

CRISIS

COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL



OVERVIEW

From time to time, a member of the press will contact you directly rather than going through your PR agency.

The journalist may have a direct relationship with one of your employees. He or she may not know that you have an agency, or maybe they're trying to circumvent the agency to get a direct and juicy scoop on a breaking story.

However, it's critical that all incoming media inquiries go through your PR agency. PR professionals have the experience and ability to address media inquiries, relaying your company's agreed-upon messaging while avoiding the pitfalls of going on the record with an unfortunate statement. Enthusiastic but untrained employees (and their managers) too often find themselves regretting comments made in haste.

At no time is this process more critical than when a company is experiencing a crisis.

Tensions can run high, and the situation could be changing rapidly. This makes it essential to have a clear, unified message, delivered by designated, trained spokespersons.

You can only dive into the media narrative when you have a single, clear, consistent voice.

Crisis Communication Protocol

Initiating and coordinating media interactions is one of the primary goals of any public relations program. Though most contact with the press originates from your agency, there are instances when a member of the press or analyst community will contact you directly. These inquiries might result from a recent news pitch, published article or press release, a news tip, or they could simply be requests for general information. It is important to properly manage media inquiries by:



Identifying the caller and their information needs



Providing appropriate responses



Facilitating follow-up and future contact



Creating an internal media protocol

General Guidelines

TACTICAL CHECKLIST

- Identify a crisis management team (executives, legal, company spokespeople) and PR team to handle crisis communications.
- Identify one executive to lead.
- Notify employees of company spokespeople in the event of a crisis situation.
- Create a communication policy for employees to direct all crisis inquiries from the media to designated spokespeople.
- Develop and distribute a statement for employees if they are questioned on the crisis situation.
- Develop a company statement that is approved by all upper management.

Refer Inquiries to Your PR Representative

- All press inquiries (through any channel—email, phone, text, chat, web, etc.) should be funneled through your contact to your PR representative, who can determine the nature of the query and how best to proceed. The internal protocol is designed to route press inquiries to those who have the most appropriate responses.

Designate Internal Contacts

- Identify two or three company spokespeople who are knowledgeable on a variety of topics, who are media savvy and who have had some media training (this is a service Force4 provides for our clients). The CEO or vice president of marketing are usually optimal press contacts.
- Identify additional contacts for engineering, sales and financial questions.
- Designate a company contact to answer internal protocol questions and redirect press to the appropriate contact.

Identify and Distribute Consistent Information to Press Contacts

- If key spokespeople are not available, or random employees are contacted by the press directly, all employees should know how to respond. Distribute copies of your Media Protocol to all employees.
- Identify the company's key messages, positioning in your industry and other relevant information. To ensure consistency, circulate this information to all key spokespeople. Identify confidential information and educate employees on what information is not available for disclosure to the press under any circumstances.

Media Protocol for Your General Employees

- Send all media inquiries to your agency and/or to your internal corporate communications contact.
- If the inquirer cannot or does not want to be referred, ask what the interview will generally concern and tell the inquirer someone will return their query immediately. Get the message to the contacts referenced above. Use communication channels that are most likely to get through fastest (A text message pointing to an email, for example).
- Do not refer the inquirer to anyone who is not identified as an approved press contact.
- Do not provide your own speculative answers. The desire to be helpful can have surprisingly negative repercussions.
- Do not disclose any confidential company information under any circumstances. Confidential information includes:
 - Layoffs/Re-organization
 - Lawsuits
 - Earnings results prior to an announcement
- Employees should direct any questions about the internal communication protocol to your PR agency contact.

CRISIS MODE

- Notify the crisis team and employees.
- Route all press inquiries to designated PR contacts responsible for managing the press.
- Provide an approved statement to the press if requested.
- Assemble the crisis management team to review situation details and determine the magnitude of the crisis and an action plan.
- Give priority to inquiries from any major national publication.
- Respond in a timely manner with additional information or statements.

Toward Clear, Consistent Communications

Having a strong crisis communications plan can help safeguard your company's reputation, customers and business. Knowing what to do before a crisis hits ensures a communications chain of command that delivers consistent messaging and can help prevent irreparable damage. Media-trained employees and PR professionals will be able to convey clear, consistent communications to the press to avoid mis-statements or "over-shares" that may worsen the crisis.

Having a social media element to crisis communications is critical, too. Our social media crisis management data sheet is available here.

The data sheet provides steps on how to define and prepare for a crisis, implement responses to the crisis using the company's social media channels, and evaluate and adjust as necessary.

Conclusion of Crisis:

Analyze the success/failures of the crisis management plan and revise if necessary.

