



Eye of the Storm

Crisis Communications Planning
in an Uncertain World



In a perfect world,

crisis communications would be a rarely utilized skill for PR professionals—something called upon once in a career, if ever. In the real world, crises of all shapes and sizes pop up frequently, placing communications teams at the center of storms that require a combination of speed, decisiveness, and tactical savvy to navigate successfully and minimize damage.

By nature, crisis communications are a reactive practice. Thankfully, there are several *proactive* steps that can be taken to help streamline your actions in the moment, as crisis situations evolve. In fact, developing a detailed, thoughtful, and flexible plan for managing crises *before* they arise is a critical component of success.

In this e-book, *Eye of the Storm*, we'll explore how to implement a more proactive approach to crisis communications, identifying many of the steps required to craft a strategic plan that can weather even the toughest media storms. Along the way, we'll also delve into how the modern communications landscape shapes the crises PR professionals face; explore some of today's most common scenarios; and identify what tools and tactics can help companies to thrive in the high-pressure environment that these situations create.



A Constantly Moving Target

Modern communications are a challenge in the best of times, with new channels, technologies and platforms being introduced seemingly every day. On top of that, audiences demand more transparency and responsibility from brands than ever before, offering equal opportunity for companies to form a deeper connection with consumers *and* a greater chance of making a misstep that leads to backlash. This new state of constant flux is made even more challenging when facing a crisis, when every word and second can mean the difference between a minor hiccup and a “cancel culture” catastrophe.

Surviving in this world of change requires higher levels of leadership agility, no matter how rapidly the waters change. Below is a look at four of the key factors that define the modern world of communications.



**AN EVER-EVOLVING
LANDSCAPE**

**AN UNCERTAIN
PRESENT AND FUTURE**

**OMNICHANNEL
COMMUNICATIONS
ARE TABLE STAKES**

Thanks to the explosion of social and digital media, the modern news cycle moves fast ... very fast. [4.5 BILLION](#) people now use social media (that's more than half the world!), and digital news reporters are often required to churn out multiple stories every single day. With all that noise, a negative story can both appear and explode within minutes, spinning out of control before a company even has the chance to respond or take action. Staying on top of this volatile cycle requires companies to keep eyes and ears open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

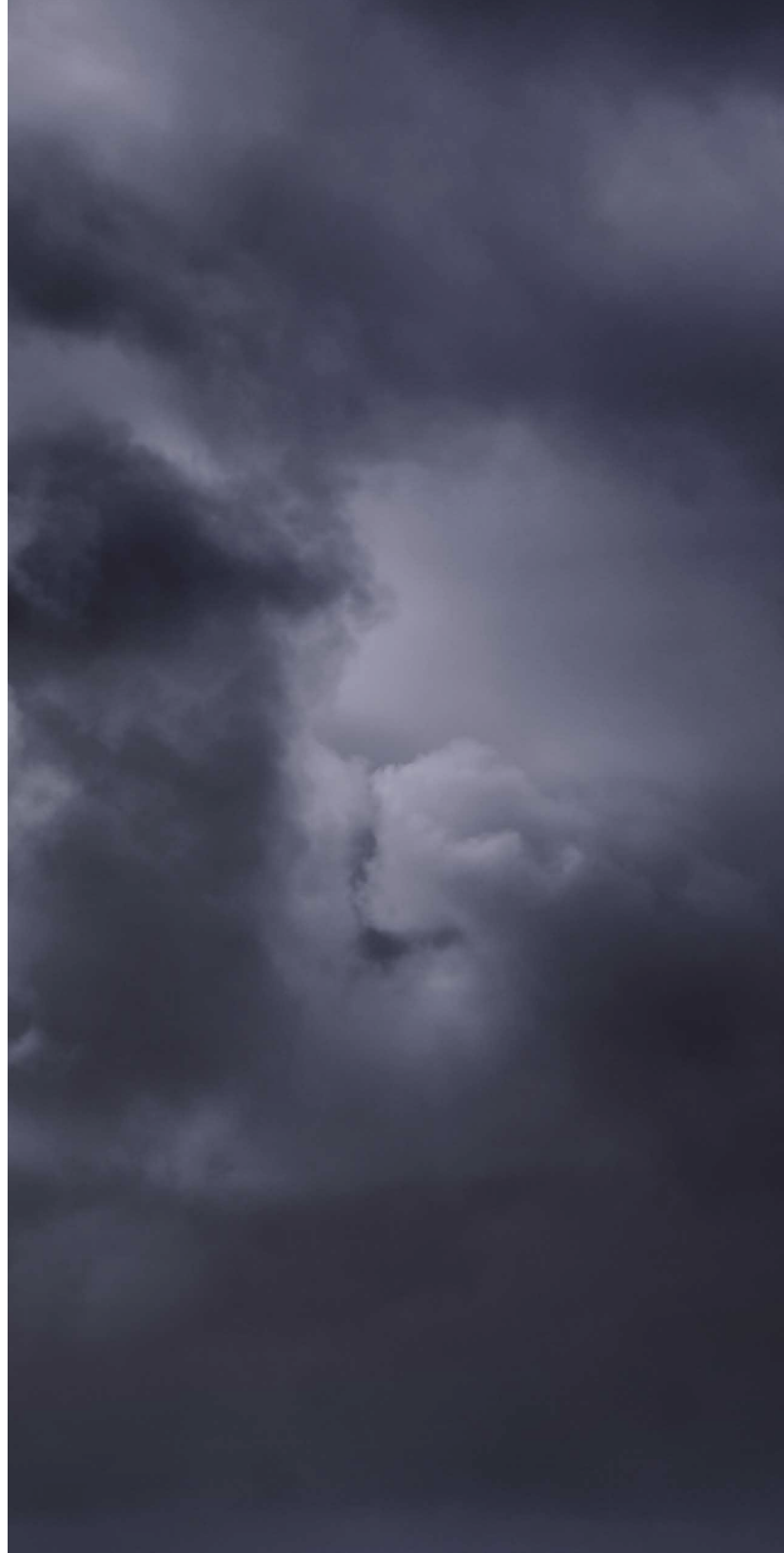
With all of that volatility comes a heavy amount of uncertainty. In our fast-paced world, companies (and the PR pros who represent them) are expected to make immediate decisions and share them widely. Each of these choices and the communications that follow are made with limited knowledge of how the market will receive them and what the future holds. The very best communications functions understand that having and using data is the best way to handle this uncertainty. Gathering and leveraging information from customer sentiment surveys, industry research, competitor audits and more to make the most informed decisions possible is a must—now and into the future.

Long gone are the days of making major company announcements via a standard press release and packed news conference. Today, communications—especially in a crisis—need to span across owned, earned, paid and shared media to reach consumers where they live. From Facebook and Twitter to investor emails, company blog posts to executive appearances on the evening news, PR pros need to have their key messages nailed down and be comfortable translating them to the dozens of channels at their fingertips ... and fast.

Know What You're Up Against

To survive in this world of change, PR pros need to actively engage with uncertainty, accepting that volatility is a given, increasing their agility and developing a proactive strategy that provides structure when problems do arrive.

The first step to building a crisis communications strategy is understanding what types of challenges may lay ahead. Of course, specific crises will change from company to company and industry to industry, but most will be caused by similar challenges and fall into common scenarios. Based on a combination of our research and conversations with professionals in the field, here are five increasingly common crisis communications scenarios.





1

REAL-TIME COMMUNICATIONS

The corporations of today are expected to be in constant, real-time communication with the world around them. This responsibility largely applies to social media, where engaging via a growing and changing mix of channels has proven to be a major challenge for communicators.

The leading platforms—e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.—have taken on so much importance for consumers that the content contained within them is often given the same weight as what’s published by major news organizations. This weight, combined with the opportunity to speak directly to an audience rather than through an intermediary, offers an incredible opportunity. Unfortunately, it’s also a powder keg for negative or unwanted attention.

Whether from a dissatisfied customer, testy former employee or run-of-the-mill internet troll, communicators need to be prepared to respond clearly and decisively when negative sentiment rears its head on social media. If you don’t have one already, creating a clearly crafted, executive-approved set of responses to the most likely negative posts should be at the top of your list.



2

FAKE CONTENT

Not to be confused with the political accusations of “fake news” that have become so common that they’ve lost most meaning, fake content is a very real problem that PR pros may need to manage.

Much has been made in recent years of [the rise of “deepfakes,”](#) technology that uses machine learning software to process recordings of a prominent person, then generate eerily realistic video/audio of that celebrity, politician or executive saying and doing things that they never actually did. The focus so far has primarily been on the potential impact of deepfakes on the political world (what if, for instance, someone released a deepfake of a Senator admitting to a crime or indiscretion they didn’t commit), but the technology could just as easily be used to create trouble for prominent executives.



3

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Unfortunately, workplace violence is one of the most common crisis situations faced by modern businesses, with these incidents cutting across every industry and impacting organizations large and small. According to international consulting firm [TAL Global](#), more than two million people are affected directly by workplace violence each year, leading to an annual cost to businesses of more than \$130 billion.

Communications professionals need to be involved in each phase of the organization’s advance planning for how to deal with a potential incident. This includes doing everything possible to prevent them from happening in the first place, developing internal escalation protocols at the first sign of trouble and crafting specific action steps and communications strategies in the event of a crisis.



4

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Since 2019, the world has placed a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion, giving a greater voice to minority groups in the workplace and placing business leaders under greater scrutiny for how they engage with those communities.

Recent movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have fueled a significant amount of anger over mistreatment of women and minorities in the workplace. These conversations have earned many prominent business leaders unwanted attention in recent years, with [record numbers of CEO's being ousted for bad behavior](#).

To help avoid these issues, communications teams should push for organization-wide cultural awareness and sensitivity training, as well as work with leadership to introduce initiatives that promote a more diverse workplace. Additionally, PR pros need to ensure that executives are well drilled on the do's and don'ts of engaging in these important conversations.



5

CYBERSECURITY INCIDENTS

Cybersecurity is a growing concern for businesses, with criminals enlisting an increasingly sophisticated mix of tactics to disrupt organizations. According to Gartner, businesses spent more than \$123 billion on security in 2020; that [figure could grow](#) to \$170.4 billion by 2022.

These incidents are a major danger for communications professionals because they often involve the theft of personally identifiable data and financial information, leading to an erosion of trust and major backlash across traditional and social media. PR teams need to have specific protocols in place to ensure a measured response to data breaches, respecting the organization's regulatory compliance duties, legal obligations, and reputation management objectives.

Charting a Plan

Good crisis communications strategy isn't about developing a perfect roadmap; it's about putting plans and clearly defined steps in place that allow you to react decisively in the moment and adjust quickly as issues evolve. Below are a few concrete steps your organization can take to prepare for future crises.





PREDICT THE PROBLEMS

While PR professionals can't predict *exactly* what the next major crises will be, you can use a combination of research and industry analysis to identify the most likely issues to arise. (Hint: start with those outlined above). Conducting an audit of the crisis situations similar organizations and/or competitors have faced is an excellent way to identify potential future problems for yourself.



START WITH STRATEGY

Once you've identified your most likely issues, a strategic response strategy should be developed for each. This starts by asking what problem you're trying to solve, then developing a step-by-step plan for achieving that. These plans should include not only the external communications tactics you'll deploy (social media posts, executive interviews, etc.), but also how decisions are conveyed to executives and employees internally. And don't forget to establish a clear chain of approvals so that decisions can be made as quickly as possible in the moment.



LEVERAGE YOUR DATA

As mentioned earlier, access to quality, unbiased data is one of your most powerful tools for making informed decisions and minimizing damage during a crisis. Remember, not all data analyses are created equal—you should always include context and insights that are meaningful to your audience, not just numbers. Having the right measurement and monitoring tools in place, such as Nexis Newsdesk®, allows you to quickly access the right information to inform your crisis response.



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Understanding your core audiences is critical to successfully executing a crisis communications plan in real-time. Who are they? What drives them? The answers to these questions should inform all your messaging. You should also understand which channels are the best for communicating to each audience. A crisis centering on investors may require different tactics than one that is more consumer-facing, and vice versa.



KNOW YOUR VALUE

Because of the tumultuous nature of modern communications, PR professionals are more important now than ever. The rise and ongoing complications of the COVID-19 pandemic have proven this out in a major way. This should be used as an opportunity to encourage your organization to develop a crisis communications plan, update it regularly, and ensure that key executives are familiar with it and ready to engage meaningfully in decisions made in the moment.

The crisis comms checklist

Sometimes knowing where to start can be the most challenging aspect of developing a crisis communications plan. This checklist provides you with five tasks to tackle in the next six months, as well as a quick tip to ensure you're heading in the right direction.



TASK TO TACKLE

1

Review your strategic communications plan to ensure that all ongoing efforts are aligned with the strategy.

2

Conduct a thorough audit of your social and traditional media monitoring and measurement systems. Look for bias and adjust accordingly.

3

Reevaluate your audiences, their needs and their behaviors. Mine their comments on social and traditional media channels to better understand their viewpoints.

4

Align with your C-Suite and internal stakeholders on one unified message related to current crises impacting your organization.

5

Engage in active listening and use what you learn to deliver meaningful, actionable insights to your stakeholders and to inform future iterations of your crisis plan.

TOP TIP



Remember to ask, "What is the problem we're trying to solve?" for the short and long-term health of your organization.

Look beyond your priority media list. Keep your search criteria as broad as possible to avoid narrowing your data filters.

Conduct an informal survey or focus group to ensure your messages still resonate with your audiences' views and values.

Go further by providing data insights and guidance to manage your organization's reputation, highlighting what your audiences want and need.

Consider circulating a short, weekly or monthly data digest to keep stakeholders informed and make real-time adjustments to your plan.

The graphic on the left side of the page is a complex, symmetrical circuit board pattern. It features a central circular area containing a laptop icon. The laptop screen shows two interlocking teal gears. From this central circle, a dense network of thin, dark blue lines radiates outwards, resembling a circuit board or a neural network. These lines are punctuated by small teal circles at various intervals, creating a sense of connectivity and digital flow. The overall design is clean and modern, emphasizing technology and communication.

Have the Right Tools

Professional communicators have a lot to wrap their heads around when it comes to crisis communications *and* their day-to-day efforts. Thankfully, powerful new analytics tools and media intelligence solutions have emerged to help you better prepare for future crises and manage them in the moment. Some of these tools are descriptive (backward-looking), others are predictive (forward-looking) and the most innovative are prescriptive (what to do to achieve a specific result).

These new tools, which include a variety of digital toolkits that provide template plans, crisis assessment charts, crisis messaging maps and crisis communications team descriptions, can help you understand each potential challenge and guide you through fundamental planning exercises and organizational goal setting needed to handle them.

Keeping a finger on the pulse of the media is also important. The Nexis Media Intelligence Suite provides communications professionals with real-time media monitoring and analytics tools that enable you to search, analyze and share developing news, market intelligence and other information. In addition, personalized alerts can be created to ensure that your communications and leadership teams are aware of up-to-the-moment news and social media content updates in real time.

As the world of communications continues to evolve at an incredible pace—with new channels and technologies rising to prominence each year—the fundamentals of sound crisis communications remain the same. **Plan. Monitor. React. Adapt.**

Moving forward, crisis communications will continue to be an incredibly important and highly valued part of the work handled by PR and comms professionals—and for good reason. It's a challenging task that requires a deft combination of strategic planning and in-the-moment agility. Navigating from the eye of a storm to safer waters during a crisis isn't for the faint of heart, but it is both necessary and critical to the success of every organization.

The Nexis Solutions team is here to help PR and comms teams get access to the information they need to support business decisions and thrive under the pressure of a crisis. To schedule a free trial of our crisis planning, media monitoring or social listening solutions, reach out to us at

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