Core Strategy Report

What's in this report?

Many organizations fail to plan for crisis situations and find themselves scrambling to respond in the moment of need. Without advance planning, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to react with the speed and precision needed to mitigate damage and serve key stakeholders. For communications leaders, inadequate crisis planning can lead to mistakes that compound the harm caused by the crisis. Crisis planning is a significant undertaking – but one that organizations will be glad they put the time into if a serious event occurs.

In this Core Strategy Report, we outline the steps for developing a comprehensive crisis communications plan that provides the basis for sound decisionmaking during a stressful period. The following specific topics are covered:

Crisis planning and protocols. Identifying and prioritizing key crisis types for preparation, understanding key roles, and developing a detailed process to be used in the event of a crisis.

Messaging and content. Understanding the best way to approach message development and compiling a list of the key content assets that are needed.
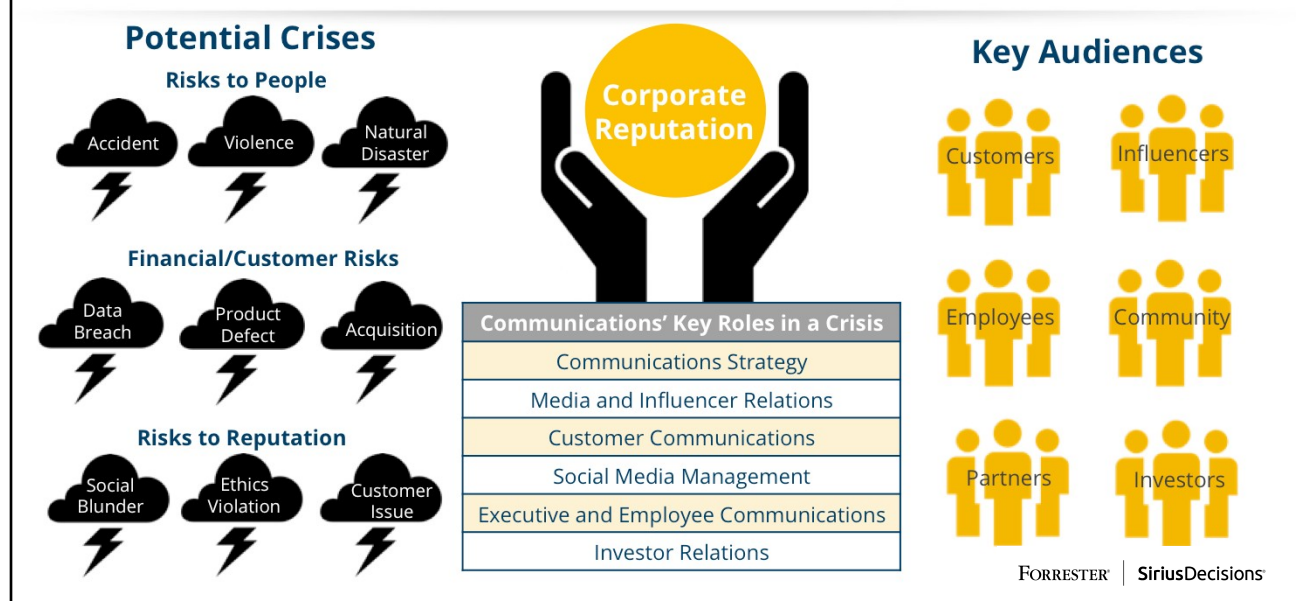
Systems and resources. Understanding what the organization must have in place (technology and infrastructure) to support crisis response.

Key enablers. Best practices and templates to ensure successful execution in a time of significant stress.

Post-crisis recovery. Steps the organization should take to learn from the crisis and rebuild its reputation once the initial response is complete.

Core Strategy Report

The Role of Communications in a Crisis

Potential Crises

Risks to People
- Accident
- Violence
- Natural Disaster

Financial/Customer Risks
- Data Breach
- Product Defect
- Acquisition

Risks to Reputation
- Social Blunder
- Ethics Violation
- Customer Issue

Corporate Reputation

Communications' Key Roles in a Crisis

Communications' Key Roles in a Crisis
Communications Strategy
Media and Influencer Relations
Customer Communications
Social Media Management
Executive and Employee Communications
Investor Relations

Key Audiences
- Customers
- Influencers
- Employees
- Community
- Partners
- Investors

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What's the role of communications in crisis planning?

Crisis planning varies according to company size, maturity, industry, degree of risk and the existence of regulatory requirements. For example, a manufacturing company that operates heavy machinery and handles hazardous materials has a risk profile that's very different from a consulting firm whose employees are not exposed daily to serious physical hazards. A crisis is any scenario that threatens the health of the organization's reputation. In organizations with elevated risks, an emergency response team often leads crisis planning, with communications and marketing leaders playing key supporting roles. In organizations with fewer or less serious risks (and likely fewer regulatory requirements), communications often leads crisis planning. Key areas for planning include:

Communications strategy. What is the message to key audiences, and how will it be conveyed? Communications must develop strategies that balance audience needs with the desire to protect the organization's reputation, while acting as an ethical watchdog to ensure a complete and timely response.

Media and influencer relations. How will the organization field questions from the media and provide information? How will the organization serve the needs of competing media outlets and channels? How will the organization manage a potentially large number of media under difficult conditions?

Customer communications. Consider the impact of the crisis on all customers when formulating a communications plan. Provide personal outreach and the most detailed information to those that will be affected directly.

Social media management. Social media is a valuable channel for communicating directly with external audiences, and social monitoring tools are useful for understanding impact. Dangers lurk within, however – one ill-conceived tweet can turn a minor mess into a major crisis. Often social media may be the source of the crisis.

Executive and employee communications. During a crisis, executives are on the front lines fielding questions from media, employees, customers and government officials. Employees are often affected by crises in very personal ways, and the communications team needs to keep them informed and support their emotional needs.

Investor relations. Investors may suffer serious financial repercussions from a crisis. Investor relations must also ensure that regulatory requirements are met for disclosure and timing.

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The SiriusDecisions Crisis Preparation Framework

Scenario Identification	Role Assignment	Protocol Development	Content Strategy
What it is: • Enterprise-wide process of brainstorming and prioritizing crisis types	**What it is:** • Identification of key roles and designation of individuals fulfilling roles	**What it is:** • Development of detailed process for each crisis scenario	**What it is:** • Inventory of crisis-related content types that are needed
Participants: • Executives, functional and regional leaders, communications, legal	**Participants:** • Executives, functional and regional leaders, communications, legal	**Participants:** • Executives, functional and regional leaders, communications, legal	**Participants:** • Communications, marketing, sales, legal, agencies
Key deliverables: • A list of scenarios prioritized by likelihood and severity	**Key deliverables:** • A list of key roles, requirements and associated individuals	**Key deliverables:** • Detailed process documentation	**Key deliverables:** • A list of documents by scenario, templates and stub content

Infrastructure and Resources

What it is:	Participants:	Key deliverables:
• Systems and supporting resources for managing crisis communications	• Communications, operations, IT, marketing, digital, social	• A plan for physical and technological needs, as well as support resources

What are the steps in crisis preparation?

The Forrester SiriusDecisions Crisis Preparation Framework covers the key aspects of crisis planning, including identifying the high-priority crisis types, critical roles in the event of a crisis, what process will be activated, what content will be needed and what systems/infrastructure will support a response. The framework includes the following phases:

Scenario identification. The crisis plan of every organization reflects the unique set of risks it must consider. This phase involves brainstorming of potential crisis scenarios by a broad cross-functional group. The output is a list of scenarios categorized by themes and prioritized by likelihood and severity.

Role assignment. Identify the key roles for dealing with a crisis (e.g. spokespeople, media relations specialists, monitoring specialists), and designate individuals to fill these roles.
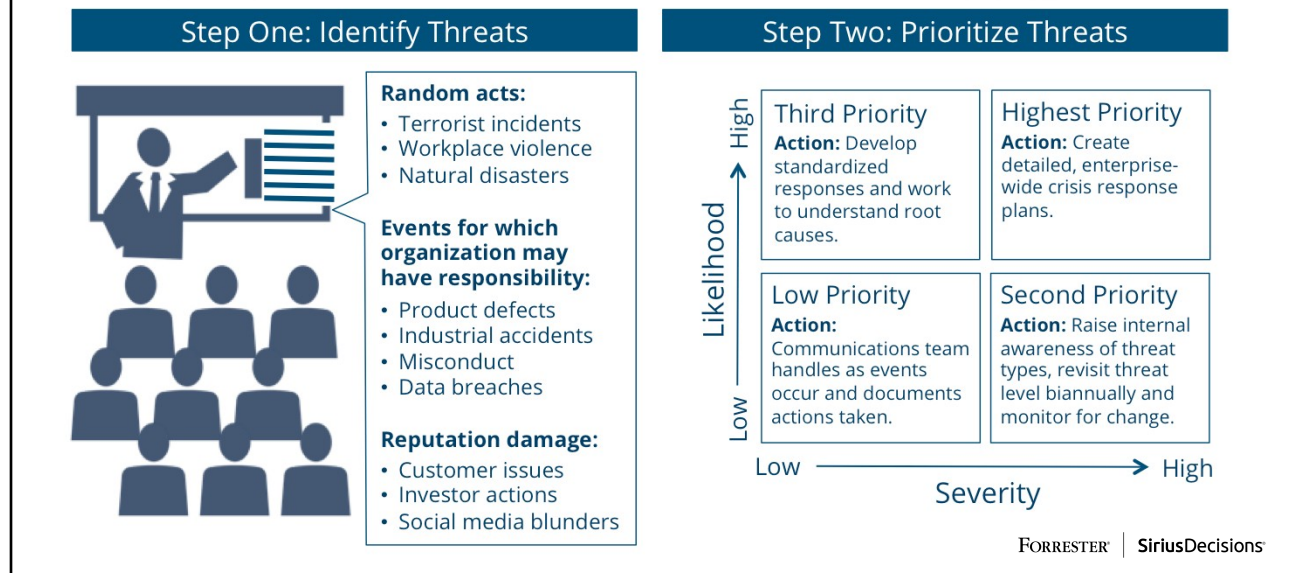
Protocol development. Create a detailed plan of action for each known crisis type. Communications often leads plan development with support from a cross-functional team. Process documentation should be updated regularly and must be accessible in multiple forms for easy access in a time of need.

Content strategy. Understand what messaging and content are needed and how they can be activated to reach key audiences. Where possible, the team should create templates and stub content. Communications leads support this phase with the help of marketing, sales, agencies and legal.

Infrastructure and resources. Think through what is necessary for the communications process in terms of facilities and technological capability (e.g. command center, media briefing area, media monitoring capability, redundant technology systems).

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Scenario Identification

Step One: Identify Threats

Random acts:
- Terrorist incidents
- Workplace violence
- Natural disasters

Events for which organization may have responsibility:
- Product defects
- Industrial accidents
- Misconduct
- Data breaches

Reputation damage:
- Customer issues
- Investor actions
- Social media blunders

Step Two: Prioritize Threats

Third Priority
Action: Develop standardized responses and work to understand root causes.

Highest Priority
Action: Create detailed, enterprise-wide crisis response plans.

Low Priority
Action: Communications team handles as events occur and documents actions taken.

Second Priority
Action: Raise internal awareness of threat types, revisit threat level biannually and monitor for change.

Likelihood (Low–High) / Severity (Low–High)

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What types of crises should organizations prepare for?

Any event or story that threatens an organization's reputation is worthy of crisis planning. Even events that may start out as relatively harmless can snowball into a true crisis quickly in our hyper-connected digital world.

What it is. Scenario identification starts as a workshop or series of workshops to which leaders bring their understanding of business risks to inform a list of potential crises. Some types spring to mind quickly – industrial accidents, terrorist incidents, workplace violence and natural disasters. Secondary events are those that may have devastating effects on customers and the organization's reputation, such as product defects, data breaches or employee misconduct. Also consider the impact of negative business events like layoffs, legal actions or investor actions. Finally, consider events that may not immediately appear serious, but that can have lasting reputation impact, such as customer satisfaction issues aired on social media or revelations of executive misbehavior. Different types of scenarios may exist for different business units or regions.

Once the leaders have developed a master list of crisis scenarios, they prioritize the scenarios according to their severity and likelihood. Severity may include factors such as the type of harm: damage to facilities, injuries or fatalities, environmental impact, financial damage, and service disruption. Consider how widespread the event is – will this affect all employees and customers, or only a few? What is the likely duration of the event – will it cause an extended disruption? Also consider the matter of fault – is the crisis the result of the organization's actions or those of a third party (e.g. supplier, customer, other agents)? Determine likelihood by looking at history or observing what is happening in the market (e.g. data breaches are an increasing risk).

Participants. The communications leader takes charge of the scenario identification phase, involving executives and operational leaders from all parts of the business. For organizations that have retained a crisis communications agency, the agency will lead the exercise.

Key deliverables. The output of this phase is a prioritized list of potential crisis scenarios; larger or complex organizations may have a series of lists aligned to business units or regions.

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Role Assignment

	Executives	Communications Lead	Legal Counsel	Customer Service Lead	Sales Lead	Digital Lead
Primary Responsibilities	Primary spokespeople, decisionmakers and internal leaders	Leads the development of a communications strategy, messaging, content creation and media relations	Advises on legal issues and vets all content	On the front lines for fielding questions and delivering responses	Responsible for managing key customer relationships	Responsible for monitoring tools, Web site preparation and digital channels
Key Requirements	Must be accessible 24/7 and trained for crisis communications	Must coordinate the flow of incoming information and communications to internal and external audiences, including press	Must have the bandwidth to support quick review and approval of outbound communications	Must be equipped with listening tools, messaging and escalation protocols	Needs accurate customer contact data, approved messaging and content	Must be equipped to detect a crisis, monitor change and respond quickly

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What does a crisis response team look like?

Leaders and decisionmakers must be ready at a moment's notice to spring into action when a crisis occurs. Support personnel also provide information and manage a variety of tasks. Because a crisis brings many issues into play simultaneously, roles must be defined clearly and the individuals who fill those roles must understand their responsibilities.

What it is. The role assignment phase of the Crisis Preparation Framework involves identifying the key roles and requirements for the specific crisis scenarios identified in the previous phase. More roles are likely to be defined – and with greater specificity – for higher-priority crisis types. For large-scale crises, the response team may include representatives from nearly all functions and regions. For more localized or limited crises, the team may have fewer participants, or participation may be limited to a region. In addition to identifying specific roles, define the chain of command and interlock between roles so that who is doing what job, who can make decisions about various issues and who is authorized to speak on behalf of the organization is clear. Also specify who will step in if the designee is not available.

Participants. The communications team develops the list of key roles, soliciting input from a wide array of internal stakeholders such as executives, operational leaders, customer service leaders, sales leaders and marketing operations leaders. Many of these individuals may have been part of the cross-functional brainstorming group in scenario identification. When the roles are defined, communications must ensure that individuals who have been chosen to fill these roles are informed and accept their responsibility. Some roles may have requirements such as media/communications training and participation in drills. Individuals filling key roles must supply 24/7 contact information.

Key deliverables. The output of this phase is a master list of key and support roles with detailed descriptions of responsibilities, as well as contact information for individuals identified for these roles, who must be available at all times. For more information on the roles in crisis communications, see the brief "Building the B-to-B Crisis Communications Plan."

Core Strategy Report

Protocol Development

Identification	Notification	Assessment	Strategy	Response
Crisis				
How will this crisis be identified?	Who will be a part of the crisis team? How will we reach these team members?	What is the severity of this crisis?	What factors will affect response – audiences, severity, safety, legal requirements?	Who will craft responses? What channels will we use? What key influencers?

Practice

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What should the organization do in the event of a crisis?

Protocol development is the creation of a detailed plan to be put into action when a crisis occurs. Developing a plan in advance for various types of scenarios can help reduce the chance for missteps and decrease response time.

What it is. The protocol lays out actions to take at each phase of a crisis, including identification, notification, assessment, strategy and response. The identification protocol addresses how the organization will know when a crisis happens – not all crises are obvious in nascent stages. For external events, organizations should map out triggers and escalation paths that will initiate the crisis protocol. The notification protocol defines who needs to know when different types of events have occurred. Organizations must identify the chain of command and notification/alert process for the core and larger team. The assessment protocol identifies who is responsible for assessing the severity of the event and the criteria for determining that severity and potential next steps.
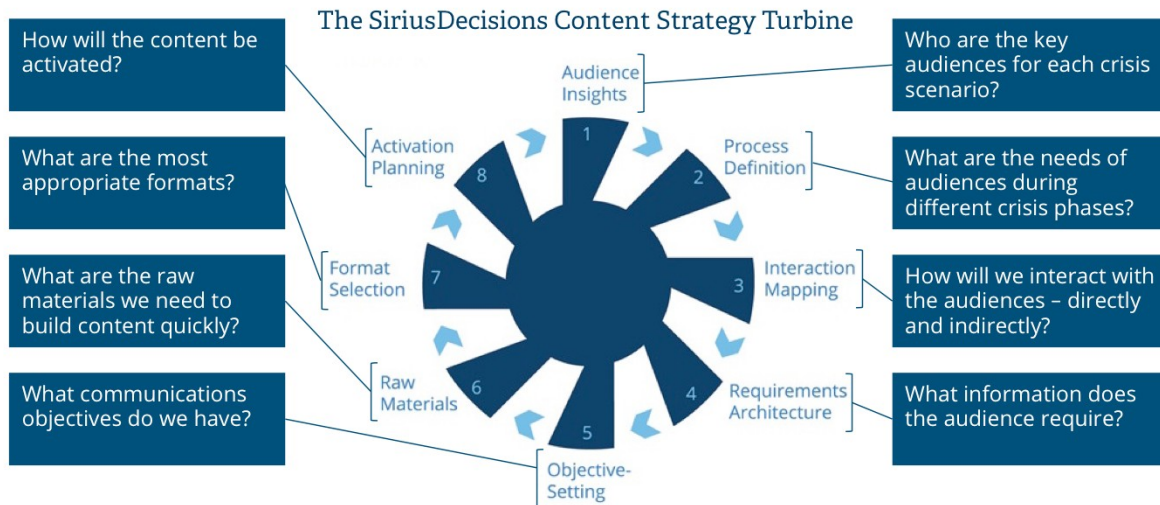
The strategy protocol lays out the actions to be taken on the basis of factors such as severity, fault, legal issues and audiences affected. Strategy development also includes execution elements such as the setup of physical and virtual command center(s), primary and secondary communications channels (internal and external), and other support needs. In developing the response protocol, communications must tailor responses to various audiences, regions, objectives, information needs, content types and available delivery channels. Organizations should create contingency plans if the primary course of action cannot be carried out, and indicate the order of communications if multiple audiences may present an issue. Finally, organizations should engage in various types of practice to help uncover potential weaknesses in the plan and prepare participants to handle the stress of a real event.

Participants. Communications or operations leads development of the protocol with contributions from executives, functional and regional leaders, support functions, and agencies.

Key deliverables. The output of this phase is a set of detailed processes to be used in the event of various crises.

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Content Strategy

The SiriusDecisions Content Strategy Turbine

How will the content be activated?

What are the most appropriate formats?

What are the raw materials we need to build content quickly?

What communications objectives do we have?

Activation Planning — 8
Format Selection — 7
Raw Materials — 6
Objective-Setting — 5
Audience Insights — 1
Process Definition — 2
Interaction Mapping — 3
Requirements Architecture — 4

Who are the key audiences for each crisis scenario?

What are the needs of audiences during different crisis phases?

How will we interact with the audiences – directly and indirectly?

What information does the audience require?

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What content is needed in the event of a crisis?

Content creation is one of the most time-consuming and difficult aspects of crisis response. Anticipating what content is likely to be needed is the first step in creating the conditions for a speedy response.

What it is. The communications team analyzes the types of content necessary to support various types of crisis messaging, as well as the activation paths to be used. The SiriusDecisions Content Strategy Turbine provides a framework that ensures alignment of audience needs, the organization's objectives and content execution (see the brief "The SiriusDecisions Content Strategy Turbine"). Specific messaging stems from an understanding of what happened, what details are known and whether fault can be attributed. Create templates for common types of content and, where possible, stub content. Work with the legal team to set up an expedited vetting process and with the digital and database teams to ensure that content can be activated through the Web site and email. Create a crisis Web site or Web page that remains inactive until it is needed. Also plan for situations in which Internet may be inaccessible (deliver content via text message or paper) and identify vendors for large-scale paper mail response (e.g. to communicate a data breach).
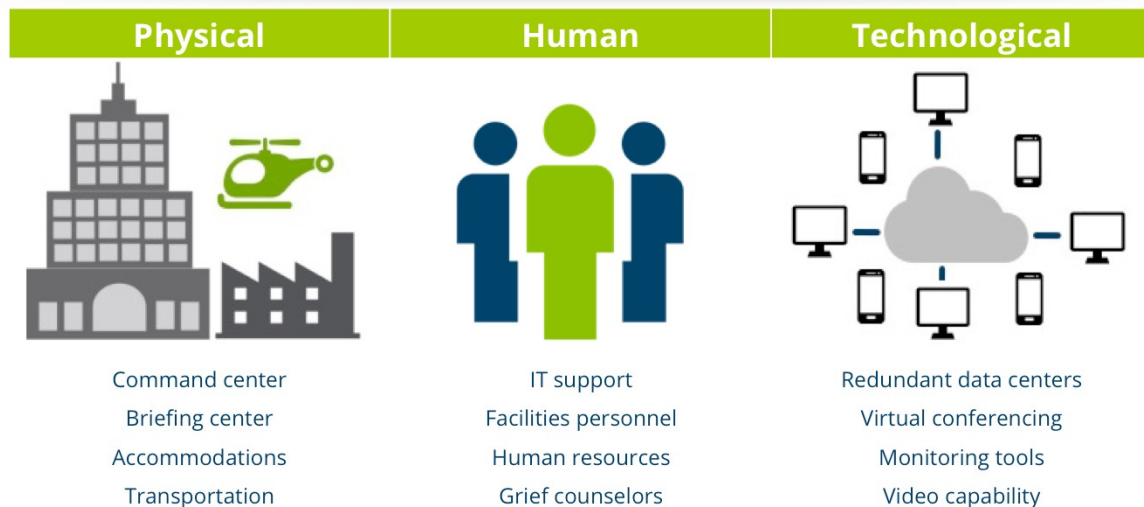
Corporate materials should include several forms of the corporate backgrounder containing executive bios, recent photos, a description of operations and key contacts. Create a holding statement – which can be used until all the facts are known – on the organization's position that acknowledges the crisis without divulging too many unconfirmed details. Develop in advance as many FAQs and talking points as possible, anticipating tough questions from media, customers, employees and other stakeholders. Provide these to customer support and sales, as well as escalation paths, for their use as needed. Plan for delivery of customer communications via digital (e.g. Web site, community, email) and possibly paper, as well as through sales reps (e.g. presentations, scripts). Provide call center employees and receptionists on the front lines with concise answers for phone or chat, as well as what they can offer the customer without additional approval and escalation paths.

Participants. The communications and content teams lead content strategy, with assistance from marketing, product marketing, the digital team and agencies.

Key deliverables. The output of this phase is a checklist of content aligned to scenarios, templates and stub content.

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Infrastructure and Resources

Physical	Human	Technological
Command center	IT support	Redundant data centers
Briefing center	Facilities personnel	Virtual conferencing
Accommodations	Human resources	Monitoring tools
Transportation	Grief counselors	Video capability

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What infrastructure and resources should be in place to address a crisis?

A crisis may create the need to host a large amount of media or maintain a 24/7 command center. Physical facilities, technology and human resources are necessary to support communication.

What it is. The need for various types of physical and technological infrastructure becomes evident during the development of crisis protocols. For example, organizations with multiple manufacturing locations should consider whether to manage a crisis onsite or at a central location. A crisis may also occur at an offsite location (e.g. terrorist incident at a customer event). In all cases, the organization should establish where the main crisis management team will operate – a physical space where decisionmakers can colocate is ideal, but often a virtual command center is needed as well.

If a crisis necessitates hosting a large amount of media and possibly families, consider the needs of the crisis team that may be onsite for long hours – how will meals be provided? Will sleeping accommodations and showers be available? While maintaining such facilities in many locations is not practical, the planning team can identify local hotels that may be used to support an extended crisis or host media briefings. Finally, ensure the organization has sufficient support staff to manage communications operations (e.g. Web site, social channels, monitoring tools).

Participants. The communications and operations teams lead this phase, with participation from IT, marketing, and digital and social teams.

Key deliverables. The output of this phase is a plan for physical and technological needs, as well as support staff requirements.

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Key Enabler: Practice, Practice, Practice

Tabletop Exercise	Crisis Simulation
Purpose: Discuss what the response to a specific scenario would look like with key stakeholders in the process	**Purpose:** Test preparedness for a potential crisis under realistic crisis conditions

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How can the organization improve performance in a crisis?

Because crises happen unexpectedly and often involve a large number of unknowns, the best preparation for performance under fire is practice drills. Two types of practice are typically used at various points in the development of crisis protocols:

Tabletop exercises. These generally take place in the formative stages of protocol development and involve bringing together key participants in the crisis response team to discuss various aspects of the scenario, potential responses and interdependencies, often under the leadership of a crisis communications agency. The group may be able to cover three to five scenarios in a daylong workshop. This type of practice enables the crisis team to see a variety of perspectives and develop a more realistic and comprehensive plan in later stages. Capture lessons learned from the exercise in a report and use this to inform protocol development.

Crisis simulation. For crisis types that are serious and likely, crisis simulation exercises allow participants to experience the pressures of responding to an evolving crisis in real time. Periodic crisis simulations are often required by law for organizations that have public safety responsibilities. The most realistic simulations involve internal and external participants – including first responders, local governments, community members and media – and a team of observers watching and taking notes so that a comprehensive report can be created. Communications can use simulation as a way to help spokespeople prepare for aggressive, unpredictable questions. Crisis drills for a social media team will help ensure that triggers are detected, appropriate escalations are made and the right response is delivered quickly. Write a post-simulation report that documents which actions in the plan proceeded as expected and which need improvement.

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Key Enabler: Audience Communications Templates

Crisis Type:					
Audience	Information Needs	Emotional Context	Organizational Objective	Content Format Preference	Delivery Channels
Employees (segment)					
Sales (direct)					
Partners					
Suppliers					
Customers (affected, not affected)					
Influencers					
Investors					

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What is the most effective approach to communications planning?

As in other areas of marketing and communications, considering the audience's needs at the start of planning tends to produce the most effective result. This can save valuable time in a crisis by ensuring that communicators are focused on the right audiences and their needs. Understanding the audience's emotional context is critical to creating communications with the right tone and substance. Being clear on what the organization needs to achieve through the communication also helps clarify purpose and message. Use a template like the one shown above to map communications messaging and delivery channels to key audiences. The template contains the following elements:

Audience. Divide the audience into segments with as much granularity as the crisis type warrants. Any segment may be subdivided into audiences that are affected directly and those that are affected indirectly.

Information needs. What is the most important information needed at any point by any audience? This may evolve over the course of the crisis.

Emotional context. Some crises may have deep personal impact, and understanding the likely emotional state of the audience helps shape the tone of communications.

Organizational objective. What does the organization want to achieve or need to communicate? What is the appropriate order of communications?

Content format preference. Knowing the audience's content format preferences in advance can speed creation of the most effective content types.

Delivery channels. Where does the audience go for information in a time of crisis? What are the audience's preferred media outlets or social networks? Who are the influencers with the greatest credibility?

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Key Enabler: The Crisis Dashboard
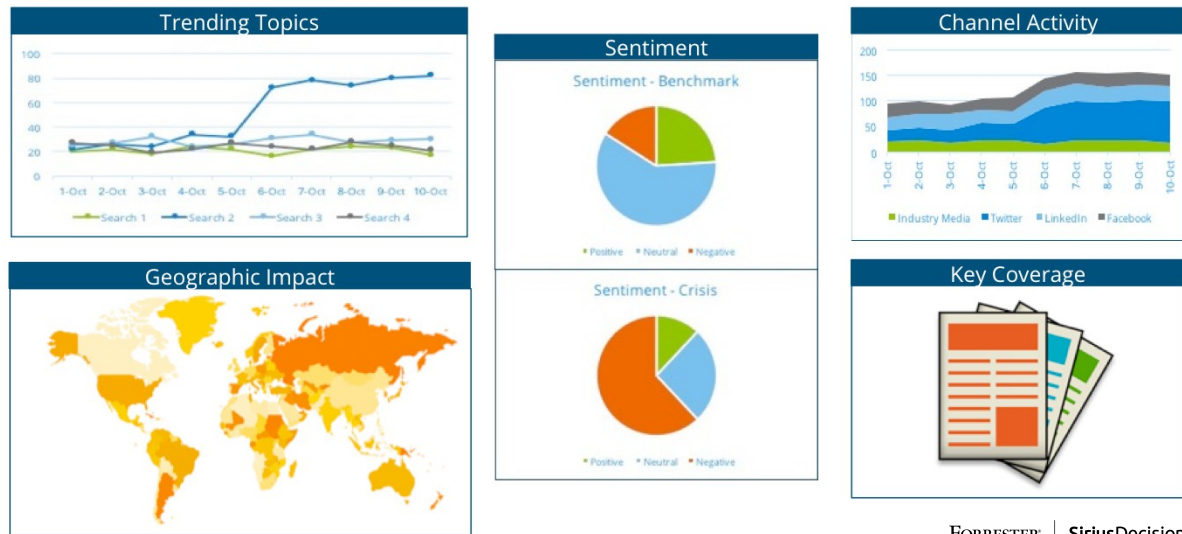
What is the best way to monitor and track audience response?

Communications plays a key role in detecting some crisis types that may not be immediately obvious, such as social media blunders or customer complaints that take on a life of their own. For other crisis types, monitoring is key to developing messaging that addresses audience concerns meaningfully. A crisis dashboard brings reporting on the external response to the internal crisis team. Having a system and people in place before disaster strikes enables the effective use of monitoring tools. If an agency is handling monitoring, include the agency in crisis planning.

Start by understanding the typical brand conversation in traditional and social media (see the brief "Defining and Measuring Share of Voice"). Where does the organization usually receive coverage? What topics are typically associated with the brand? What does sentiment normally look like? This baseline helps the organization detect a crisis and its degree of impact. As the team brainstorms about potential crisis scenarios, it should develop a list of keywords and phrases that may be associated with that type of a crisis. Having preformatted queries can hasten response in the moment of need. Elements of a crisis dashboard could include:

Trending topics and channels. Understanding what is being said and where most of the coverage/conversation is (e.g. publications, channels, influencers) is key to addressing a crisis quickly. Look for sudden spikes in crisis-related keywords. The conversation may be in specific channels for some crises, while for others it may be widespread. Topic reports help the team understand what aspects of the crisis are generating the most intense coverage.
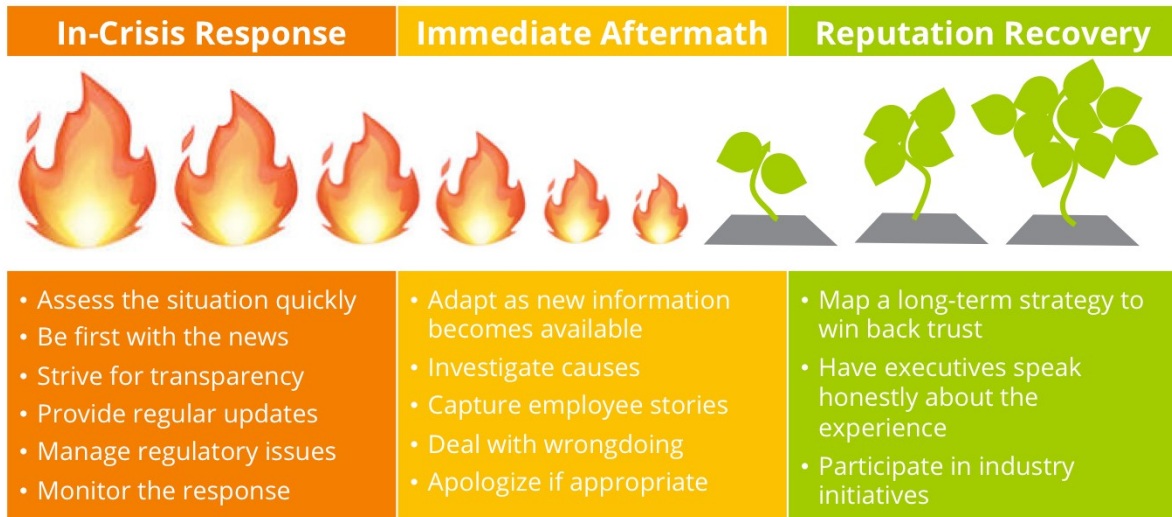
Geographic heat maps. Some crises may be more or less confined to a specific area, but in the digital age, news of a crisis can travel worldwide. Use a geographic heat map to help executives understand how a crisis is spreading across regions to plan appropriate response and resourcing in regions.

Sentiment. A crisis can increase negative sentiment toward an organization – especially if the organization is perceived to be at fault. Tracking changes in sentiment against a baseline can help illuminate how much damage the brand has sustained, which can assist in building a long-term recovery plan.

Key coverage. Share examples of coverage and social media postings to help internal teams understand the full impact of conversations.

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Planning for Post-Crisis Recovery

In-Crisis Response	Immediate Aftermath	Reputation Recovery
• Assess the situation quickly • Be first with the news • Strive for transparency • Provide regular updates • Manage regulatory issues • Monitor the response	• Adapt as new information becomes available • Investigate causes • Capture employee stories • Deal with wrongdoing • Apologize if appropriate	• Map a long-term strategy to win back trust • Have executives speak honestly about the experience • Participate in industry initiatives

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How does the organization rebuild its reputation after a crisis?

How a crisis was handled says a lot about an organization. Use it as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and build deeper trust with audiences.

During a crisis, the communications team has its hands full dealing with rapidly unfolding events and responding to media inquiries. Even during the heat of crisis, however, lay a foundation for post-crisis recovery. As the initial crisis response concludes, the communications team must ensure that no follow-on mistakes exist that compound the crisis. Finally, a long-term plan is needed to restore trust and rebuild reputation. Follow these best practices for transitioning from crisis response to reputation recovery:

In-crisis response. Speed is critical in crisis response. Organizations that are slow to reveal or address a crisis come under suspicion and lose whatever sympathy they may have received. Going public does not require the organization to have every detail. Media on deadline want to know that regular briefings will occur – even if no new information is available. Organizations that strive for truth and transparency are likely to fare better and receive more sympathetic coverage. Understanding audiences' response to the crisis can help shape response strategy.

Immediate aftermath. Sometimes a crisis situation is compounded by communications mistakes that become their own news story. Once the immediate crisis has passed, the organization needs to look for root causes and learn from what worked and what didn't in the crisis response. Coordinate an internal review with members of the crisis response team. Capture stories of employees who went above and beyond the call of duty. Communicate lessons learned from the crisis – e.g. how it made the organization better, stronger or more responsive.

Reputation recovery. Reputation rebuilding is an extended project. Monitor changes in sentiment and conversation and look for signs that reputation is returning to its pre-crisis state. Look for opportunities for leaders to meet with affected audiences to speak honestly about their personal experiences and what they learned. Find ways to get involved in industry initiatives or charitable organizations that address topics related to the crisis.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Don't put off crisis preparation any longer!
- Use the planning process as an opportunity to develop stronger interlock with executives, legal and other functional leaders
- Make sure plans don't sit on a shelf gathering dust – revisit them regularly to update participants, contacts and other information
- Understand legal requirements of various crisis scenarios, and balance legal protection with the need for transparency

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What are some takeaways that I can share with my team?

Not being prepared for a crisis can contribute to the severity of its impact on reputation and people. Sometimes a failure to plan is a result of a too-rosy assessment of the organization's situation, while other times it's a result of simply being too busy. Whatever the reason, failure to engage in crisis planning is irresponsible to stakeholders and investors. If the organization does not have an up-to-date crisis plan, begin work immediately. If the organization's crisis plan has not been updated in a year or more, start a process to review and gather current contact data and other information.

Being prepared for a crisis clearly enables the organization to respond more quickly under pressure, but the process of crisis planning also helps teams develop key skills that organizations can use in almost any kind of dynamic situation that requires a response. This planning is an investment in improving situational agility. Whether the crisis is a truly catastrophic event involving injury or loss of life or simply a competitive attack aired in the media, this type of planning can help ensure a nimble and appropriate response.

Finally, use crisis planning as an opportunity to look at the sources of risk and, where possible, reduce or eliminate them. Many crises stem from known weaknesses. This is a chance to address long-term issues and educate employees on the importance of ethical conduct.