# JOHN C. SCHMIDT

75 Alvin Sloan Avenue • Washington, NJ 07882
973-632-8214 • wordschmidt@msn.com • linkedin.com/in/wordschmidt

## 2024 PENNSYLVANIA BUILDING OFFICIALS CONFERENCE
# Managing Communications During a Crisis

What would you need to do if an incident created a crisis event in your community? Or if some emerging situation threatened the health and safety of local residents? How would you respond to a damaging rumor, or an unfounded criticism of you or your municipality on social media?

Municipal workers don't have to deal with crisis events regularly, but the possibility of an unanticipated situation (e.g., a natural or man-made disaster, an act of terrorism, a grid or utility failure or outage, or public health threat) could create a potential risk. Manufacturing facilities located near your water supply, railcars carrying hazardous chemicals through your community, slumlords, and unscrupulous contractors, just to name a few, all represent potential vulnerabilities that could force your municipality to face a critical situation.

It's helpful to understand what "Corporate America" already knows: How you respond to the situation is as likely to be remembered as the incident itself. A study by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) once revealed that 40% of businesses never reopen after a disaster and 25% end up failing within a year, while the U.S. Small Business Association has reported that 90% of businesses shut down within two years of an incident. And it's not always the damage that's done to plants, operations, or business procedures; how an organization handles communications during a crisis can make or break its future. That goes for the employees who are thrust into the spotlight as a result, as well.

While there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to responding to a crisis, there are steps you can take to protect your and your municipality's reputation and mitigate risk, before, during, and after an event. There are also "best practices" to keep in mind when developing and implementing communications plans. Specifically: Be responsive, honest, and transparent.

### Preparation
Knowing potential crisis scenarios you might face is an important first step; understanding that there are situations that can't be anticipated is just as critical. Deployment of a software glitch in July 2024 shut down cities, companies, airlines, and more all over the United States. Hurricanes and tornadoes, disruptions to logistic routes or the power grid, and other events all have the potential to put any community in crisis mode. In order to be prepared:

- Know in advance what to do when you face a crisis. Have a team of critical personnel with specific roles that can be mobilized and allowed to focus on the situation at hand. The crisis response team is likely to be composed of the mayor or a designated elected official, the municipal administrator/manager, the municipal attorney, the emergency management director, the police, fire and EMS chiefs, the public health director, the public works director, and functional specialists (social media, communications, social media, IT, administration).
- Draft communications plans for any situations that can be anticipated, including standby statements for both traditional and social media.

- Conduct regular training sessions and crisis communications drills based on varying events to ensure everyone on the team knows her/his role.
- Identify and train spokespeople who will serve as the face of the municipality.

In addition, communicate information about your community's crisis communications preparation to employees. Let them know that in the event something occurs, it's important not to post information on social media or speak to the press unless they are instructed to do so.

## Communications Planning

Any crisis is likely to be a developing and evolving situation, which means a communications plan and any corresponding statements will change continuously as information is known. While a communications plan should be tailored to the specific situation, it should include the following elements:

- **Situation Analysis** - What happened, who/how many it affected, what is happening as a result, who responded, how it's being addressed. This should be updated as new information becomes available.
- **Goal** - The broad, long-term outcome that the community wants to achieve. Given the occurrence of a crisis, the goal may be to restore a municipality's reputation.
- **Target audience(s)** - This includes employees, those who are impacted by the crisis, and the community in general. Note that the media is not an audience; it is a means to reach the target audience.
- **Objectives** - The measurable results designed to achieve the goal. In a crisis situation, objectives should focus on demonstrating responsiveness, transparency, and timely communication of information.
- **Strategy** - Details of how the communications plan will be implemented.
- **Tactics** - Details of which traditional (newspapers, radio, television) and social (X/Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) media will be addressed, along with the types of deliverables (Q&A document, website posts, statements, news releases, news conferences, social posts, customer communications, etc.) that will be developed.
- **Key Messages** - The information that will be communicated. A good practice is to date and timestamp every public statement so that target audiences know that they have received the latest information.
- **Team** - As mentioned above, it's important to have a team of critical personnel with specific roles, including those who will be responsible for reviewing, approving, and distributing public statements.
- **Timetable** - While this might present a moving target, it might be possible to schedule briefing sessions for the media on a regular basis, especially in a crisis situation.
- **Evaluation** - All media reporting of the event should be tracked and evaluated for factuality and tone. This will help determine the next steps once the situation is resolved.

## The Q&A Document

In a perfect world, you would be able to gather all relevant information pertaining to the crisis, have sufficient time to draft a plan, statement and Q&A document, brief public officials, get everything approved, and be able to manage media inquiries and social media smoothly. In the real world, things don't work that way.

Potentially, you could learn about an incident from X (Twitter) or news reports, and before you can start working on anything you'll be bombarded with calls and emails from reporters and dealing with misinformation, rumors, and speculation on social media. The first deliverable to be developed should be the Q&A document. Start with a brief summary of the incident (this can actually serve as an initial statement) that includes as much information as you can gather:

*"On <Date> at <Time>, <Description of what happened>. <Description of what occurred as a result, e.g., were there any injuries? Casualties? Property loss? Release of harmful or toxic substances? Impact on surrounding community?> First responders who have informed us <include that information>.*

Note that if an active dangerous situation, such as the release of a harmful substance, is involved, there may be a need to inform residents to take precautionary measures (e.g., shelter in place). This statement should be date and time stamped. From there, an attempt should be made to identify as many questions that news reporters might ask as possible. For example:
- What happened?
- When/where/why did it happen?
- Who was/how many people were affected?
- What was the cause of the incident?
- What threat does this pose to others?
- Could the incident have been prevented?
- What type of safety precautions are typically in place to prevent something like this?
- Has anything of a similar nature happened before?
- What changes were made then to prevent something like this from happening?
- When is the situation expected to return to normal?

Two important things to remember when drafting the Q&A. First, it's best to try to ask and get answers to the toughest questions. Journalists will ask them, and the answers should be as transparent as possible. Second, if the 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," with a promise to get back to the reporter once the information is known. When interacting with a reporter, keep these best practices in mind:
- **never** go "off the record;"
- **never** say something you don't want to see in print, hear broadcast, or see running viral on social media; and,
- **never** argue with a reporter.

It's also recommended not to use blanket "no comment" statements to answer questions; these will lead reporters to presume that something is being covered up and invite speculation. However, there are instances in which information should not be disclosed, such as:
- **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 and speculation** - "As a matter of policy, we do not comment on rumors and speculation."

## Public Statements

Once there is sufficient information to begin releasing public statements, always stick to provable facts and be truthful:

*"On <Date> at <Time>, <Description of what happened>. <Description of what occurred as a result, e.g., were there any injuries? Casualties? Property loss? Release of harmful or toxic substances? Impact on surrounding community?> First responders have informed us <include that information>. We are currently investigating the situation and will provide further information as it becomes available."*

Another thing to keep in mind is that shorter statements will need to be developed for social media. When space doesn't permit inclusion of all relevant facts, it becomes helpful to include links to the municipal website, where full statements can be posted. As information becomes known or better understood, additional statements should be released to provide updates.

## Social Media

During a crisis, the potential for social media misinformation and attacks can increase exponentially. These attacks can come from internal or external sources, they can be generated by real or fake accounts, and they can range from simple malicious rumors to campaigns aimed at reputation damage – or worse.

In many cases, social media attacks can be addressed and damage can be minimized…but not with a direct response. Before addressing anything on social media:

- look at the source/sources of the attack,
- determine the credibility of the threat,
- identify misinformation that needs to be addressed,
- carefully assess all options before responding, and,
- understand what you can control.

If you are going to respond to anything on social media, it's best to stick to your key messages. Look to inform readers by pointing them to information on your website and focusing on solutions. Avoid antagonizing and giving credibility to uninformed sources, because those are battles that can't be won. It's also good policy to always double-check any links you include.

## Monitoring Traditional and Social Media

One news story can have a direct, long-lasting impact on your community's reputation – and yours. Despite today's rapidly moving news cycle, news about a crisis will have high visibility and a long shelf life on the internet. All information on the media and social media should be tracked and evaluated. If wrong or misleading information is published in traditional media, it's best to reach out to the reporter with a clarifying statement. However, handling false information on social media is different. A good rule of thumb is not to respond directly. Instead, stick to key messages, look to inform (not antagonize), avoid giving credibility to uninformed sources, focus on solutions, and double-check any links you include.

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