

National Association of Chemical Distributors

How to Develop a Crisis Communications Plan

Executive Summary

When written in Chinese the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.”~ John F. Kennedy, in an April 1959 Speech

Does your company have a Crisis Communications Plan? You probably have an Emergency Operations Plan that coordinates police, fire, rescue, paramedics, government agencies, and others that may be involved. Maybe you call it a Crisis Plan. You probably have a Business Continuity Plan to maintain cash flow and services while you get your business up and running again in the event of a disaster. But do you have a Crisis Communications Plan that gives easy-to-follow directives for communicating with the media, to your employees and their families, your customers, suppliers, and the community?

This document tells you how to develop a thorough, yet simple Crisis Communications Plan that tells you what to say, when to say it, and what tools to use.

As communicators, we have the ability to save lives. Powerful communications before a crisis and rapid communications during a crisis has the ability to move people out of harms' way.
– Gerard Braud, Braud Communications

The Responsible Distribution ProcessSM is designed to provide a system that promotes continuous improvement in the EHS&S performance of all member companies. It is also designed to be sensitive and responsive to community needs and public concerns. Much of the work required to develop a Crisis Communication Plan has already been done through your efforts to comply with RDP Code VII – Emergency Response & Public Preparedness and Code VIII – Community Outreach.

How to Develop a Crisis Communications Plan

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What is a Crisis Communications Plan?

- A simple step-by-step plan that tells you what to say, when to say it, and which tools to use to communicate.
- Make it SIMPLE. Keeping it simple will allow you or anyone else to follow the Plan in the stressful, emergency situation. Official spokespersons should be appointed well in advance, but imagine that you and your crisis team cannot reach the facility – say the wind is blowing a chemical cloud over the highway you or your VP needs to drive on to reach your facility. Make the Plan simple to follow.
- Create your Crisis Communications Plan on “a sunny day” before any crisis occurs.
- Do NOT include your policy & procedures manual in this document! A Plan with action, not policy, speeds communication.

Other plans to have:

- Emergency Plan – coordinates policy, fire, EMS, and rescue.
- Business Continuity Plan – Outline for how your business will resume operations and remain profitable.

Crisis Communications Team

- Your crisis communication team is the group of people who will participate in communicating about the crisis and will also work to identify potential disasters that could happen at your facility and determine ways to respond to them. The team should include senior-level executives, especially the CEO, and key people in operations, marketing, finance, legal, and public relations/communications.
- Leadership can be the biggest problem if they don't buy into creating a Crisis Communication Plan. The CEO must be involved.
- Create your crisis communications team – develop a complete calling tree
- Name 4-5 people to your crisis team. Include the:
 - CEO
 - VP Communications or Director
 - VP Operations
 - Security Chief
 - Legal or HR department

- Include additional support contacts on your phone list:
 - Consultants or agencies to call for help
 - Off-duty employees
 - Police, Fire, and Rescue, media contacts
 - Vendors – catering company / tents for media, etc.

Elements of a Plan

Writing a Plan – Allow 200-500 hours to create your Plan.

Getting started – gather your crisis team for brainstorming

- Imagine what could go wrong. Ask yourself what keeps you up at night?
- Think – Sudden crisis, i.e. explosion, or a smoldering crisis, i.e. theft, drugs, etc.
- Conduct a full vulnerability assessment of each potential crisis.
 - Imagine you are in the crisis – and write simple, step-by-step directions (Execute page 1 then turn to page 2; Execute page 2 then turn to page 3).
 - Collect who, what, when, why, and how.
 - The Plan itself should emphasize What to do and be so simple that anyone can pick it up and execute it because it tells them What to do and when to do it.
 - Create a template for each scenario you come up with. Example: On a sheet of paper make four columns – (1) Crisis (2) those to be Notified (3) contact numbers and (4) action items. While that form is still blank, make a lot of copies of it.
- Develop a notification system – include employees, stakeholders, and the local media. For your crisis team, list all phone numbers, e-mails, PDAs, Blackberries, etc. Consider contracting a vendor or purchasing a rapid dial technology program that will allow immediate communication with all parties. Contact all employees to let them know about the crisis and if and when they should report to work. Alert your neighbors to the nature of the emergency.
- Decide who should be authorized to speak on behalf of the company. The CEO should be one of these people, but possibly someone else is simply a better communicator. Have a backup. Instruct all other employees to direct reporters to the proper authority.
- Your crisis communication team should receive training on how to deal with the media before a crisis situation occurs, the sooner the better. Hold another session after your practice drill. Repeat once a year.
- Review the Plan with all employees.
- Hold drills to practice your Plan and determine weaknesses.

An effective message is straight forward and honest, not vague

- Be prepared to give your 1st Critical Statement to the media within first hour of a crisis
 - Create a generic template
 - Fill in the blanks with basic information only – what you know at the time, and promise additional information at a specific time. Read your statement. Example: “Last night there was an explosion at our ____ facility. There are two injured employees. We do not yet know the cause of the explosion. We realize you want more information, and we’ll be back in about one hour to provide an update. In the meantime,

please bear with us.” Then turn and leave/exit the area. This indicates competence and a willingness to be open.

- In one hour, go public with live news conference, then send e-mails, post special Web site, text messages, etc.

You have 3 goals at this time:

- 1) To be forthcoming with information as quickly as possible.
- 2) To maintain safety.
- 3) To resume operations.

Pre-written statements

- 95% can be pre-written on a “sunny day” prior to any crisis.
- Your vulnerability assessment identified potential crisis situations.
- You’ve created a template for each potential crisis event.
- Include three major points you want your audience to remember, such as:
 - You are concerned about the people involved and the environment.
 - Your staff reacted promptly according to a pre-arranged plan.
 - You are cooperating with the appropriate authorities.
- Your Plan has been approved in advance by your crisis team and legal department.
- You can communicate with speed – to save lives and spread truth.
- Use a large font (at least a 14 font) for ease of reading.

Message must address:

- Danger to life & limb – explain impact on families, children, and pets.
- Explain consequences for failing to act – impact on shelter, water & food, and livelihood.
- Give known facts.
- Give projected business/other disruptions.
- Offer anticipated hardships.
- Damage recover estimates (length of time)
- Don’t use industry jargon.
- Explain your chemicals in simple, positive terms; relate them to the everyday world.

Tools to use

In order for your Crisis Communications to be effective requires a wide variety of tools in addition to an effective Crisis Communication Plan. Your Plan must include a one-hour communications mandate, but address the media before you go public on Web site, etc.

Communication tools available include:

- Media to get the message to the masses (although less dependent on that now)
- Reverse 911 system where the police dials the area homes around your facility
- E-mail – might not be fast enough
- Cell phones and text messaging – use to get the accurate message out
- Web site – a key posting spot for up-to-date information
- Create an Internet mirror site (back up) off-site prior to crisis

- Think about not having use of your computers, printers, telephones, faxes, e-mail, or Web site. What will be your method of communication? Have a contingency plan – think about what will not work without electricity to determine replacements and alternatives.

Hold drills

- Table top vs live action – consider both, but live practice drills allow you to test that your procedures really work. Simulate various crisis scenarios and see if everyone knows what to do, if they coordinate as a team, if communication breaks down. Active role-playing exercises will challenge certain assumptions and clarify points that need to be strengthened.
- Include media role playing using employees or ex-reporters.
- Include telephone inputs – test switchboard and routing of calls.
- Evaluations – self critique your drills with your group.
- Hold post-drill media training sessions.

Keep copies of your Crisis Communications Plan in our office, your car, and your home.

Update sections of your Crisis Communications Plan on a monthly basis

- Phone tree of crisis team with home telephone numbers, cell phone numbers, e-mail addresses, etc. Add new members of the team.
- Include new technology – cell phones, beepers, PDAs, Blackberries, etc.
- Other key contacts' cell phone numbers, e-mail addresses, home telephone numbers, etc., including employees, suppliers, customers, and neighbors. Keep your local media contact list current – check for accuracy at least every four to six months.
- Add new potential crisis scenarios/templates as appropriate.

Details for developing a schedule to write your Crisis Communication Plan

Start now. Block out the required hours on calendars. Allow 200-500 hours to create your Plan.

- Plan on at least 25 hours to conduct the vulnerability assessments – may be 50 or more hours.
- Plan 5 hours for each scenario you consider.
- Plan on 100 or more hours to write the Plan.
- Update the Plan monthly.
- Test the Plan every 6 months.
- Hold a drill and media training once a year.

Cost of creating a Crisis Communication Plan

- Consultant fees for helping you create a Plan will range from \$25,000 - \$100,000.
- If you think that's a lot – calculate the cost of a single wrongful death law suit.
- Establish a case for life and safety – rapid communication could have saved 29 lives at Virginia Tech.

Quick Review

Develop a Schedule

Write the Plan

Update it Monthly

Test it Every 6 Months

What to do if you have an emergency

- 1) Give one person the responsibility to speak to the press – owner/CEO best, if possible. Do not let just any employee talk to reporters. This should be decided and announced prior to emergency, if possible.
- 2) Communicate to the press within 1 hour of the emergency, i.e. talk to those at the site/send out an e-mail.
 - a. Give basic information – what you know at the time (injuries, cause, etc.) and promise to provide additional information as you get it.
 - b. Feel comfortable reading a prepared statement.
 - c. Be willing to openly explain what happened, but only the basic information – “This morning there was an explosion at our facility on the corner of....”
- 3) Hold a news conference at the top of the 2nd hour.
- 4) Keep all communication simple and honest; be straightforward, do not be vague; never lie.
- 5) Admit if you do not know the answer to a question and promise to get back to them within a defined timeframe with the answer – “We realize you want more information, and I’ll be back in about an hour. In the meantime, please bear with us.” Then turn and exit. Follow through an hour later.
- 6) Quick & honest communication will create a sense of confidence.
- 7) Control the flow of accurate information via e-mails, cell phones, Web site, text messaging, i.e. spread the truth faster than lies & rumors (but address media first).
- 8) Focus your communications on your #1 target audience – your employees and the surrounding neighborhood.
- 9) Call, depending on level of emergency:
 - a. Consultant or agencies for help
 - b. Off-duty employees
 - c. Police, fire, emergency
 - d. Vendors -- catering for food/drinks for everyone on site, tents for media

Dealing with Reporters

Figure out how to coordinate procedures

- You don’t want any reporters’ questions or interview requests to get lost. Remember that if you’re not talking to them, they will find someone else to talk to. On that sunny day, decide the following and update regularly:
- Who is the main contact for information, and who’s the backup person?
- Who will conduct media briefings, and who’s the backup person??
- Who will take media calls and handle e-mails? How will they be routed?
- Who is allowed to give out what type of information?
- Who gets to talk to the CEO and when?

During the crisis

- Plan to communicate with the media within the 1st hour with a statement, and then plan to hold a news conference with more details at the top of the 2nd hour.
- Be prepared to explain the chemicals involved in simple terms, explaining the end use product that is easily understood.
- Think through media access and information centralization. If you're hit by a disaster or crisis of major proportions, where are you going to put the media who will want to be close to the action? How much access will you give them to what's going on? Since you're planning in advance, you can't decide definitively how things will be handled in the crisis. But consider what your options are, for example, depending on your situation, you may have a media briefing room or area inside a building, or you may need to provide an area outside to speak, possibly under a tent.

Creating the first statement

- Use a template to create a statement for each scenario. Then, if your crisis communication plan is in place and up to date, you'll be able to assess the situation and prepare a statement in an hour or less. In general, the steps would go like this:
 - Pull out the crisis communication plan. Have multiple copies, laminated, in your home, office, and car. Put your spokespersons on notice that their job is about to begin. If the crisis is one of the potentials you've already identified in your advance crisis-planning process, a lot of your work is done. If not, you'll need to see what usable fact sheets and other resources you have on hand and what additional information you quickly have to gather.
 - Assess the crisis and define the problem. Whoever has the responsibility should start by obtaining as many facts as possible and validating information as thoroughly as is feasible.
 - Determine the specifics—time, date, place, extent of crisis, injuries/deaths, and anything else you can find out. What do you know for sure and what is speculation? Do not speculate to the media. Combine this new information with the background information you have on file to complete the picture. Ideally, you've already developed some key messages as part of your crisis planning; now make any necessary adjustments for the present situation.
 - Make a decision, based on the rate at which information is coming in and the type of crisis, on how often you will update the media—every two hours, three times a day, whatever seems reasonable. Then do it.
- Take every opportunity to deliver the messages you want to get out. Even if you're doing Q&A at a press conference, start by making a statement that contains all the information you want known. It's OK to read your statement. Tell reporters how much time you are allotting for questions and don't go over that limit.
- Although you most likely would rather not have to deal with the media at all during a crisis, keep in mind that they provide you a way to talk to your publics. It's your opportunity to get your message out to all stakeholders and enhance your company's credibility.

- Finally, document everything, if possible. Keep a phone log. Yes, it is a crisis, but try to write everything down. By keeping a record of who said what when, once it's all over you can review and assess the effectiveness of your statements, responses, and decisions. That way you'll be even better prepared when, inevitably, the next crisis comes.

Things to remember when talking to the press

- Demonstrate concern about your employees and people in your neighborhood.
- Explain what is being done to remedy the situation.
- Use everyday language, not jargon, when talking to reporters.
- Provide written materials that give reporters background information.
- Be truthful.
- Don't speculate. If you don't have all the facts, it's better to say, "We're looking into it and will let you know more as soon as we have the facts."
- Do not say "No comment" – it will sound as if you have something to hide.
- Don't go off the record – there is no such thing.
- If you don't know an answer but can get the information, say so. Then make it available at the next briefing.
- Never lose your temper or your cool. It is OK, good, in fact, to show heart-felt emotion and compassion.
- Always assume that all microphones and cameras are on.
- Don't say anything you wouldn't want to see or hear in the print or broadcast news.
- Respect reporters' needs and deadlines.
- Never give exclusive interviews during a crisis. All members of the media should have the chance for gathering information.
- If an injury or death has occurred, do not release the name(s) of the injured/deceased until all next of kin (immediate family) have been notified.
- Do not provide damage estimate, discuss responsibility for the incident, or discuss legal liability in any way.

Resources

Please visit <http://www.nacd.com/resources/resourceCenter.aspx> for a list of resources:

RDP Codes

NACD Members' Suggestions/Lessons Learned

Government Web Sites

Crisis Communications Experts

Articles Published in the *Chemical Distributor*

If you have a good resource to share – a consultant, company, Web site, book, or lessons learned – please e-mail kbaker@nacd.com and your recommendation will be posted on the Web site.

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