
**Pennsylvania Building Officials
Conference (PENNBOC)**
Annual Conference & Trade Show

**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS
FOR MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES**

JOHN C. SCHMIDT
SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

WELCOME



“The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis.’ One brush stroke stands for ‘danger;’ the other for ‘opportunity.’ In a crisis, be aware of the danger, but recognize the opportunity.”

John F. Kennedy

Photo credit: Sentinel & Enterprise

'FROM A STEEL SHIPBUILDER TO A SILICON VALLEY STARTUP'



- Studied journalism & PR at Duquesne University (BA 1980)
- 4 years in journalism
 - 6 months as reporter
 - 3.5 years as editor
- 40 years in corporate communications
 - 35 years of crisis communications background & training
 - 25 years in corporate spokesperson roles
 - PR accreditation (2014)

- **Issues:** Bankruptcy, layoffs, facility and business closures, divestitures, litigation, declarations of force majeure, price fixing allegations
- **Crises:** Industrial accidents with loss of life, cargo ship fire, extreme facility damage

TODAY'S OBJECTIVES

Share experiences, examples, & best practices to help you understand:

- Impact & importance of crisis communications
- What to do before, during, & after a crisis
- How to manage social & traditional media during a crisis



Photo credit: lohud.com

TODAY'S AGENDA



- Understanding crisis communications
- Planning for a crisis event
- When a crisis happens
- Managing social media during a crisis
- Managing traditional media during a crisis
- Post-crisis evaluation
- Interactive tabletop drill
- Conclusion

UNDERSTANDING ISSUE & CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS



“An issue ignored is a crisis invited.”

Henry Kissinger

Photo credit: Insignia

ISSUE VS. CRISIS

ISSUE

- Developing or ongoing situation:
 - Property owner/contractor threats
 - Unpopular decisions/regulations
 - Threat of litigation
 - Problematic employee(s)
- Needs to be addressed
- May require communications support
- Long-term, negative impact unlikely

CRISIS

- Often sudden negative event:
 - Natural or man-made disaster
 - Act of terrorism
 - Grid/utility failure or outage
 - Public health threat
- Must be addressed
- Requires communications support
- Impacts people, property, environment

ANY SITUATION CAN EVOLVE

When not managed properly:

- An issue can develop into a crisis
- A crisis can turn into a long-term issue



Photo credit: Forbes

ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS DURING A CRISIS

- Inform key audiences about the situation
- Provide facts & updates as the situation evolves
- Prevent the spread of misinformation
- Instill public confidence



Photo credit: Bucks County

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONS DURING A CRISIS

- High visibility & long shelf life
- How you respond vs. the actual incident
- Effective communications during a crisis will help protect your reputation & avoid:
 - erosion of public trust
 - legal action
 - financial consequences
 - loss of employment



Photo credit: Pennsylvania Capital-Star

KEY PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

- **A**lways prioritize human life
- **B**e truthful, transparent, & responsive
- **C**ommunicate proactively to key audiences & stakeholders as information becomes available



Photo credit: The Castle Group

CASE STUDY: RADON IN GLEN RIDGE

In 1983, high levels of radon were found in homes in Glen Ridge & Montclair, NJ, & vital information was withheld from the most important audiences:

- Residents who were affected directly
- Local officials
- Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)

Local officials 'last to know'

By John C. Schmidt

Almost 24 hours after New Jersey Nightly News announced that the state Department of Environmental Protection had information regarding the findings of radon gas in 10 homes in Glen Ridge and 17 homes in Montclair, local officials in both communities were still not prepared to offer any statements.

The reason was simple: no one in the DEP had bothered to inform the local officials about the situation.

The presence of radiation in the area has been detailed beginning with the Sept. 8 issue of the Glen Ridge Paper.

"The last I heard," said Glen Ridge Health Officer Richard Proctor Thursday afternoon, shortly before Gov. Thomas Kean was about to begin a press conference in Trenton, "was the information they gave us in September. I wrote to Jeannette Eng at

the DEP in November, asking specific information on the test results, but I've gotten no response from them."

Kean, during his press conference last Thursday, had this to say:

"Last night, each homeowner was called to advise them of our state of knowledge and what they might experience due to the breaking press story. In addition, local, county and state officials were called and advised of the situation."

This was news to local officials in both communities and apparently to the DEP as well.

Most of the homeowners apparently received the information about the situation the same time everyone else did—as it was being covered on television or in the daily newspapers. It wasn't until Friday that anyone from the DEP mentioned that any homeowners had been contacted.

Even by that point, the DEP ac-

knowledged that "we haven't spoken to everyone yet."

Other officials contacted Thursday had a response similar to Proctor's.

"They (the DEP) haven't said anything to us," said Borough Clerk Stephen Berry Sr., who spent most of the day explaining that to reporters and concerned citizens.

"We're still waiting," offered an anxious Tom Restaino, Montclair health officer. "It's a local problem, not a county problem, so I can't understand why county officials are being quoted" in the local newspaper.

Glen Ridge Mayor Donald Lane expressed his displeasure over the state's inability to inform the borough or the affected residents before the story attracted large headlines throughout the metropolitan area, and noted that the situation was causing problems locally because "we have nothing to tell our people."

41 YEARS LATER...

“1983 radon in Glen Ridge homes” lives on in internet infamy

1986

The New York Times

Living With A Radium Nightmare

Share full article



By Debbie Galant
Sept. 29, 1996

WHEN Eldon and Betty Allin decided to move into a four-bedroom Colonial on Carteret Street in 1961, her father warned against it. "Don't buy it," he told them. "It's built on a dump." He knew because he worked at Public Service Electric and Gas, and had installed all the original gas meters on the block. The Allins bought the house anyway.

They didn't discover how right he was until 22 years later. Then one evening, on vacation in Florida, they saw their street on television. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency had just announced that an extensive area of radium contamination had been found in Essex County. The Allins, and their neighbors, were living atop radium waste discarded more than half a century earlier from a nearby watch-dial factory. The dirt in their yard was radioactive, with a half-life of 1,600 years.

2009

nj.com
True
Jersey.

EPA wraps up long cleanup of U.S. Radium pollution in Essex County

Published: May. 04, 2009, 9:37 p.m.



By Elliot Caroom/The Star-Ledger

ESSEX -- By the end of the summer, one of the most complicated cleanups the federal Environmental Protection Agency has ever overseen could be finished and removed from the list of the country's worst-polluted sites.

It's been a decade and a half, but residents of Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Montclair, East Orange and West Orange will no longer live with the threat of radiation poisoning from the long-closed U.S. Radium Factory that made glow-in-the-dark watch faces.

"There was over 220,000-cubic-yards of soil which was contaminated.... We're talking about a hell of a lot of soil," said U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr., whose 8th Congressional district includes Montclair, Glen Ridge and West Orange. "We're talking about soil in a really densely-populated area."

PLANNING FOR A CRISIS EVENT



“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

Benjamin Franklin

WHAT YOU CAN DO BEFORE A CRISIS HAPPENS

- Identify a crisis response team of critical personnel with specific roles that can be mobilized to focus on the situation
- Create communications plans for situations that can be anticipated
- Conduct regular training sessions & drills
- Identify & train spokespeople



Photo credit: Castle Group

CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

- Responsible for the crisis strategy
- Primary decision-making body throughout the crisis
- Manages all facets of crisis response
- Coordinates communications



Photo credit: Seraphim Communications

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- Goal - Broad, long-term, high-level outcome
- Key audiences - Those who are **impacted** &/or who **need to be informed**
- Objectives - Measurable **results** designed to achieve the goal
- Strategy - **How** the plan will be implemented
- Tactics - Detailed **communication vehicles** & targeted media outlets
- Messages - The information that needs to be communicated
- Team - Clearly-defined roles
- Timetable - Might present moving target
- Evaluation - Track & assess response & reporting for factuality, tone, & inclusion of key messages

CRISIS TRAINING AND DRILLS

- Provide an overview of the crisis scenario, discuss important factors, walk through different response scenarios, & practice developing messaging
- Use to assess:
 - The plan & process used by the team to respond to a crisis
 - The participants & their ability to follow the plan & respond to the event



Photo credit: Media Trainer Pro

CRISIS TRAINING & DRILLS: BEST PRACTICES

- Utilize a facilitator when possible
- Develop a realistic scenario
- Build a timeline & list of events
- Focus on strategy, not tactics
- Adapt if team moves in unexpected direction
- Document & review results



Photo credit: Forbes

SELECTING A SPOKESPERSON

Should be the most appropriate person for the situation:

- At ease in front of a camera or microphone
- Personable & likeable
- Able to build confidence & trust by demonstrating empathy, gravitas, knowledge, & reassurance
- Knows the facts, understands the Q&A, owns the messaging
- Strong enough to handle hostile questioning



Photo credit: Nonprofit Quarterly

CASE STUDY: CHEMICAL SPILL IN WEST VIRGINIA

In 2014, crude 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol spilled from a Freedom Industries facility into the Elk River in West Virginia, leaving 300K people without water

Gary Southern, president of Freedom Industries, appeared before television reporters...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAGixCOj8bg>



Photo credit: YouTube

EVALUATING GARY SOUTHERN AS A SPOKESPERSON

- ✓ Appropriate person for the situation?
- ✗ At ease in front of a camera or microphone?
- ✗ Personable and likeable?
- ✗ Able to build confidence and trust by demonstrating empathy, gravitas, knowledge, and reassurance?
- ✗ Understand and own the messaging?
- ✗ Did he handle hostile questioning?

PS – He was sentenced to a month in jail & a \$20,000 fine



Photo credit: New York Times

WHEN A CRISIS HAPPENS



“There can’t be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.”

Henry Kissinger

Photo credit: New York Post

NO CRISIS IS EVER CONVENIENT

In a perfect world, you would be able to:

- Gather information pertaining to the crisis
- Have sufficient time to draft a plan & Q&A
- Brief key personnel
- Be able to manage communications, media inquiries, & social media smoothly

26 people taken to hospital after ammonia leak at commercial building in Northern Virginia

"More information will be provided as available," said Loudoun Fire Rescue



Julia Gomez
USA TODAY

Published 7:23 a.m. ET Aug. 1, 2024 | Updated 8:28 a.m. ET Aug. 1, 2024



An ammonia leak in a Virginia commercial building Wednesday night led to 26 people being transported to the hospital, with four of them expressing “significant symptoms,” according to local officials.

Officials in Loudoun County, Virginia, about 45 miles northwest of Washington DC, received a call reporting a gas leak Wednesday around 8:36 p.m. local time. The leak occurred at a food processing plant.

Fire and rescue crews confirmed that the leak was ammonia and found numerous patients who had been exposed.

CRISIS RESPONSE CHECKLIST

- Mobilize the crisis response team
- Establish a command center
- Identify key audiences
- Draft incident & communications plans
- Create Q&A document
- Draft & review all communications
- Develop a media list
- Set up protocol for media inquiries
- Prepare spokesperson(s)



Photo credit: Forbes

CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM CANDIDATES

- Team leader/point person
- Mayor/designated elected official
- Municipal administrator/manager
- Municipal attorney
- Emergency management director
- Police/fire/EMS chiefs
- Public health director
- Public works director
- Functional specialists (HR, communications, social media, IT, admin)



COMMAND CENTER ESSENTIALS

- Dedicated inbound lines
- Wi-Fi
- Cell/landline phones
- Backup generator
- Computers/laptops
- Printers/printer paper
- Flip charts/white boards
- Stationery
- Pens/pencils
- Table/chairs
- Batteries
- Television
- Radio
- Catering services



Photo credit: City of Los Angeles

TARGET AUDIENCE(S) FOR COMMUNICATIONS

- Everyone who is directly impacted by the situation
- Anyone who is likely to be impacted by the situation in the near or long-term future
- Ask:
 - Who else needs to be informed?
 - What is the best way to reach each audience?



Photo credit: NPR

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- **Situation analysis - What happened, who/how many it affected, what is happening as a result, who responded, how it's being addressed, updated PRN**
- Goal - Focus on municipal reputation
- Target audiences - Start with those who are most affected
- Objective - Transparent & timely response
- Strategy - Continuous updates
- Tactics - Best way to communicate with those who are most affected, plus statements to traditional & social media (date/time stamp)
- Key Message - Safety is highest priority
- Team - Crisis response team
- Timetable - Communicate PRN
- Evaluation - Factual reporting on situation; positive reporting on response

DEVELOPING THE Q&A DOCUMENT

- Ask & answer the tough questions
- Be transparent & truthful
- If answers are not yet known or available, the best response is “that’s still under investigation,” or “we don’t have the answer to that yet”
- Always get back to the reporter once the information is known



Photo credit: NY Times

Q&A DOCUMENT ESSENTIALS

- What happened?
- When/where/why/how did it happen?
- How many people were affected?
- What was the cause of the incident?
- Does this incident still pose a threat to the public?
- How is it being addressed?
- Has this ever happened before?
- Could this have been prevented?
- What precautions are typically in place to prevent something like this?
- What preventative measures will be implemented now?
- When is the situation expected to return to normal?

MEDIA LIST CANDIDATES

- Traditional media:
 - Daily newspapers that cover the municipality
 - Local community newspaper
 - Local radio/cable TV stations
 - For a major event: network TV
- Social media: Facebook, X, Instagram, etc.



Photo credit: Jeremy Porter

PROTOCOL FOR DEALING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

- Verify the source
- Direct all inquiries to official spokesperson
- Use Q&A document to answer all questions
- If the answer to a question is not known, get the answer & get back to the reporter
- Track all inquiries/responses



Photo credit: Maryville University

MEDIA INQUIRY TRACKING

- Date & time of inquiry
- Media outlet/reporter
- Questions/responses
- Date & time of response
- Who responded
- Follow-up
- Link to published articles



Photo credit: Workzone

SPOKESPERSON PREPARATION

- Up-to-the-minute updates on the situation
- Key messages that need to be conveyed
- Q&A document, including questions that can't/shouldn't be answered
- Information about the media and/or audience



Photo credit: ICMA

COMMUNICATIONS DELIVERABLES

- Internal communications
- Public statements
- News releases
- Social media posts
- Website posts
- News conferences



Photo credit: Audley

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Employees are often overlooked in a crisis – make sure to inform & reassure them

- Train leaders how to interact with employees during crises
- Provide timely, accurate, & relevant information
- Communicate with empathy & let employees know about available resources



Photo credit: LinkedIn

COMMUNICATING INTERNALLY

- Start with an overview of the situation & what they need to know
- Ensure messages are professional & neutral in tone
- It's OK to praise standout performers – helps raise morale
- Let employees know who to contact



Photo credit: Forbes

PUBLIC STATEMENT STRATEGY

- Provide details about the event and its cause
- Express compassion for victims
- Explain what's being done to address the situation & timeline of how long it might take to resolve
- Advise regarding any precautions that need to be taken
- If possible, say when further updates will be available



Photo credit: Forbes

INITIAL STATEMENT WITH LIMITED/NO INFORMATION

Statement as of September 19, 2024, 9 a.m.:

We are aware of *<description of what happened>* and are gathering facts as quickly as possible.

As soon as we have additional information, we will post it on our website.



Photo credit: Graphic Online

INITIAL STATEMENT WITH INFORMATION

Statement as of September 19, 2024, 9 a.m.:

On *<date>* at *<time>*, *<description of what happened>*.
<description of what occurred as a result>. *<Description of who was impacted>*.

Our first responders have informed us *<TBD>*.

We're asking residents to take the following precautionary measures: *<TBD>*.

<Acknowledge deaths/injuries/property loss>.

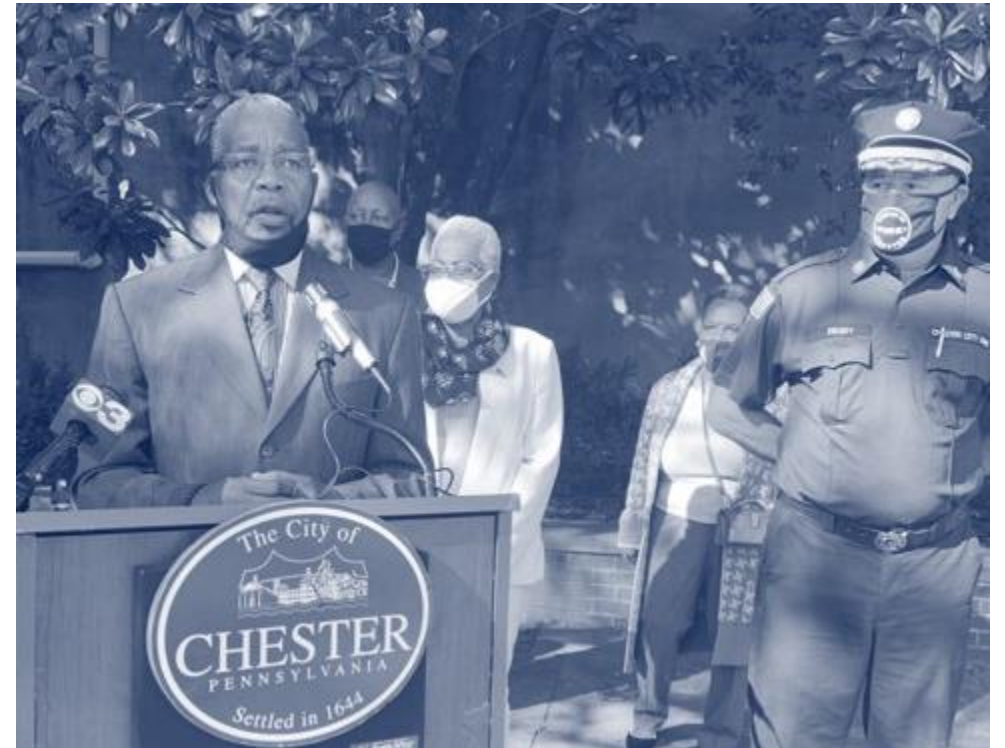


Photo credit: City of Chester

EXAMPLE STATEMENT - CITY OF HARRISBURG

Mayor Williams statement on the July 4 events in Riverfront Park

| Jul 4, 2024 |

(HARRISBURG) Mayor Wanda R.D. Williams has released the following statement regarding the July 4 events in Riverfront Park that took place during the fireworks show:

“Earlier tonight at the July 4th fireworks show in Riverfront Park, Harrisburg Police officers helped stop what potentially could have been a catastrophic event. On three separate occasions, our officers noticed what they believed were weapons being carried in the crowd of people. Each time they approached the individuals, that person ran. The first person they came across, a juvenile, had a gun with a 24-round magazine. Harrisburg Police officers took him into custody. The second person, an adult man, started running with another juvenile, and he threw his gun into the river. Both were arrested. The third was a boy with a BB gun. He was eventually stopped and was released. Other kids were setting off firecrackers and running. One person ran into me and fell on my leg. Commissioner Carter made the decision at that point to end the fireworks show early for everyone’s safety.

Aside from being furious at what happened, I am deeply indebted to the heroic actions of our Harrisburg Bureau of Police officers. When they spotted potential danger, they ran towards it, and in the process, prevented what could have been a disaster. The City of Harrisburg owes our men and women in uniform our highest gratitude. Because of them, there were no shots fired tonight and no major injuries. While it’s disappointing a few bad actors ruined an incredible and free event we put on for the city, we are most glad they kept everyone safe.”

NEWS RELEASE STRATEGY

- Have a distribution list prepared ahead of time & update as necessary
- Coordinate the release with other relevant agencies
- Issue the release as soon as all relevant facts are known
- Keep it simple: short sentences & paragraphs, no jargon or acronyms



Photo credit: Magoda

WHAT GOES ON A NEWS RELEASE

- Contact information
- “For Immediate Release”
- Headline/subhead to summarize the news
- Dateline & top news in the Lede paragraph
- 2-3 paragraphs to add context/details
- Bulleted facts & figures (optional)
- Boilerplate (About the municipality)
- End with # # # or -30-



Photo credit: Raritan Valley Habitat for Humanity

EXAMPLE NEWS RELEASE - CITY OF PITTSBURGH



Translate

GUÍA DE RESIDENTES

FOLLOW US

CONTACT US

CAREERS

Search Our Website

GO

RESIDENTS

VISITORS

BUSINESS

CITY HALL

ONLINE APPS

CITY INFO

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Mayor Ed Gainey Will Sign Declaration of Disaster Emergency for Fern Hollow Bridge Collapse

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: January 30, 2022

Press Release

Mayor Ed Gainey Will Sign Declaration of Disaster Emergency for Fern Hollow Bridge Collapse

City of Pittsburgh announces intention to become a party to NTSB investigation

PITTSBURGH — Mayor Ed Gainey will sign a Declaration of Disaster Emergency for the City of Pittsburgh for the next several days. This declaration will increase the availability of federal funds, facilitate closer coordination between PennDOT and Department of Mobility and Infrastructure (DOMI), and expedite the process of cleanup and reconstruction of the Fern Hollow Bridge. Mayor Gainey is also calling on the Pittsburgh City Council to extend the declaration.

Additionally, the City announced its decision to become a party to the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigation. Becoming a party to the investigation will allow the City and all relevant departments to share information with the NTSB in support of their independent investigation and to receive information that can be used to improve safety.

Published

01.30.2022

Save as PDF

Experimental - may have alignment issues.

Contacts

Sam Wasserman
Communications Manager
Mayor's Office
412-352-4674
sam.wasserman@pittsburghpa.gov

RETURN

"The Fern Hollow Bridge collapse is a painful reminder of the condition of our bridges and a call to action to address our aging infrastructure," said Mayor Gainey. "As

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

- Don't let negativity drive the conversation – take a positive, proactive approach to influence public views
- Be transparent – explain steps being taken & preventative actions to make sure it doesn't happen again
- Identify keywords and hashtags that the public is using



Photo credit: Search Engine Journal

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Can be used to provide real-time information:

- Edit public statements to meet space limits
- Understand audience limitations
- Use to convey transparency & build trust
- Inform, but don't engage
- Act, but don't react



Photo credit: Shutterstock via Business Matters

EXAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS - CITY OF PHILADELPHIA



Home



Explore



Notifications



Messages



Grok



Bookmarks



Communities



Premium



Profile



More

← **City of Philadelphia** 
44.5K posts



City of Philadelphia 
@PhiladelphiaGov

Serving the people of Philadelphia. City of Brotherly Love. Birthplace of American Democracy. Contact @Philly311 for non-emergencies, call 911 for emergencies.

📍 Philadelphia, PA 🌐 phila.gov 📅 Joined January 2009

253 Following 368.8K Followers

 **Follow**



City of Philadelphia  @PhiladelphiaGov · Jul 19

The City of Philadelphia is aware of the international IT issue and is impacted.

9-1-1 and life and public safety systems remain functional. We continue to assess the full impact.

🗨️ 5

↻ 31

❤️ 49

📊 15K



City of Philadelphia  @PhiladelphiaGov · Jul 19

City staff and employees are to still report to work to assist with critical support tasks related to the outage.

More information will be communicated as soon as it is available.

🗨️ 9

↻ 8

❤️ 17

📊 9.8K



MUNICIPAL WEBSITE STRATEGY

- Unlike social media, no space limits
- Use to post statements, Q&A, FAQs
- Can archive all response information
- Note that everything you post becomes part of your search engine history, making it “Googleable” in the future



Photo credit: PCMA

WEBSITE POSTS

Make sure:

- the most accurate & current content is posted,
- emergency information, including who/how to contact, is easily accessible,
- updates are date & time-stamped

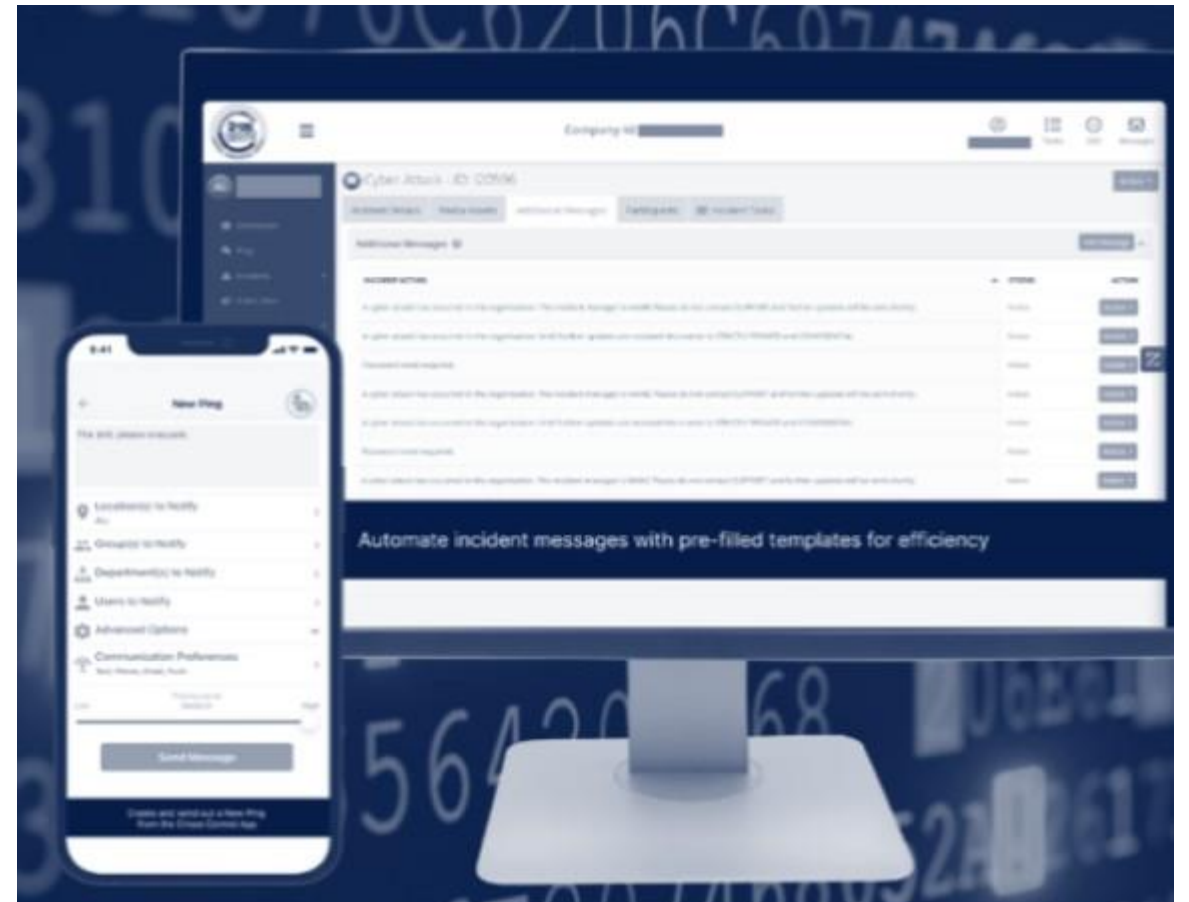


Photo credit: Crisis Control

EXAMPLE WEBSITE POST - CITY OF LANCASTER



NEIGHBORHOODS

SERVICES

CITY GOV

BUSINESS

VISITORS

NEWS

NEWS

Boil Water Advisory Lifted for 800 Block of W. Walnut Street

AUGUST 9, 2024 | BUREAU OF WATER

DRINKING WATER PROBLEM CORRECTED

BOIL WATER ADVISORY LIFTED: WATER IS SAFE TO DRINK.

Este informe contiene informacion muy importante sobre sy agua de beber. Traduzcalo o hable con alguien que lo entienda bien.

As of Friday, August 9, 2024, at 8:45 AM, the boil water advisory is lifted for customers residing at:

- 823, 825, 827, 829, 833, 835, 837, 839, 841 W. Walnut Street

Your water is safe to drink and we have lifted the boil water advisory.

NEWS CONFERENCE STRATEGY

- Provide advanced notification & logistic information (date, time, location)
- Prepare press kits & background information
- Record names & affiliations of media members who attend
- Identify speakers, establish procedures for Q&A
- Monitor questions & answers closely for follow-up
- Video/audio record the event



Photo credit: The Atlantic

NEWS CONFERENCES

- Choose appropriate venue with podium & A/V equipment
- Be able to satisfy reporters' technical requirements
- Ensure availability of Wi-Fi & electricity
- Arrange for media vehicle parking



Photo credit: Throughline Group

EXAMPLE NEWS CONFERENCE - CITY OF ERIE



Mayor's News Conference

THE CITY OF ERIE, PA GOVERNMENT

Press Conferences – Erie, PA

CASE STUDY: PITTSBURGH POTHOLES

Sinkhole Swallows Bus On Busy Downtown Street in Pittsburgh

October 28, 2019

PITTSBURGH (KDKA) -- A massive sinkhole opened up in downtown Pittsburgh during the Monday morning rush hour, swallowing the back half of a Port Authority bus and nearly a car with it.

Emergency crews have been on the scene all day at Penn Avenue and 10th Street, near the Westin Hotel. They were called there just before 8 a.m. and are expected to be there into the evening hours.

Director of Pittsburgh Public Safety Wendell Hissrich says the impact will last even longer than just Monday night. He says 10th Street will be closed for at least one to two weeks.



Photo credit: KDKA

HOW WOULD YOU START TO BUILD A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

- Incident summary
- Goal
- **Target audiences**
- Objectives
- Strategy
- **Tactics**
- **Key messages**
- Team
- Timetable
- Evaluation



Photo credit: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A CRISIS



“Don’t believe everything you read on the internet.”

Abraham Lincoln

Photo credit: Grafdom

SOCIAL HAS CHANGED THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE



Photo credit: University of Oregon Blogs

Back Then

Print /radio/TV

24-hour news cycle

Journalists

News stories

Headlines

Trusted sources

Now

Social/apps/blogs

24/7 news cycle

Social influencers

Content

Click-bait

“Fake news” reputation



Photo credit: CBS News

WARNING: SOCIAL MEDIA CAN HIT LIKE A STORM

Social media attacks during a crisis:

- Can come from internal or external sources
- Can be generated by real or fake accounts
- Can range from simple malicious rumors to campaigns aimed at reputation damage – or worse



Home

Explore

Notifications

Messages

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Premium

Profile

More



Edit profile

Your Worst Nightmare
@TheHacker

112,000 Following 14 Followers

Posts Replies Highlights Articles Media Likes



Your Worst Nightmare @TheHacker
Did you know your building official takes bribes??? He ain't cheap, neither.

MINIMIZE THE DAMAGE & CONTAIN THE SITUATION

First, take a deep breath:

- Look at the source/sources of the attack
- Determine the credibility of the threat
- Identify misinformation that needs to be addressed
- Understand what you can control
- Carefully assess all options before responding



Photo credit: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

THE RIGHT ACTION PLAN

- Be proactive
- Stick to key messages
- Look to inform, not antagonize
- Don't give credibility to uninformed sources
- Focus on solutions
- Double-check any links you include



Photo credit: Lineup.com

CASE STUDY: EQUIFAX SECURITY BREACH

In 2017, Equifax revealed a massive data breach affecting 143 million Americans

Equifax's Twitter (X) account then accidentally directed victims to a phishing website

Even after Equifax offered free credit monitoring, its brand experienced a significant loss of trust



Photo credit: Slate.com

MANAGING TRADITIONAL MEDIA DURING A CRISIS



“The questions don’t do the damage. Only the answers do.”

Sam Donaldson

UNDERSTANDING NEWS REPORTERS

- Looking for news & how it affects their readers/viewers
- Want a scoop – something their competitors don't have
- Skeptical about everything
- Trained to ask good follow-up questions
- Resourceful ones will find a way to get information



Photo credit: Newslab

BEFORE AN INTERVIEW

You need to know:

- The media outlet & its audience
- Who the reporter is
- Topic the reporter wants to discuss & why
- Any agenda the media outlet or reporter may have



Photo credit: Forbes

THE GOLDEN RULES OF INTERVIEWING

- Keep every conversation with a reporter on the record – always
- Don't say anything you don't want to see in print, hear on a broadcast, or see “hash-tagged” on social media,
- Never argue with a reporter



Photo credit: Statter911

BEST PRACTICES FOR INTERVIEWS

- Have a media brief that identifies objectives & key messages
- Be transparent & honest
- Only discuss publicly disclosed information
- Never comment on rumors & speculation
- Be prepared for a worst-case scenario



Photo credit: Mihajlo Maricic, IPTC Photo Metadata

TYPICAL MEDIA BRIEF

Interview details

- Date, time, location/logistics
- Media outlet description & information about the reporter
- Objectives for the interview

Talking points

- Background information on the topic
- Key strategic messages that should be conveyed
- Q&A

Recent articles by the reporter



Photo credit: The Guardian

PERFECTING YOUR KEY MESSAGES

- Are there proof points to support each message?
- Can you articulate the value of each message to the audience?
- Are there anecdotes that could make the messages easily understandable?



Photo credit: Ladders

PERFECTING YOUR INTERVIEW SKILLS

- Look into the reporter's eyes
- Understand the question & think before you answer:
 - Stick to the topic
 - Stick to facts – no opinions
 - Focus on key messages
- Never repeat a question you don't like
- Never speculate or comment on rumors
- Always tell the truth



Photo credit: George Armstrong, IPTC Photo Metadata

KNOW WHEN NOT TO COMMENT ... & WHAT TO SAY

- Personnel matters - “Because this is a personnel matter, we are unable to comment”
- Lawsuits - “Because the matter is the subject of a legal proceeding, we are unable to comment”
- Rumors & speculation - “We do not comment on rumors & speculation”
- Other agencies - “You should speak to them”



Photo credit: WordPress

WHAT YOU NEED TO AVOID

- Not having credible messages
- Not owning the messages
- Trying to spin the messages
- Demonstrating a lack of awareness about the situation



Photo credit: ABC News

FOUR ASSUMPTIONS THAT KILL CAREERS

- “The reporter will treat me fairly”
- “The reporter is my friend”
- “We’ll keep everything off the record”
- “The reporter doesn’t know what I know”



Photo credit: Media Friendly

CASE STUDY: DR. HARTLEY GOES ON TV

A member of the local media requests an interview

You've seen the reporter's work before; she seems to ask "softball" questions

She appears to report factually

You agree to the interview...

<https://vimeo.com/32207413>



Photo credit: Vimeo

WHAT WENT WRONG?

- What could he have done differently **before** the interview?
- What could he have done differently **during** the interview?



Photo credit: AV Club

POST-CRISIS EVALUATION



“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”

Warren Buffett

Photo credit: State Magazine

ASSESSING THE CRISIS RESPONSE & COMMUNICATIONS

- Did we already have a plan in place?
- Did we stick to the plan, or did we improvise?
- Did we adapt to the situation as it evolved?
- How did other municipalities respond to similar situations?
- What can we learn from them?
- What are the takeaways & lessons-learned that can help us in planning for future crises?
- How effective was our spokesperson?
- What was the media/social media response to what we did?
- Was there any damage to the municipality's reputation?

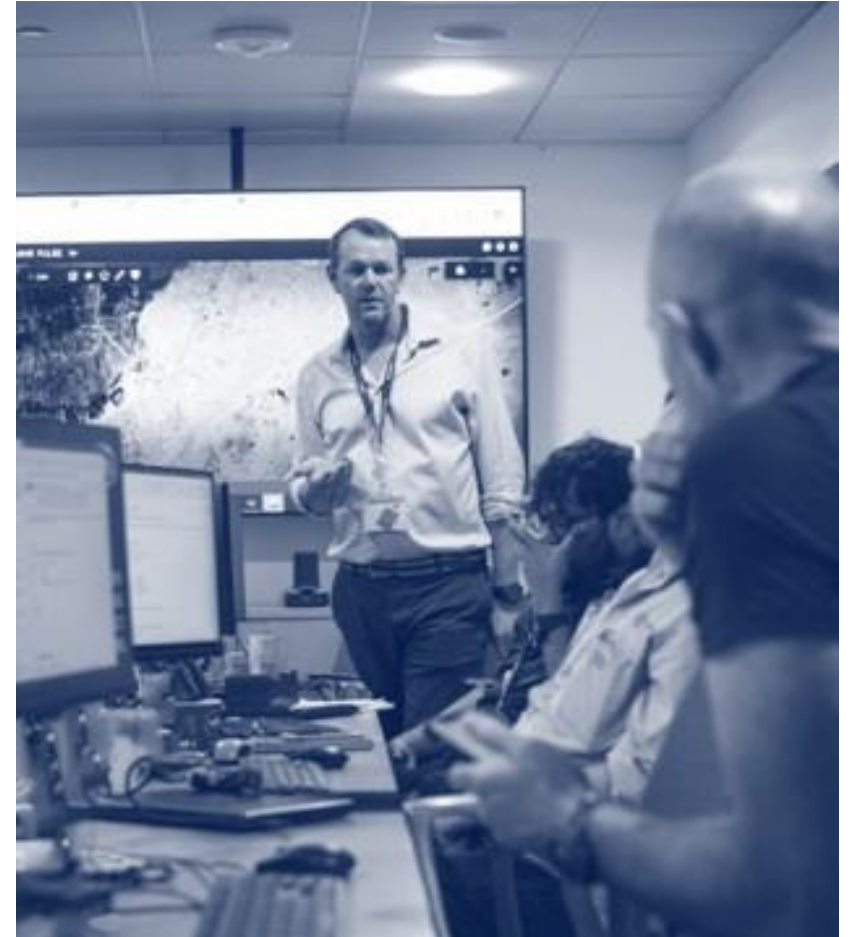


Photo credit: International SOS

NEXT STEPS AFTER A CRISIS

Negative backlash is inevitable – take a positive, proactive approach to influence perception going forward:

- “Things are back to normal,” or “Next steps/recovery plans/interim changes”
- What is being done to prevent a similar crisis from happening in the future
- Address traditional & social media perceptions (especially wrong ones)
- Promote good things being done



Photo credit: Nextlegacy Construction

INTERACTIVE TABLETOP DRILL



Photo credit: Duke Today

“A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.”

Winston Churchill

THE COMMUNITY

- Quaint municipality of @8,000 people
- Mix of Victorian-style homes & new development that resembles the older homes
- Average home cost \$500K-\$750K
- New schools with great reputation
- Well-known “downtown” area with nice shops & antique stores
- Behind the shops is an abandoned 100-year-old factory* sitting on 5 acres of land



Photo credit: The Southern Mansion

* - Closed in the 1950s

THE SCENARIO

- A new owner has purchased the factory property with plans to renovate the building, open a nice antique mall, restaurants, & a parking facility that would also serve the downtown area
- Work has begun clearing out the building and excavating the land
- On your way home after work one Friday, you stop by to check on the progress...



Photo credit: NYVT Media

THE ISSUE

You find out that dozens of unmarked barrels & containers have been removed from the building & unearthed from the grounds



Photo credit: Environmental Protection Agency

REMEMBER THE CRISIS RESPONSE CHECKLIST

- Crisis response team
- Command center
- Key audiences
- Incident & communications plans
- Q&A document
- Draft communications
- Media list
- Protocol for media inquiries
- Spokesperson preparation



THE ISSUE BECOMES A CRISIS

- One of the shop owners is on social media (500K followers!) calling the situation “the toxic death nightmare”
- He rips you, the mayor & council for a “lack of response”
- You’re watching the 11 p.m. news when this story comes on the air
- There are reporters standing in front of a familiar-looking house – YOURS! And your doorbell rings... now what?



Photo credit: Millbank Media

THE INITIAL RESPONSE

- First things first: Don't answer the door in your pajamas
- Be prepared to tell the reporters what you do know
- Let them know that the situation is under investigation & that the proper authorities have been notified
- If asked about social media posts, stick to key messages



Photo credit: WIRED

THE FOLLOW-UP

What's the next step?

Remember, how you respond & communicate is as likely to be remembered as the incident itself



Photo credit: Miller Environmental Group

THE UPDATE

- Turns out, the factory manufactured chocolate candy until the 1950s
- The drums were once filled with cocoa, sugar, cinnamon, & honey
- The land was tested & everything is safe
- The drums have been carted away & disposed of properly
- Are we done here?



Photo credit: WordPress.com

THE IMPORTANT NEXT STEPS

How do you bring this event to a conclusion?



Photo credit: West Virginia University

Thank you!

**If you have any questions, or need communications advice
for an issue or crisis:**

John C. Schmidt
wordschmidt @msn.com