



Communicating in a Crisis

A step-by-step guide to prepare your business for a crisis

A product of Cindy Miller Communications



Introduction



A family owned business in suburban Atlanta experienced a 25 percent decline in revenue in the first 30 days following an issue with a rogue employee.

Due to a #MeToo claim, Guess apparel company lost \$250 million in market value in a single day.

TIME.com



Crisis-Planning Guide

A step-by-step guide to prepare your business for a crisis

Even the best companies are vulnerable to a public relations crisis — a rogue employee, an unfair but punishing social media assault, a public incident that tarnishes an organization's reputation.

Or a global pandemic that threatens to shutter thousands of businesses, quite possibly yours among them.

Bad things can happen to good companies. Misfortune is part of life and it never arrives on a predictable schedule.

But here's the good news: The outcomes don't have to be tragic. Many of the crises lurking over the horizon can be anticipated and prepared for. With planning, you can be ready to respond effectively to the people who matter to your brand.

At Cindy Miller Communications, we work on two fronts: Preparing you in advance for that "it-could-never-happen-to-us" crisis that hasn't happened yet, and helping you react when it does.

In this e-book we'll describe how you can assess where your brand is vulnerable, how you can prepare for an unexpected public relations crisis by creating scenarios for potentially threatening situations, and how you can develop plans and materials to communicate with your key constituents.

Once the plan is developed, you may never need it. But if you do, you'll be able to swing into action immediately to protect the value of your brand.

Remember, by the time an unpleasant local event or global pandemic emerges to threaten your organization's stability, it's too late to start down the learning curve. Essential stakeholders — including employees, vendors, customers, stockholders and your community — want to know immediately what's happening, and why.

You have the opportunity to control the narrative — take it.

Why It Matters



The World Economic Forum reports that more than *25% of a company's market value* is directly attributable to its reputation.



43% of all data breaches target small businesses (*Verizon's 2019 Data Breach Investigations Report*)



Peloton lost \$1.5 billion of market value from a failed ad campaign.



Boeing lost nearly \$19 billion from the two deadly crashes of its 737 Max airliners and its mishandling of the aftermath of the events.

About CMC



Cindy Miller



Edward Miller



Joe Gorley



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Our crisis communications experience ranges from guiding companies on response to Covid-19 to a fired CEO of a multi-billion-dollar regional healthcare system and a small business coping with the financial impact of community reaction to the arrest of a key employee.

As companies struggle with a global pandemic, we're coaching them on how to respond to the many urgencies of each day. We're guiding CEOs on how to communicate candidly and swiftly with key constituencies about the challenges faced and the changes undertaken.

Each crisis is different. When a situation jeopardizes your organization, and events seem to be spiraling out of control, you need an experienced team that can respond quickly and effectively.

Led by former journalists, Cindy Miller Communications draws on decades of breaking-news experience to quickly put in place plans that make clients feel more confident, more in command. We've done that for a celebrity's nonprofit, a regional-home services company, a Juvenile Court judge, a first-year elementary school teacher, a regional restaurant chain ... our list goes on.

CMC has spent more than 10 years helping companies navigate complicated situations, including a worldwide outbreak of a new and deadly virus. That's valuable experience we can put to work for your organization.



Preparing For A Crisis

Here are the key steps to take long before a crisis strikes:



Assess your brand's vulnerabilities



Identify scenarios



Draft key messages and talking points for each scenario



Write a template for a holding statement



Gather information and documents that will help state your case



Build your media list before you need it



Recruit a crisis team



Gather contact information



Prepare social media plan



Draft statements appropriate to various scenarios

Assess your brand's vulnerabilities

Not all crises are created equally. What is at the intersection of “It could happen to us” and “It would cause significant damage to our brand?” Those are the scenarios you should focus on first.



Imagine Scenarios:

Based on those vulnerabilities draft a scenario for each in which you describe a hypothetical set of events. The objective is to imagine four or five situations that would constitute a crisis.



A company truck has an accident and rolls into a shallow creek, spilling what are presumed to be toxic materials.



A disgruntled customer starts a negative social media campaign aimed at tarnishing your company's reputation with misinformation and slander.



Your industry is under attack for making products no longer politically correct, tarring you with a national brush of scorn.

It's not difficult to imagine worst-case scenarios for your organization. Just ask yourself "What if ... ?" and complete the sentence with your worst nightmare.

Draft key messages and talking points for each scenario



In each scenario several key messages will guide the company's response.

For example, in an incident with injuries, the safety of the employees and the surrounding community is paramount, so the company's concern for safety should become a key message.

Another should be truthfulness. Cover-ups never work; they only make matters worse, so a key message must stress a commitment to providing timely and accurate information.

If your best defense is in data that few people have, a key message should assert the existence of that data and offer to share it publicly.

Once you have the key messages articulated, substantiate each by drafting three or four talking points. Like the key messages, the talking points should be short and targeted to the scenario.

Write a template for a holding statement

This is a statement for the media or your social media sites that you write in advance. It's ready to quickly adapt and use, effectively buying time while you learn more about the crisis at hand.

Here's an example:

“Our team is diligently working to understand the details about (brief description of incident) and how we can help (brief summary of the urgent need). Our immediate concern is for the people in the (name of location of incident) community and our employees. We are actively working with (local authorities/investigators/state or federal officials) to determine exactly what happened and how we can support their efforts.”

In all cases, holding statements should be vetted by your legal team.

Gather information and documents that will help state your case.



What's in place? What's missing? For example, if your company uses hazardous materials, you'll want to have your process for transporting and using these materials documented on paper in case you need the details quickly. It's one thing to tell a reporter the materials your company's truck just spilled into the nearby creek are not harmful to humans; it's more convincing to produce a document spelling out those exonerating details.



Build your media list before you need it.

Who covers your company, industry and community? Gather the names and contact information of media outlets, social media sites and journalists who will want timely, accurate information from you. Even better, build a relationship with some of those key individuals before you're faced with potentially negative media coverage. They won't alter a negative story just because they know you, but they are more likely to listen to your case before they write it.

Recruit a Crisis Team:

You'll need a small work group that will be completely familiar with your crisis communications plan and ready to implement it at a moment's notice. Likely members may include your CEO and representatives from your legal, financial, marketing and leadership teams. This group will pull in others to work with them in a crisis.

Contact Information:

Critical in any response sequence will be access to contact information for crisis team members, other company executives, the legal team and public relations representatives. It's essential that the company speaks with a single voice.

One of the pitfalls during a crisis occurs when an employee is unknowingly or unwillingly thrust into the spotlight with an on-the-record comment or interview. The “voice” of the company could be more than one person, but there must be single-minded coordination of all those involved in dealing with key audiences.

Be sure to create and keep current:

Contact List: Create crisis team contact information with 24/7 reachable phone numbers for all members.

Wallet Card: Using information from the contact list, draft and distribute a wallet card to all employees.

Prepare a Social Media Plan

Social media is often the first place people go for information and updates. A company needs to have a proactive plan ready to respond to online comments, and share accurate information with customers and the community.

Draft statements appropriate
to various scenarios.



Five Documents to Prepare

- **Holding statement:** A generic statement that can be quickly updated
- **Press Releases:** A template for each scenario
- **Social media:** Relevant facts that could be used in a series of posts
- **Background:** A brief summary of the company history
- **Bios:** Information about key executives who speak for the organization

Reacting to a Crisis: A checklist

Immediately after the incident occurs:

- ① Ensure the safety of everyone involved.
- ② Contact someone in senior management or a member of the crisis team. Continue reaching out until someone is contacted in person, not via email or voicemail.
- ③ Be sure someone contacts the rest of the crisis team.
- ④ Make an immediate assessment of the situation via conference call or virtual meeting.

Within one hour of the incident:

(Note: Steps 5-9 will happen quickly, possibly simultaneously.)

- 5 If warranted, gather the crisis team in a designated “war room.”
- 6 Designate a crisis manager from among members of the crisis team.
- 7 Identify a spokesperson. This could be the crisis manager.
- 8 Assign someone to monitor media and social media sites.
- 9 Enlist additional members for the crisis team as needed.

As soon as possible following the incident:

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Gather data and create a process for continuous updates for crisis team members and others as designated.

(a)

What do we know about the incident?

(b)

What do we know about short-term and long-term impact?

(c)

What external agencies and authorities are involved, and what is their role?

(d)

What is happening on social media and how should we respond?

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Crisis team assessments

(a)

What information do we still need?

(b)

What internal information do we have available that will be helpful?

(c)

What media response is required?

(d)

How effective are our social media responses?

(e)

Is our website in step with current conditions?

As soon as possible following the incident:

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- a Designate responsibilities among crisis team and beyond as necessary.
 - b Create a continuing communications plan for employees and key constituents.
 - c Create a media plan and create press releases and social media posts
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- a Monitor and adapt Action Plan

On Days 2-5:

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Determine follow-up steps based on Day 1 events. These will include ongoing internal and external communications and any additional public relation initiatives.

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Each day, document what's been learned from the incident and begin to identify necessary changes.

Testimonials

What others are saying ...



“Ours is a thorough, well-prepared company, but I realized one day we were not prepared to handle a public relations crisis. Several business friends all had the same advice: ‘Call Cindy Miller.’ We did, and within months we formed a Crisis Response Team, drafted a briefing book that outlined roles and responsibilities for everyone

in the company, created talking points and collected all the important data sheets about our materials and processes. As Cindy told us early on, ‘You’re going to build a plan you hope you never have to use.’ So far, we haven’t, but we sleep better knowing the plan is in place.”

Lanny Allgood,
CEO of Cingo



“If you have a message from an investigative reporter, you want Cindy Miller to return the call. We were faced with a barrage of questions from a Washington, D.C., television reporter armed with information that simply wasn’t true. Because of other internal issues, we needed to address the questions with extreme care.

Cindy and her team knew exactly what we needed: On-going contact with the reporter, talking points, written statements, and internal communication about how to respond if a reporter showed up with a television camera. We also needed constant communication about progress and potential conflicts, and Cindy kept us fully informed. It was a crisis out of our hands, but beautifully handled.”

Loretta Goodson, CEO
University Cancer & Blood Center

CMC Case Studies

How we helped ...

A regional restaurant chain tangled in a crime

The Challenge:

A regional restaurant chain found itself coping with a devastating crime committed at one of its restaurants.

The Strategy:

The CMC team set up a war room at corporate headquarters. Working with the executive team, we analyzed the situation, gathered all the facts about the incident and drafted a corporate statement within the first hour. The statement was distributed to all store managers, who were then coached on what to do if the media contacted them. All media queries were referred to the CMC team. Simultaneously, we monitored and responded on all social media platforms. For the next 48 hours, CMC responded to social media posts and traditional media inquiries and made recommendations on next steps.

The Outcome:

By carefully explaining the facts of the case, we convinced media that the crime had nothing to do with the restaurant itself. As a result, after the first news cycle the coverage focused on what happened, not where it happened.

How we helped ...

Guide a company by creating a Crisis Briefing Book

The Challenge:

A well-known regional company realized it would be hard-pressed to respond quickly and effectively if there was an accident with one of its chemical-carrying vehicles, or if somehow the company were connected to an illness or outbreak that had no connection to its products or services. The reality was that it would not take much to damage a valuable brand.

The Strategy:

Crisis management for the company came in two distinct parts. The first was conceiving a plan to cover a number of potential crises. The second was executing that plan in the heated atmosphere of a crisis. CMC helped company leaders identify the scenarios that could have the biggest negative impact on the brand. We then drafted scenarios, talking points, sample press releases, social media posts and supporting materials. Contact information, messaging, talking points and other materials for each scenario were assembled in a “Crisis Briefing Book,” which CMC helps the company update annually. The idea is to be ready, when a crisis hits, with approved messages, talking points and more. We prepared the company to report quickly on actions already taken. We assembled data that would be useful in crisis, such as the nature of the chemicals carried on company trucks. We prepared them to talk to team members, the community, the industry and the media.

The Outcome:

For more than five years, the company has continually updated its crisis briefing book to reflect new scenarios and changing business realities. While CMC has been called on to assist with managing minor crisis situations, in many cases company executives are able to handle incidents with guidance from the Crisis Briefing Book.

How we helped ...

A foundation create a crisis communication plan to communicate stability

The Challenge:

A widely known and highly regarded local citizen had established a foundation to improve the health and well-being of young people. The effort was a noble success, in part, because of the founder's prominence in the community. But what would happen if the founder died suddenly? Would the financial future of the foundation be in jeopardy?

The Strategy:

The overall focus of the strategy was clear: To assure all stakeholders that the foundation was stable, prepared for the unexpected and able to continue the mission of the foundation without interruption. CMC worked with the foundation's leadership to identify the key constituents, namely donors, board members, staff, community partners and the general public. Specific messages were drafted for each group that would be reinforced in all communication in the event of a grave illness or death. The messages emphasized the foundation's endurance and viability in the face of adversity.

The Outcome:

In addition to key messages, the CMC team prepared a detailed communications plan to guide the initial 48 hours following a crisis involving the organization's founder. Draft materials created ranged from a holding statement and press releases to internal emails and social media posts.

Learn More

More resources are a click away

Think You Can't Plan for a Crisis? Not True.

Do companies fail in crisis situations because they have bad intentions? We don't think so. It's likely that the breakdown was because no crisis plan existed, so what-to-do-in-a-crisis procedures and expectations were never communicated to every employee.

Is Your Business Ready for a Pandemic?

Your CEO is stuck in a rapidly implemented quarantine in Europe. The local government closes schools and urges all businesses to limit or block visitors. Your long-planned industry event that pulls together hundreds of people from locations across the country no longer seems like such a great idea. You need a plan, and the right communications in place to inform your employees, customers and community about what you're doing, and why.

Staff Communication Key In Crisis Planning

Ever had a fire at your business? It can be scary. Just as scary might be a fire that happens with no crisis plan in place. These plans must be in writing, and available to employees when needed.

From "Meh" To Amazing: How Crisis Planning Turned a Bad Situation Around

Crisis planning is the key to turning a customer's bad experience into a pleasant one. Problems happen. How your business deals with them will make the difference.

Are You Prepared to Protect Your Brand In a #MeToo Moment?

Every business needs a strong anti-harassment policy and a communications plan should the worse-case scenario become reality: An employee claims sexual harassment at your company, and that claim rocks your employees, customers and community.

Unexpected Doesn't Have to Mean Unprepared

The only thing predictable about a crisis is that it will be unexpected. But unexpected doesn't have to mean unprepared. Smart CEOs have a plan in place that helps alleviate the stress of the most likely scenarios that can disrupt the operations — and future — of the company.

Your Employees Are Your Brand

Your team members are walking billboard signs for your company. When clearly informed of your company values, they can be your biggest advertisers. Invest the time early on to properly train your employees and make sure they understand the business' values and mission. It will pay off in the end.

It's Uncomfortable to Talk About, But Necessary

Preparation is the key. Every company should have in hand draft obituaries on all key executives and others in the organization who have made an impact in the community. When someone dies, there's no time for a meeting. These stories need to be ready for immediate release to the media and posting on appropriate sites online.



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