CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS HANDBOOK

DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL

Table of Contents

Introduction

Dear Member,

We are pleased to present this Crisis Communications Handbook for destination organizations. This resource has been developed by communications experts as a tool for preparing your team to manage a potential crisis in your destination.

Throughout these pages you will find information and resources to guide you through the process of creating a plan for how your organization can speak to audiences both internally and externally in the event of a crisis.

Every destination is unique, and every crisis is different. We hope you find this handbook helpful as a guide to preparing and managing communications when the inevitable crisis hits. Please do not hesitate to call on us if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Don Welsh
President and CEO
Destinations International

Crisis
Communications

Crisis Communications Planning

OVERVIEW

Every organization should be prepared for a crisis. Having a plan to utilize when something rises to the level of a crisis offers a blueprint for action that is essential to:

- Ensure clear, accurate and timely dissemination of information to audiences.

- Promote safety by informing audiences about any existing hazards and what they should or should not do.

- Build trust by promoting transparency and honesty with stakeholders and audiences.

- Enable decision makers to make more rapid and informed decisions.

- Minimize rumors and disinformation.

- Reduce uncertainty and panic through transparent communication to provide facts, offer reassurance and minimize fear.

- Safeguard brand reputation and enhance a destination's image – and an organization's reputation as transparent, responsible and well-managed.

A crisis communication plan is essential to ensuring an organization is prepared and able to respond quickly in an organized and effective way. In the event of a crisis, a written plan serves as a guide for conducting communications both within the organization and with external stakeholders, as well as to the media, and provides step-by-step guidelines for how to address a variety of crisis scenarios through timely, coordinated communications.

The following are essential elements of a crisis communications plan.

PURPOSE

Events that may elicit a crisis communications response can vary widely from destination to destination and organization to organization. In general, **a crisis can be defined as a sudden, unforeseen and often disruptive event or series of events that has the potential to negatively impact an organization, brand or destination**. In a tourism context, a crisis could involve a serious issue within an organization or an external incident that jeopardizes health and safety and/or could potentially impact the flow of visitors to a destination.

A crisis has the potential to impact the safety and well-being of both visitors and residents, as well as cause long-term harm to the reputation of an organization and/or destination. As a first step, it is essential for an organization to identify who is responsible for determining when an issue or incident rises to the level of a "crisis," the responsibilities of individual key team members in responding, and the role of others (e.g. law enforcement, public agencies, etc.). This will help ensure a smooth, coordinated and effective response.

Crisis Communications Planning

OBJECTIVES

Crisis communications plans are designed to assess potential risks and proactively prepare for and provide accurate, clear and timely information in the event of a crisis. The goal is to ensure health and safety, protect brand reputation, control false narratives and provide an effective response in critical situations by ensuring timely and accurate communications with key audiences. Ultimately, an effective crisis response conveys to stakeholders that the organization and those in it *care*.

PROCEDURES

The responsibility for maintaining, distributing and updating a crisis communications plan should be clearly assigned. Plans should be reviewed annually and updated as necessary (more frequently when required), with specific attention paid to those with responsibilities to manage a crisis and essential contact information.

Every organization should establish a cross-functional Crisis Response Team (CRT) of senior leaders responsible for crisis planning and response (e.g., executive leadership, operations, finance, technology, human resources, communications, etc.). The CRT should include the organization's most senior communications leader, as well as, when appropriate, other members of the communications team (e.g., those responsible for social media monitoring and posting). Everyone in the organization should be familiar with who is on this team and their responsibilities. It also is essential to establish in advance how the CRT will communicate with each other (e.g. Teams channel, email alias, text chain or other methods).

It is ultimately the role of the CRT leader to determine when the crisis communications plan is to be activated. If it is unclear whether a crisis has occurred, CRT members should be consulted to help decide whether the incident requires a crisis response.

CRISIS SCENARIOS

Every organization should identify a list of potential high impact events that it would consider a crisis and prepare an outline for each that includes a checklist of response steps, a list of key audiences, draft holding statements and communications priorities. Potential crisis situations may include:

- Natural disasters
- Social and political unrest
- Acts of violence or terrorism
- Health crises
- Accidents or safety incidents
- Service or technical failures
- Personnel or financial issues
- Problematic brand partnerships, sponsorships or events
- Pending litigation
- Labor issues
- Issues stemming from social media/customer service issues

For each crisis, it is important to determine the role of the organization. For example, there are crises where the local authorities will take the lead and the organization plays a supporting role (e.g., natural disasters, acts of violence or terrorism) and others where the organization must take the lead (e.g., pending litigation, personnel or financial issues). Clearly defining and understanding ahead of time the role of the organization in communicating during a crisis reduces the risk of confusion and delay in responding.

Crisis Communications Planning

RESPONSE

In anticipation of potential disruption to normal business activities, it is important that the crisis communications plan consider contingencies for a crisis command center location. In selecting a location, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- A safe and secure location

- A location with reliable land lines as well as internet access

- A location that provides easy access for those who will staff the center

The plan also should take into account the various stakeholders and audiences that will need to be kept informed. Depending on the crisis, key audiences may include:

- Destination executives

- Employees

- Board of Directors

- Key community stakeholders

- Law enforcement personnel

- Media – traditional & social

- Travel industry or business stakeholders

- Customers (e.g., meeting clients, travel industry sales clients, general leisure travelers, etc.)

- Public officials

A staff member should be designated in advance as the primary contact for each key audience, as should the means of communication to be used to reach each audience. For example, is there a staff text system or a way to alert staff outside of the office? Can visitors be alerted through website updates or email communications? Should information be provided to local media or hotels to reach visitors? Consider which means of communication are needed

to ensure these audiences are reached, including multiple languages when appropriate.

Designated spokespersons should be identified in advance. Anyone serving in this capacity should be a senior level executive or communications lead and fully trained and briefed prior to any incident. Periodic training and rehearsal are strongly recommended. No individual should speak on behalf of a destination without the approval of the CRT.

MEDIA BRIEFING LOCATIONS

If media briefings are needed, they should take place in a secure area away from any incident. If there is a physical incident, access by the media to the site should only take place after the situation has been resolved and the area has been deemed safe. Potential locations for media briefings should be identified in advance when possible. It is also possible to consider virtual briefings.

SAMPLE STATEMENTS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Templates of holding statements for each type of crisis identified in the plan should be included in the plan and cover a variety of communications platforms, including email, social media posts and website content. When dealing with the media, the following guidelines are recommended:

- Make a spokesperson available to communicate frequently with the media.

- Double-check all information before making it public.

- Coordinate statements and information with spokespersons from other organizations such as police, fire, emergency response organizations, hotels, etc.

- Immediately correct false or misleading information.

- Repeat key messages.

- Always be completely factual and truthful.

Crisis Communications Planning

- If you do not know the answer, say so and that you will get back with the appropriate information. Controlling false narratives during a crisis is crucial.

- Track all media inquiries.

- Prepare statements in advance and have them approved by the CRT.

- Respond as positively and accurately as possible.

SOCIAL MEDIA
Social media is an important tool to disseminate accurate information directly to stakeholders, monitor public sentiment and identify and correct misinformation. The communications team should closely monitor social media as well as ensure an accurate and effective approach to timing and content of the organization's own posts. In a crisis, scheduled social media programs and posts should be evaluated and paused if appropriate. Depending on the crisis, posts might share a destination status update or direct people to other sources for current information (e.g. government or other websites).

POST-CRISIS EVALUATION
Once a crisis has been resolved, the CRT should complete a post-crisis evaluation while the information is still fresh. Considerations should include:

- Was the crisis communications response handled effectively? What steps could be taken to ensure a more effective response to a future crisis?

- Was a public statement necessary to state the resolution? If so, was it made in a timely way and via channels that reached intended audiences?

- Were the proper agencies notified in a timely manner?

- Was the incident and resolution documented for future reference?

- Were changes implemented to minimize or prevent a recurrence of the incident?

- Was reasonable medical, financial and emotional support extended to personnel affected by the incident?

TRAINING AND SIMULATIONS
Regular training programs are crucial for equipping the CRT, including the communications team, with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle various crisis scenarios. These programs aim to familiarize those who have assigned responsibilities with the crisis communications plan, roles and responsibilities, and effective communication techniques.

- Training Programs: Ensure regular training for the crisis team and staff, including those who will be involved in managing communications.

- Simulations and Drills: Conduct regular crisis simulations or desktop exercises to test and improve the plan.

- Evaluation and Feedback: Assess performance after drills and update the plan accordingly if needed.

Crisis Response & Protocols

When a crisis occurs, having a clear and well-defined initial response checklist is crucial for effectively managing the situation and minimizing its impact. The checklist below provides a step-by-step guide to immediate actions that an organization should take when a crisis occurs, including a suggested timeline to ensure timely and efficient response.

Action	Time Line	Description	Owner	Completed
Notify & Activate Crisis Team	Immediate	Immediately notify all members of the Crisis Response Team (CRT) using pre-established communication channels (e.g., group chat, email, phone). Activate the CRT, including designating a meeting point (physical or virtual) for initial coordination.		
Gather Information	Immediate	Collect all available information regarding the crisis from reliable sources with time stamps (internal and external).		
Assess the Situation	Immediate	Document the situation, including time, date, source of information, and initial assessment.		
Establish Communication Channels	Immediate	Set up secure communication channels for the CRT to ensure information flows efficiently. Ensure all team members are aware of and can access these channels.		
Pause Social Media	Immediate	Assess and, unless deemed essential, temporarily pause all scheduled social media posts and paid media campaigns to prevent insensitive or irrelevant content from being published.		
Pause All Media & Marketing	Immediate	Assess and, unless deemed essential, ensure all newsletters, advertising and paid media are temporarily paused to prevent insensitive or irrelevant content from being published.		
Set Up Media Monitoring	Within 30 minutes to 1 hour	Begin monitoring news outlets, social media platforms, and other communication and media coverage.		
Set Up Social Media Monitoring	Within 30 minutes to 1 hour	Set up social listening with relevant keywords, topics and hashtags. Keep a close eye on comments and direct messages to stay on top of the narrative and hide anything inappropriate.		

Crisis Response Protocols (cont.)

Action	Time Line	Description	Owner	Completed
Draft Holding Statement	Within 60 to 90 minutes	Prepare a brief initial statement acknowledging the crisis and expressing concern or commitment to resolving the situation.		
Deploy Statement	Within 1-2 hours	Release the approved holding statement through appropriate channels.		
Inform & Coordinate with Stakeholders	Within 1-2 hours	Inform key stakeholders (e.g., local officials, tourism partners, staff) about the crisis and the initial response actions. Provide them with the holding statement and any additional talking points or instructions.		
Monitor & Evaluate	Within 1-2 hours	Continuously monitor the situation, media coverage and public sentiment. Evaluate the effectiveness of the initial response and adjust strategies as needed.		

Crisis Communications Worksheet

Crisis Overview

What are the details of the crisis?

....
....
....

Information Gathering

What information is needed and from whom?

....
....
....

Key Contact

Who is the primary communications contact for the Crisis Response Team (CRT)? What other members of the communications team need to be involved and what are their roles?

....
....
....

Technology & Communication

What technology will be used to maintain information flow?

....
....
....

Crisis Communications Worksheet

Crisis Awareness

Who else knows about the crisis at this point in time?

....

....

....

Community Stakeholders

What assistance is needed from Crisis Response Team (CRT) for other

community stakeholders?

....

....

....

Impact Assessment

Who is likely to be directly impacted?

....

....

....

Media Coverage

What information is currently in the media?

....

....

....

Crisis Communications Worksheet

Media Channels

What channels are the media using?

....

....

....

Content Management

Are there any proactive campaigns, social media posts or pitches planned or in progress that need to be stopped, paused, etc., due to the crisis?

....

....

....

Misinformation

Are there any rumors or misinformation currently circulating that need to be addressed?

....

....

....

Public Updates

What communication channels (e.g., social media or other) will be used to provide updates to stakeholders and key audiences?

....

....

....

Social Listening During a Crisis

Social listening involves monitoring digital conversations to understand what is being said about your organization, industry or the crisis itself. It helps gauge public sentiment, identify misinformation and monitor evolving narratives. The following steps offer a guide to ensuring social listening during a crisis.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY KEY KEYWORDS AND PHRASES

- Include crisis-related terms: Set up keyword tracking for terms related to the crisis (e.g., "[Destination] emergency," "Visit [Destination] response," "[Destination] flooding").

- Monitor related hashtags: Track relevant hashtags being used in discussions about the crisis (#[Destination]Strong, #[Destination]Updates).

- Track influencers and key accounts: Monitor mentions and posts from local influencers, journalists and key stakeholders who may influence public opinion.

STEP 2: SET UP ALERTS

- Configure alerts for specific keywords, phrases and mentions to get real-time updates on the crisis as it unfolds. This ensures immediate awareness of any significant conversations or developments.

STEP 3: MONITOR SENTIMENT AND VOLUME

- Analyze sentiment: Regularly assess the overall sentiment (positive, negative, neutral) of conversations to understand public perception and adjust communication strategies accordingly.

- Track volume and peaks: Monitor the volume of mentions to identify any spikes in conversation, which could indicate new developments or increased activity or interest.

STEP 4: IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS MISINFORMATION

- Detect false information and rumors quickly: Use social listening to identify misinformation or rumors circulating on social media and other online platforms.

- Correct misinformation promptly: Provide clear and factual information to correct misinformation. Share links to official sources and updates to reinforce credibility.

STEP 5: REPORT INSIGHTS TO CRISIS TEAM

- Provide regular updates: Provide the CRT with regular updates on social media sentiment, key conversations and any emerging issues.

- Adjust strategy based on feedback: Use the insights gathered from social listening to adjust your communication strategies, address concerns and manage the narrative.

Crisis Communications Plan Checklist

KEY AUDIENCES

Employees

Board of Directors

Community Stakeholders

Law Enforcement Personnel

Media

Travel Industry Stakeholders

Customers

Public Officials

Residents

Destination Stakeholders

COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS

Proactive or Reactive

Press Release

Meetings/Phone Calls

Media Interviews

Email Blast

Social Media Posts

Crisis Communications Worksheet

Audience	Key Messages [Top 2–3 points tailored to this group]	Tactics/Channels [e.g., Email, Town Hall, Slack, Intranet]	Timing [e.g., Immediate / 24 hrs]	Responsible Party [e.g. Communications lead, PR lead, HR lead]	Status [Top 2–3 points tailored to this group]
[e.g., Employees]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed
[e.g., Media]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed
[e.g., Local Government]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed
[e.g., Board of Directors]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed
[e.g., Partners/ Shareholders]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed
[e.g., Public Visitors]					Not Started In Progress Sent Confirmed

SUPPORTING NOTES

- **Key Messages:** Limit to 2–3 clear, factual, consistent points per audience.
- **Tactics:** Choose channels based on trust, urgency and effectiveness for each audience.
- **Responsible Party:** One owner per audience, responsible for execution and follow-up.
- **Status Tracking:** Use checkboxes or color highlights to monitor progress.

Crisis Communications Holding Statement Templates

INCIDENT TALKING POINTS

This is what we can confirm at this time:

- Today, there was an emergency incident at XXX.

- We are working with local authorities and emergency agencies to assess the situation and ensure the area is safe.

- We are evaluating the situation to determine if there are any injuries and if there is any continued risk.

- We will continue to provide updates as they are available.

EMPLOYEE EMERGENCY INCIDENT

- We do not disclose confidential personnel information.

- We have been informed XXX was involved in an incident at XXX.

- Authorities have informed us that (incident details that are public information).

- The incident is under investigation and we are monitoring the facts as they become available.

- We will provide updates as they become available.

SOCIAL MEDIA INCIDENT POSTS

Update on [Event Name]

[City/Destination] is currently addressing [brief situation summary]. Visitors are encouraged to follow [agency/authority] for the latest information: [URL].

We will continue to share updates here.

#StaySafe #[DestinationName]

WEBSITE HOMEPAGE POST

"[Destination Organization] is actively engaged in responding to [crisis description]. We are in close contact with our local partners and emergency officials to ensure coordinated efforts. We encourage visitors to stay informed through official channels. For media inquiries, please contact [Name, Email, Phone]."

EMAIL COMMUNICATION

Dear XXX,

We want to keep you informed regarding [brief description of the event]. Here's what we know:

- [Key fact 1]
- [Key fact 2]
- [Safety or travel impact notes]

Our team is [action being taken], and we're coordinating with [agencies]. Please use the following link to access our latest updates and official messaging toolkit: [link].

Thank you for your continued support and partnership.

Best,

[Name]

[Title]

DESTINATION THREAT

What we can confirm at this time:

- Today, we were made aware of XXX.
- Local, state and federal authorities are working to determine the severity of the XXX.
- We are cooperating with authorities to help determine the appropriate response.
- We will continue to work with XXX and local media to disseminate relevant information.
- The safety of visitors and residents is our top priority.
- We encourage all visitors to remain calm and await further instruction from authorities.
- We will continue to provide updates on the situation and ask for the help of the media in providing information to the public.

TRAVEL INDUSTRY THREAT

- We are closely monitoring the events of XXX.
- XXX is/not expected to impact either our visitors or the local community.
- Visitors and residents planning to travel are encouraged to follow instructions of local, state and federal authorities.

Media Log

Date/Time When the request came in	Media Contact Name Name of the individual reaching out	Media Outlet The news or media organization	Phone/Email Contact details to follow up	Interview Requested	Media Deadline Date by which the outlet needs a response	Request Summary Date by which the outlet needs a response	Information Provided What was sent, shared, or confirmed	Fielded by Person who initially received or responded to the inquiry	Owner of request Person responsible for seeing the request through solution	Status
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info

Media Log (cont.)

Date/Time When the request came in	Media Contact Name Name of the individual reaching out	Media Outlet The news or media organization	Phone/Email Contact details to follow up	Interview Requested	Media Deadline Date by which the outlet needs a response	Request Summary Date by which the outlet needs a response	Information Provided What was sent, shared, or confirmed	Fielded by Person who initially received or responded to the inquiry	Owner of request Person responsible for seeing the request through solution	Status
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info
										Pending In Progress Complete Closed No Response Declined Referred Awaiting Info

DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL

1725 Eye Street NW, Eighth Floor, Washington, DC 20006, USA