

Crisis Communication Priorities and Protocols

Even if you have recognized the need for crisis communication planning and developed your plan, you may find implementation challenging when you are in the midst of a crisis.

What Are Your Communication Objectives? Your communication objectives are to maintain credibility, demonstrate transparency, and preserve your reputation (or brand) by doing the right thing. You may also have regulatory requirements to meet. You need to be first with the news, but not before your objectives — and your messages — are clear for your communication team. Accept that determining the facts may be a challenge. Your goal is to avoid speculation and stick to the known facts.

Crisis Information Distribution Checklist (In Order of Priority)

When you are ready to get the news out, here is the order of priority we recommend as best practice for the distribution of agreed-upon information and messages. (This works for good news too, but it's particularly critical with bad news/crisis communications):

- 1. Board or governing body (Be clear about when the information will be public and what must be kept confidential until then.)
- 2. All employees (Be clear about when the information will be public, what must be kept confidential until then, and where front-line staff can find reference information.)
- 3. Background information/talking points/FAQs/release/landing pages on website (May not be 'published' yet, but it is available to internal audiences for reference. This is often step #1 if information is complex or nuanced.)
- 4. Key government officials — this is for both private and public sector organizations, and includes local, state, and federal levels as appropriate, e.g., Selectboard, Congressional delegation, etc., depending on the situation. Be clear about when the information will be public. (You will usually want to notify government officials by phone, sometimes email is ok.)
- 5. Prep and schedule social media posts with links to your new website pages. Begin intensive monitoring.
- 6. The following steps are often all-but-simultaneous, but if that's not possible, then the order is important because now you are going 'public' and as a member of one of your audiences, how I receive your message will depend on when/how/from whom I receive the message. (Note steps #7 and #8 can be reversed in order, based on industry and situation.)
- 7. Key suppliers, dealers/distributors and partners (via email or phone) These folks only come first if customers are likely to contact them.
- 8. B2B customers (via email or phone) If email, link to website page just for them.
- 9. Make website page(s) public, if not already done.
- 10. Potentially affected consumers/customers/students, via email with link to web pages. Follow up with snail mail if necessary or required.
- 11. Distribute a media advisory if a news conference is necessary. If not, send a brief news release, which includes links to your website pages for reference, and simultaneously post social media messages with links to the release on your website, or vice versa. (The media often get Tweets before a news release.)
- 12. Repeat checklist as necessary when substantive new information becomes available.

Note that although the media is eager to get breaking news stories and will help you reach the general public, they must come after your stakeholders in a crisis or emergency situation. No one likes to be surprised at such a time.