

# Crisis Communication Planning and the Role Lawyers Play

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**A** crisis communication plan is like having roadside insurance — rarely used but a potential lifesaver. Not convinced? Ask Tiger Woods, Akio Toyada, and countless others who paid a high price for their failure to react decisively and quickly to a crisis. In this TechnoFeature, public relations expert Paramjit Mahli explains how to create a crisis communication plan, and why lawyers should play a central role in this process.

## INTRODUCTION

Love it or hate it, social media has sped up the distribution of information in the marketplace. When the news is good, the powers that be love social media. But when a crisis arises, heads roll — especially if no crisis communication plan exists.

Google has made information easily accessible. In this digital age, the potential for catastrophic damage to a business' reputation is greater than ever before. However strong the legal merits of a crisis, perceptions created from the beginning can impact your client's reputation and economic well-being.

No industry, organization, or institution is immune from a crisis. Crises can range from product recalls, an accident in a mine, food contamination, the restriction of airline passengers' movement during poor weather, environmental breaches, class-action

lawsuits, sexual harassment, consumer activism, etc.

In any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of an organization, lawyers (whether in-house or outside counsel) find themselves in a unique position between management and other stakeholders. Thus, lawyers have the ability to provide a value-added service to their clients by understanding the role the media plays in creating perceptions.

Translation: Lawyers should take on a leadership role to ensure that all their clients have a basic crisis communication plan in place. They should revisit this plan at least twice a year and modify it accordingly.

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## THE 10 ESSENTIALS FOR EVERY CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Crisis communication plans are templates that impose order, structure, and direction. They provide an organizational framework of who is responsible for which specific task when a crisis occurs.

Without a plan, the left hand won't know what the right hand is do-

ing, particularly when the press knocks on your client's door.

At the core of every plan are the key players on the crisis communication management team and their respective roles. List their contact details and keep this information up-to-date.

Each crisis will differ and teach you something new, which will likely result in modifications to your plan. However, every crisis communication plan must contain these 10 essential components:

1. Coordinator: Typically, a public relations firm or publicist who coordinates with the press. The coordinator ensures that all press requests are handled in a timely manner.
2. Spokesperson: Sometimes, the attorney is the spokesperson. Even when that's not the case, there is a fair amount of dialogue between the attorney and the spokesperson. The spokesperson usually has a fair amount of media training, or comes from a media background. In many cases there is more than one official spokesperson.
3. Media: The reporters who cover your client's beat.
4. Media Log: This file should list all press inquiries, information sent, and when you can expect to hear back or see a news re-

port. If there is more than one individual on the coordination team, be clear on which tasks were delegated to whom.

5. Rules of Engagement: The coordinator should police the spokespeople to make sure they don't talk to external sources until they have and understand all the facts. Otherwise, they may make costly mistakes.

The plan should also include how and what to communicate to any other organization, stakeholder, or community that has a specific interest in and is impacted by the crisis.

6. Social Media: The plan should incorporate Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook and Twitter as they have become increasingly important over the last few years. You may need a different team to manage the crisis online.
7. Consistent Messaging: Communicate key messages for

all your audiences in a consistent manner, whether they are within the organization or external. The messages must address questions and concerns in language that different stakeholders understand. In a crisis, many tend to lean towards objectivity and legal language, which will only work to your disadvantage. The public wants to hear and sense that you understand the gravity and depth of the circumstances.

8. Schedule: Depending how long the crisis persists, the coordinator should regularly meet with reporters, keeping them abreast of the latest developments.
9. Backups: You should have backups for all the key players on your team, especially if there is only one of each.
10. Human Touch: All crisis circumstances whether business-related or natural disasters must have a human face. Regardless of how well prepared your cli-

ent, it is critical to connect and relate to all the key stakeholders impacted by the situation. Sometimes it's best to fess up.

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#### CONCLUSION

Once a crisis period ends, you must evaluate all components of your crisis communication plan to identify weak spots, make improvements, figure out what worked and what didn't, etc., and incorporate them in a revised plan.

Crisis communication plans help to mitigate and reduce the potential for damage, saving your clients money and often their reputation. Benjamin Franklin summed it up well: "By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail."

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