

Playbook: Leadership Communications

Volume 1: Public Relations and Crisis Preparedness



Introduction

In the era of Facebook and Twitter, people demand constant information in a real-time, easy-to-use package. Government leaders are held to especially high standards as public safety and fiscal health are often at stake. For most agencies, this means leading outreach through multiple communication channels – voicemail, text, email, social media, websites and news media – in order to effectively reach everyone in the community, wherever they may be, in a matter of minutes.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

7 Steps to Crisis Communications

A crisis can happen at any time. From an unexpected storm or wildfire, to a public health outbreak or safety hazard, local governments, big and small, must have a go-to crisis communications plan in place and at the ready. Make sure your plan includes these 7 critical steps:

- 1. Identify potential threats and build out the likely scenarios** – Consider all the potential risks in your area and establish varying levels of crisis response protocol, such as warning, caution, hazard and severe. Anticipate what your community’s reaction will be to each scenario and create a timeline that provides a step-by-step guide of how you should respond in those circumstances.
- 2. Determine the roles and responsibilities of your team members** – Designate an internal Crisis Management Team to make important operational and communication decisions in the event of a threat. This team should include emergency management personnel, city management, public information officers and administrative staff to field calls and provide support. Next, identify your external communications team, including third-party allies, such as Blackboard Connect and Edelman public relations, as well as back-up resources, including neighboring police and fire departments and Emergency Medical Services to be on call and help you react quickly and effectively. Don’t forget

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR SPOKESPERSON(S)



Select your spokesperson based on the best combination of:

- Communications skills
- Experience with the media
- The ability to stay calm under pressure
- Expertise
- Thorough knowledge of the local government and its issues
- Expertise and authority

to set up email and notification distribution lists so you can reach internal and external support groups instantly. It’s also important to regularly update and distribute a contact information sheet to all team members.

- 3. Identify your audiences and the most effective way to reach them** – Consider who you’ll need to reach in an urgent situation. Identify the various groups within your community, including disabled or elderly citizens with special needs and households with possible language barriers. Determine what communication channels are the best ways to quickly and efficiently deliver tailored information to each individual. Another

audience to consider is the local media. Maintain a current list of media contacts to store in your mass notification service and standard files. This will ensure all media are prepared to receive alerts and updates, and help to relay that information to the community.

4. **Designate a single point of contact** – Designate a credible authority to serve as the definitive spokesperson in an emergency. This may be your mayor or emergency communications director, who can quickly assess the situation and communicate with key stakeholders, including the public, media and other agencies. The spokesperson should consistently relay and update the status of a situation, safety instructions to the public, and

TOP 5 COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE

1. Identify yourself and the agency you're calling on behalf of
2. State the reason why you're calling and note the current date
3. Provide clear and succinct instructions to get community members to safety
4. Explain what other measures your agency is taking to resolve the situation
5. Let your audience know when they can expect to hear from you again and how they can get more information (via website, community meeting, etc.)

BEST PRACTICES FOR SPOKESPEOPLE

All spokespersons should participate in a media training program at least once a year and use the following techniques:

- ▶ Express humanity and **show concern for anyone affected**.
- ▶ **Be prepared** by taking the time to understand the issues that will be covered, questions that will be asked and what messages you want to communicate.
- ▶ **Take charge** and be proactive in delivering your messages.
- ▶ **State the most important facts first**.
- ▶ **Be consistent** in your communication to all audiences.
- ▶ **Speak from the public's interest** and consider the concerns of the audience you are addressing.
- ▶ **Always tell the truth**, but don't speculate.
- ▶ **Emphasize the positive** and explain what actions are being made to correct the situation or prevent it from happening again.
- ▶ **Use simple sentences** and avoid technical terms and acronyms.
- ▶ **Bridge** if you're asked a challenging question. That is, address the question quickly and then build a verbal bridge to the messages you want to communicate.

Notes of Caution:

- ▶ **Avoid** using any negative words or phrases.
- ▶ Always **stay in control** of your emotions.
- ▶ Stay **on the record at all times** with a reporter. Be mindful that everything you say is OK to be published or broadcast – you're NEVER off the record with a reporter – even if the reporter says it's off the record.
- ▶ Discuss and acknowledge **only what you know**.
- ▶ **Avoid speculation** about anything, especially about the cause or contributing factors of the crisis.

updates on what is being done to resolve the situation fairly and compassionately while preserving integrity and reputation.

Use your spokesperson to proactively communicate with residents about community events and other important news before a crisis strikes. This will help instill the trust and credibility of this single point of contact, or “voice” in times of need. But remember, it’s also important to train additional staff members so there is always a backup in case your spokesperson is unavailable. Also, consider hiring a third-party public relations firm or consultant to give communications advice that is honest and unbiased.

5. Develop sample messages in advance and determine approval process – Based on the potential crisis scenarios you outline, create and save approved template messages. In most cases, this will allow you to get a message out to the community and show your immediate responsiveness. You can then craft and send tailored messages, specific to the situation at hand, as soon as you

have more information.

Prepare sample scripts, talking points and template media materials ahead of time. Having these approved materials on hand for each potential scenario will make it easy to quickly update with specific details and get the information out.

- 6. Develop backups and contingency plans** – Assign a backup for each communication task, in case communication networks are disrupted, key officials and staff members are unavailable, or resources may be in use or unable to lend support.
- 7. Ensure the crisis management plan is accessible to each team member from any location** – Ensure that each member of the Crisis Management Team has access to the most updated crisis management plan from wherever they are located. All team members should have a hard copy and access to the plan on your Intranet, and a version should be saved on your local government’s hard drive. Team members should also save the plan on their desktops and on their smart phones to allow them to access it digitally if needed.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Build Relationships, Educate and Coordinate with Key Stakeholders in Advance

By creating relationships with various stakeholder groups in advance, you can help instill confidence in your local government. These relationships are important, as stakeholders can help disseminate news and events throughout the community.

Remember that the same information may not be appropriate for all of your stakeholders, so consider what is most important and relevant to each distinct audience.

Building and maintaining good relationships with your local media will make it much easier to disseminate information quickly, in times of need. Each news outlet and reporter operates differently. Understanding these

nuances and establishing trust and familiarity with each reporter will serve you well.

POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- Community business leaders
- Faith community leaders
- Multicultural organization representatives
- Regional elected officials
- Regional public works and utilities officials
- Government leaders of neighboring municipalities
- Local reporters

TOP 4 TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEDIA

1.

Familiarize yourself with each outlet and its reporters.

2.

Reach out to reporters in advance, let them know you're a resource and that they're a critical part of your crisis outreach.

3.

Provide reporters with relevant updates so that you stay in the forefront of their minds as an information resource.

4.

Consider adding media outlets and reporters as contacts in your contact database and creating a custom contact group called "Local Media".

SOCIAL MEDIA

Utilize and Cultivate a Social Media Strategy in Advance

According to the Pew Research Center, adults rely heavily on the Internet for immediate news and updates, and approximately half of Americans use social networks. Many of your community members utilize social media to keep up to date, which is why it's important for you to use it too.

If your local government doesn't currently operate social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, consider your local community demographics to

determine if it would be an added value to your residents. You can identify which channels would be most helpful by looking at other community groups, such as a chamber of commerce, community center, schools, libraries or nongovernmental organization, to see how many community members are involved on their social media channels. It's likely you have similar audiences.

Once you've activated any social media accounts, work to build a network and provide your community with valuable, relevant information, establishing these social media networks as a reliable resource for your residents.

SOCIAL MEDIA BEST PRACTICES

- ▶ "Friend" or "follow" your stakeholders on Facebook and/or Twitter, including reporters and local elected officials
- ▶ Designate a limited number of people who can post on your social media channels for consistency
- ▶ Outline a calendar for your social media posts, which serves as a guide for providing a consistent content schedule
- ▶ In your posts, always link to additional information or resources when possible
- ▶ Include links to your social media channels in your online communications, such as websites and e-newsletters, so they're easily accessible for residents

TRAINING

Conduct Routine Trainings and Crisis Simulation Workshops

It's extremely important to conducting frequent trainings and crisis drills to keep your team ready and informed, especially if you experience personnel or resource changes, or if your community is steadily growing or changing. These trainings should run through primary and backup protocols and team member responsibilities step-by-step. Conducting timely exercises, (i.e., tornado preparation before summer or winter weather training in the fall) will keep emergency

response team members up to date and fresh on your crisis protocols.

It's best to test your mass notification system at regular intervals throughout the year. A quarterly test can be sent to just one or two people on your internal team, to make sure everything's working properly. An annual or biannual test message should also be sent to the entire community. This can be in the form of a data drive message, encouraging residents to update their contact information; notification of an upcoming town event; or a reminder encouraging the community to develop a disaster preparedness kit and other supplies. Regardless of the topic, this test allows users to measure the success of the message and determine follow-up strategies.

Also, consider publicizing these trainings and the successful outcomes to promote the local government's efforts to enhance preparedness and educate the public about your contingency plans by distributing preparedness kits, supplies and information regarding evacuation routes, and conducting interviews with local media.



UPDATES

Update Your Crisis Management and Communications Plan Regularly

As team members or resources change, or additional crisis situations are identified, it's important that your crisis management and communications plan should be updated accordingly. Once updated, be sure that all team members are aware of the changes, especially if these changes affect their roles. If significant changes are made, take time to train and discuss the updates to ensure that in the event of a crisis, everyone is prepared as possible.



ABOUT

Why a Playbook?

When a natural disaster or other urgent event develops, there isn't much time to plan how your city or county will react, and even less time to communicate these actions to a concerned public.

The Blackboard Connect™ Playbooks for Local and State Government series provides you with a blueprint for how to communicate with constituents before, during, and after such events.

EDELMAN

Edelman is the world's largest independent public relations firm, with wholly owned offices in 60 cities and 4,000 employees worldwide. Edelman provides crisis communications support to hundreds of clients around the globe – from worldwide product recalls, to natural and manmade disasters, including severe storm recovery and restoration. In a crisis situation, Edelman is available to provide strategic support and guidance to Blackboard Connect clients, and with offices across the US and around the globe, can quickly deploy round-the-clock support to help develop draft talking points, issue statements and monitor the situation, enabling clients to focus on safety and recovery efforts.

BLACKBOARD CONNECT FOR GOVERNMENT

Blackboard Connect has been the go-to mass notification service provider for local communities and has proven its reliability time and again during tornadoes and severe storms. With Weather Alerts from Blackboard Connect, Emergency Management Personnel can send severe-weather notifications from the National Weather Service/ NOAA directly to citizens. Messages can be sent automatically to all constituents, or targeted to reach predefined groups, via phone, email or SMS, providing you with quicker message delivery and increased public safety.

The Blackboard Connect platform allows officials to send thousands of messages in minutes, requires no additional hardware, and can be used from any computer with Internet access or telephone. This ensures that administrators can send vital messages from wherever they are located—even if they are evacuated. Additionally, officials receive detailed reports on contacts that did not receive a message, enabling them to follow up through alternative means as needed.

Ask your Blackboard representative about additional Playbooks, containing communication strategies and information to use when responding to other types of emergencies.

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