Keep this list up to date in as near real-time as possible. Otherwise, items that could be key in assessing the situation risk being forgotten as it evolves.

One challenging element of crisis events is striking a balance between under- and overreacting. Falling prey to either can have consequences that make the situation worse.

So first, take a breath. Then, give yourself a few moments to assess the scale of the crisis. Based on what you know at this moment, what potential does it reasonably have to escalate?

The goal of crisis management is to protect your brand, which means an early crisis assessment should consider how likely the event is to cause real damage. Evaluate both the severity of the event and the likelihood of it gaining large-scale external awareness - or 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.

Helpful Tips:

Keep your facts list neutral in tone and clear of any point of view. It should simply be a list of what's happened in chronological order, so any reader could get a clear view of what has occurred to date.

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

STEP 2: Document the facts & assess your crisis level. (cont.)

Do I have a serious crisis?

- Is this event likely to create a moderate or medium-term challenge that our business is likely to recover from?
- 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 or influential group like the media or our customer base?

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

Do I have a severe crisis?

- Is this event capable of causing 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.

Once you've assessed your crisis level, determine how likely the crisis is to escalate. A jump in crisis level typically means more people will need to be looped in. Your "need-to-know" group may become larger, whether that's due to an unintentional leak of information or because you need more hands on deck to address the situation.

With this in mind, your evaluation will depend on the likelihood of the event becoming more public and/or causing more damage to your brand than you expect. This is what we call an "escalation risk." We'd recommend labeling it as high, medium, or low.

Most Common Mistake to Avoid:

Jumping straight into action. You should NEVER skip determining your crisis level or assume you already know it. Sit down and consider what your brand is really dealing with. This will offer you a reliable guide later in the process when you'll need to decide what, if any, actions to take.

Helpful Tips:

Set yourself up for success. If your assessment determines that you have a serious or severe crisis on your hands, it's time to call in an expert in crisis communication. Trust us, it will be money well spent.

Reassess along the way. If you find it difficult 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.

STEP 3: Set your rules & determine your position.

In a crisis, it's easy to act from a place of stress. After all, crisis management can be an uncertain and frustrating experience! But letting your anxiety guide your decisions introduces the potential to undermine your brand values.

Instead, a crisis should be treated as an opportunity to lean into your values.

Most Common Mistake to Avoid:

Insensitive or tone-deaf messaging. Put some thought into ensuring you're striking the right tone. While this is certainly a crisis event for your company, crises often produce victims who experience more pain than your brand will. All internal and external messaging should be sensitive to this fact.

To help you get started, below is a sample list of rules we've used to navigate crisis events in the past. If you aren't sure whether these work for you and feel you need to move more quickly, simply reminding your crisis team of your company's core values can serve as a guide for how to behave.

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 it should never come at the expense of an honest, fair, and legal response/reaction.
5. Key stakeholders within our leadership team will be kept abreast of all information and review all disseminated communications.
6. Any and all information and documents pertaining to the crisis will be kept confidential.
7. In an event involving a person (employee, customer, etc.), names will be initially withheld unless we have explicit permission or are legally/morally obligated to release them.
8. All press will be immediately routed to the communications team.

Drafting your narrative:

Let's imagine you've experienced a major product malfunction. A good flow includes the following information:

- A basic explanation of what was impacted.

  We offer X product that accomplishes Y for customers around the world.

- A simple, but factual account of what happened and when.

  On [DATE], we learned that [MALFUNCTION] occurred.

- Any supplementary information you've learned since then and the source of how you learned it.

  We received an influx of help desk tickets that revealed customers were experiencing system outages.

- Your response as a company/brand.

  We apologize for the inconvenience and remain committed to [VALUE PROPOSITION].

- A concluding statement that communicates whether it is a situation you are still monitoring and reacting to, or one that has concluded.

  The system is now back up and running. Users can resume all regular activities.

STEP 3: Set your rules & determine your position. (cont.)

Once you've laid the foundation for how your company should operate during a crisis, it's time to put pen to paper for what's typically the hardest part of managing a crisis: determining your company's position on the event.

Don't attempt to write a full piece of communication such as a customer email just yet. First, you need clarity on the communication that will be required. There's no room for wasted time - by first completing the following exercises, you can ensure the communications needed are both easier to write and consistent across channels:

Exercise 1:

→ **Determine the tone/emotion your brand should have.**

Do we need to be empathetic? Trustworthy? Mournful? Cooperative? Transparent? You may need to embody a combination of these to put your best foot forward with crisis communications.

Exercise 2:

→ **Create a straight-forward narrative using as few words as possible.**

Consider this a basic outline that will be used to create any communication you might need. See the sidebar for an example of what this might look like.

STEP 4: Complete an audience and channel checklist.

While it's tempting to jump straight to picturing the worst case scenario, most crisis events require no communication beyond a small group of people. Outlining exactly who needs to be communicated with can minimize exacerbating the crisis and ensure you're only drafting the most necessary responses.

For each crisis, create a checklist of potential stakeholders with whom you'll need to share information. Ask yourself which of the following groups need to be communicated with on a case by case basis:

- Customers
- Employees
- Investors
- Partners
- Vendors

Now, consider the channels you have available and determine which is the most relevant 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 messaging

Most Common Mistake to Avoid:

Don't disseminate crisis communications to more people than absolutely necessary. This can make your crisis more public than it needs to be, so be extremely conservative when it comes to determining who needs to be informed.

AI in crisis communications: A double-edged sword

We're currently witnessing what headlines like to call the "AI revolution." No matter where you look these days, brands across every industry are working to incorporate AI into their workflows and/or their product offerings.

But as with any new technology, AI is a double-edged sword - especially when it comes to crisis navigation. AI-powered tools stand to improve crisis communications and cause potential crises in equal measure, which means your brand needs to be prepared for both.

AI-powered crises

AI systems are exceedingly complex. Even their developers may struggle to explain how or why AI spits out certain outputs! Many tools lack transparency into where they source their information - but we do know that they pull from vast arrays of data. Such data is often incomplete, outdated, or biased, which means AI's outputs might be flawed. This increases the risk of unintended consequences that could lead to crisis events.

Example:

Your business has started using an AI tool in your hiring process. But it begins recommending discriminatory practices due to hidden biases in its training data, and automatically rejects applicants of a certain demographic as a result. This could damage your company's reputation and trigger legal actions from affected applicants.

Data security should also be of concern any time an employee interacts with AI. Sensitive data should never be fed into an open-source AI platform, as that opens the door for data breaches (and the associated fines).

Example:

One of your employees mistakenly enters customer data into an open-source AI platform like ChatGPT. This leads to a massive data breach wherein sensitive data ends up in the wrong hands. Your business is now on the hook for hefty legal fees, and you've lost customer trust.

AI is also extremely vulnerable to misuse. This is particularly true for generative tools. Such technology can be exploited by bad actors to create misinformation or cause disruptions to your business. Deepfakes, phishing scams, and AI-generated malicious code are all examples of how AI can be weaponized against an individual or a brand.

Example:

Someone generates a deepfake video of your CEO making inflammatory remarks that don't reflect their views/your brand's values. The video goes viral, and customers struggle to identify it as fraud. Your CEO's reputation, along with that of your business, is damaged. Employees lose trust in company leadership. Customers no longer want to associate with your brand. You may even see stock prices drop if your company is publicly traded.

AI in crisis communications: A double-edged sword (cont.)

As with any shiny new technology, AI needs to be approached with caution. It stands to introduce many benefits into your business, but it requires eagle-eyed human oversight and a robust acceptable use policy. AI's rise to popularity in the corporate world closely mirrors that of social media: while both can be incredibly useful in a business setting, their misuse can have significant ramifications. Employee policies and training are the first step to preventing a crisis from happening in the first place, so make sure your company's AI strategy involves a combination of the two.

AI-powered crisis comms

There's no denying that AI is reshaping how businesses approach all manner of communications. Navigating crises is no different. From real-time monitoring to automated workflows, AI provides you with opportunities to enhance speed, accuracy, and impact.

But be careful: incorporating these tools into your crisis management strategy requires careful planning. AI should never be considered a flat-out replacement for the empathy and critical thinking skills humans bring to the table, especially in the midst of a crisis event.

Here are three areas where AI can assist in your crisis management:

1. **Real-time sentiment analysis:** AI-driven tools like natural language processing can analyze public sentiment on channels like social media and news platforms. This can grant you vital insights into how your audience perceives your brand during a crisis, which can in turn help inform your tone, timing, and overall content of your related communications.

2. **Automated responses:** Chatbots and AI-powered help desks can field high volumes of customer inquiries during a crisis, providing timely, on-brand responses and freeing up your customer support team for more complex tasks.

3. **Message personalization:** AI can segment various audiences and tailor messaging based on their demographic, geographic, or behavioral data to ensure all your communications are as effective as possible.

By leveraging AI-powered tools wisely, you can strengthen your crisis response capabilities while maintaining the compassion, accuracy, and transparency that are central to cultivating brand trust.

Helpful Tips:

To make the most out of your AI investments and ensure every output is both accurate and trustworthy, be sure to:

- Identify tools that align with your organization's needs, like sentiment monitoring or customer support automation.
- Train your crisis team on how to use these tools and interpret the data they provide.
- Establish protocols for integrating AI insights with human decision-making.
- Regularly audit AI outputs for accuracy and relevance, and be prepared to intervene when necessary.

STEP 5: Execute… but only if you need to.

Now, we've arrived at the most important decision you'll make in your crisis comms process: will you execute on all this work you just did, or not? What did your planning reveal about the next steps you need to take, if any?

Most crises escalate because of something a brand does. That means doing nothing is always an option.

Evaluate what the likely outcome of no response might be - for example, if a disgruntled former employee takes to social media to complain about being let go, you may not need to address it if their posts don't get any traction. Don't expend valuable energy and resources overreacting to a minor crisis.

But if you decide not reacting is off the table, it's time to assemble your company's 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 channel. Make sure all drafted responses are compiled in one place for consistency and version control. Assign one central reviewer — typically a member of the PR/communications team — who can offer a final review of all communication before it goes out the door. Creating a detailed timeline for sending all communications will also ensure your audiences find out in the appropriate order at the appropriate time.

At this juncture, lean on your positioning to create the emails, web banners, social media copy, etc. that you may need. And don't forget about maintaining the right tone!

For many companies, crisis events are inevitable. Staying prepared to take smart, swift action is the best way to ensure your brand remains well-protected and well-positioned, no matter what comes your way.

Helpful 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
- Is familiar with communication that went out
- Has on-brand responses ready to go
- Is staffed to manage the increased volume

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** for a free consultation.

About Kickstand

Kickstand is a global marketing agency specializing in support of high growth technology brands. Offering a data-first approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries including mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech, insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and ecommerce. For more information about our approach and how we help brands scale and successfully exit, visit **www.meetkickstand.com**