

Crisis Communication Management Guide | 2023

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From the Qatar World Cup to the Marks & Spencer Christmas commercial, scandals make the headlines. It's why an entire segment of the PR industry is devoted specifically to managing client crises.

In this guide, we outline the type of crisis you're most likely to encounter within the built environment, suggest ways of managing the situation while in the eye of the storm and offer some practical ways you can prepare ahead for any eventually.

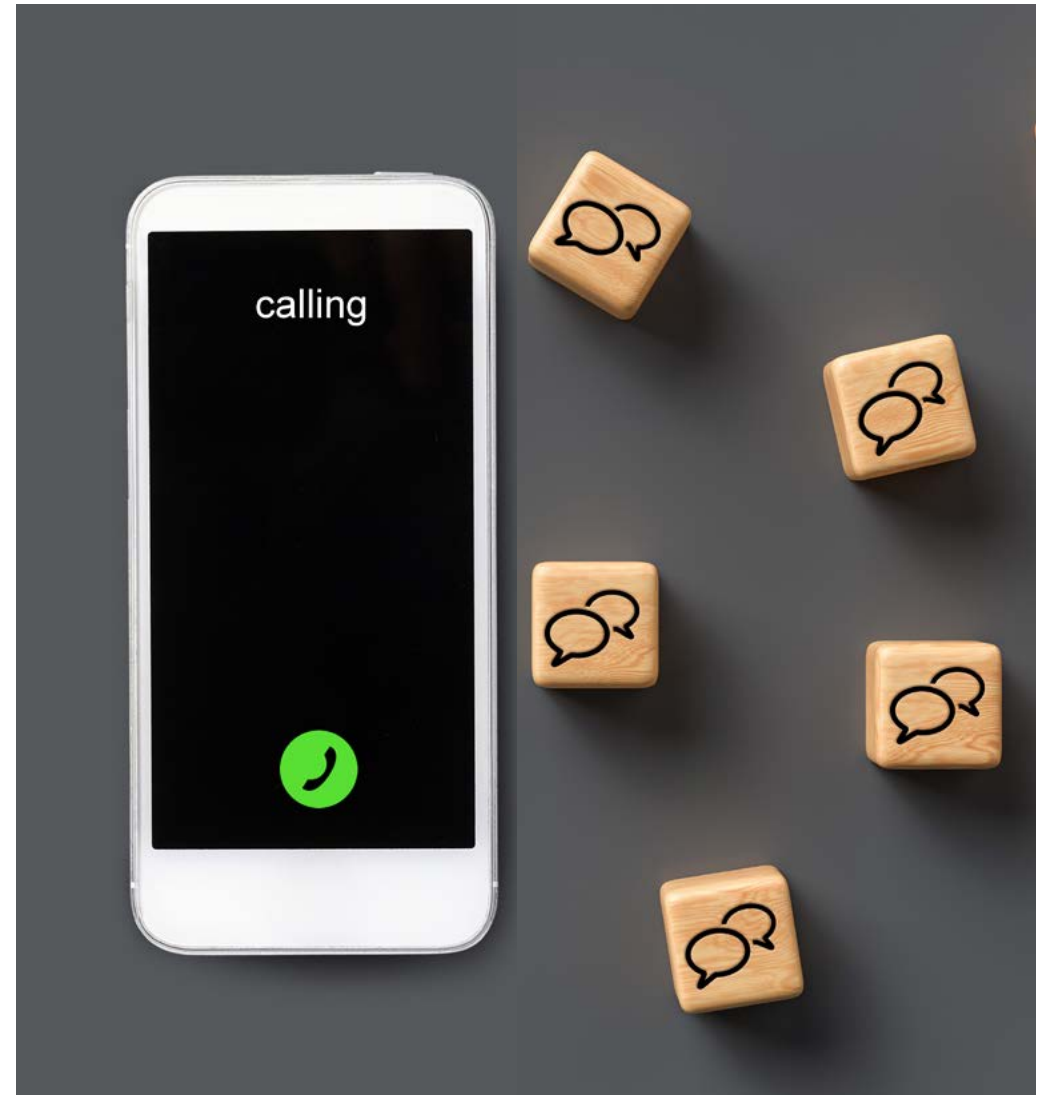
This guide takes you through the process.

Crisis communications doesn't just apply to headline-grabbing controversies. In the built environment, a seemingly low-key issue can boil over into full blown crisis if left unchecked, damaging the standing of a brand.

In one recent example, a service provider took over a new contract and inherited an ongoing industrial dispute involving staff that had transferred. This resulted in the company not only becoming embroiled in a costly strike but also being dragged through the mud as an unfair employer.

In another scenario, a maintenance specialist was criticised roundly in the press when it was discovered that every time its engineers changed a set of lightbulbs in a large public sector building, it cost the taxpayer thousands. The fault lay in the original design of the lighting, but that didn't stop the M&E contractor from taking the lion-share of the blame.

The built environment is a sector where a good reputation is one of the fundamental ingredients for attracting and retaining business, potentially having a significant impact on the bottom line.



A potential crisis may include:

- Any media enquiry however apparently innocent
- An accident or dangerous occurrence as defined within the Reporting of Injuries
- Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Riddor)
- An incident which involves the emergency services, particularly the police
- Threat by customer or employee to contact the press
- Terrorism threat/bomb scare
- Serious attack on an employee
- Staff dispute with management
- Asylum and immigration issues

Any of these issues can result in a storm of negative publicity, an outcome that must be managed carefully to avoid it blowing up into a major crisis. This is why it is crucial to be available to field calls from the media while ensuring everyone within the client organisation is kept informed.

During the crisis, you must ensure the media enquiry/incident number is circulated to all line-managers and published on the website. A mobile number is a bad idea. Instead, put forward a general number which forwards the call to the relevant mobile. Doing this means calls aren't missed when people are unavailable.

These are the main steps to take while in the throes of the storm. However, the key to success, before any incident occurs, is planning crisis communications management carefully.



THE KEY TO SUCCESS, BEFORE ANY INCIDENT OCCURS, IS PLANNING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT CAREFULLY

1. PLANNING

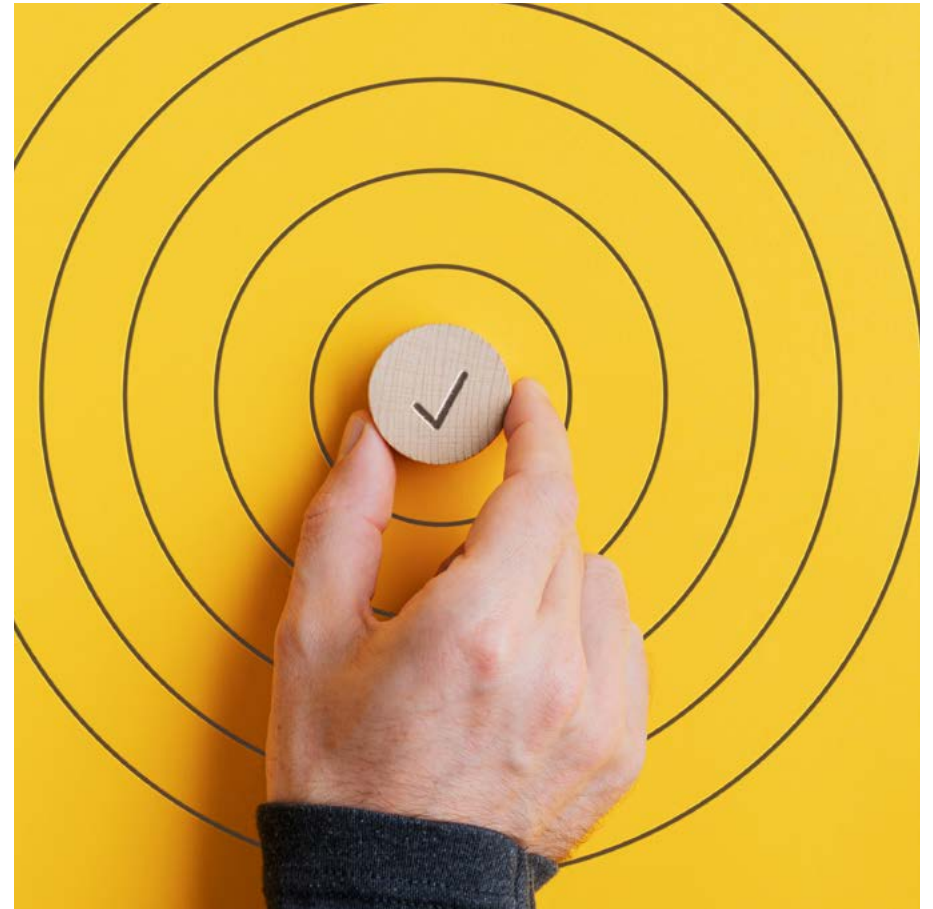
Most responsible organisations have a risk management strategy in place. The same goes for a crisis policy. The key is to establish who is in charge in the event of a potential crisis, who makes the key decisions and who speaks to the press? Before a crisis, it's crucial to discuss:

- What are the typical media incidents which have occurred to date?
- How have they been handled?
- Has a social media policy been devised which includes informing staff of the consequences should they tweet or post an inflammatory comment on social media?
- Is there an existing crisis communications policy in place?
- Who are the key spokespeople?
- Does anyone within the organisation require some media training? (See below)

Journalists can be persuasive, which is why dealing with the media in a crisis requires someone with training and experience in these situations.

The main steps to consider are:

- Be empathetic (but don't admit liability). Don't speculate, statements should be bland and dull. Say as little as possible and don't lie about anything.
- Remain cool, calm and collected at all times. Journalists might try to rile you. Don't let them.
- Don't let junior staff speak to the press.
- Be human – although it's important to avoid a mea culpa, be careful not to antagonise an injured party by hiding behind legal speak.
- Be there – refusing to make any comment may make you appear at fault, but sometimes it's better to be unavailable for comment.
- Explain any next steps or actions.
- Don't be lured into blaming anyone.



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2. CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Create a crisis communications policy which everyone can draw from should a crisis ensue. Areas to cover include:

- Why do we need a procedure?
- What is a potential crisis?
- What should you do if you think there is a potential crisis?
- What not to do
- The company's Crisis Management Team
- Procedure for the Crisis Management Team
- What is expected of the Crisis Management Team?

Once this document has been drafted, all parties must be aware of the policy and their role in it. Don't just draft it and stick it in a drawer. Things will inevitably change within the organisation, so it's important to review the policy annually, or following a crisis if appropriate.

Statements are an intrinsic part of the crisis communication process, so creating draft specimen statements is a must. As a general rule statements must be:

- Factual
- Unambiguous
- Brief
- Clear
- Consistent
- Timely

Statements should not be emotional or imply blame.

During a crisis incident, particularly if it's one which involves any sort of legal consequences, keep in mind that all emails may be required in a Court of Law. For that reason, if there is something very sensitive to discuss, it's better to discuss face to face or over the phone on private lines.

Ensure that any draft statements have written client approval so they can be used at short notice—especially important if the crisis occurs out of office hours.

Once a statement has been created for a specific issue, the next step is to get written approval from the necessary parties, particularly legal representatives. Save these statements in a Word document (rather than email) and include details in the Word document of who requested the statement and when.

Once a journalist has requested a statement, keep a constant look out for any mention of your organisation in the corresponding publication and immediately share any coverage with key people.

3. FOLLOWING AN INCIDENT

It's essential that you determine the potential damage after an incident and use it as a way of improving on the way crisis communications are managed in the future. After every media incident, consider whether it could have been handled better, or whether any of the processes can be improved.

➔ For more on Magenta's crisis communications expertise, see our **Crisis Communications Proposal 2023**

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