

# How to Respond When Media Covers Your Crisis Without Contacting You

By Mike Rosen

**I**t starts like this: It's Sunday. It's early, very early. Your phone rings, and then dings with a text, both demanding attention. You grab the phone. The voice you hear is your CEO who simply, and loudly, says "We're f\*\*ked."

There's an article, she says, and you quickly go online as your CEO progresses into a swear-o-matic. There, on the front page, above the fold (for those who still hold a paper) is an article with a headline that accuses your organization of several major atrocities. The article is loosely based on actual events. They quote *many* authoritative sources, with one major exception: you.

In my experience, media takes an interest for one of two main motivators:

- Because a real crisis has emerged, and they are sincerely interested in informing their audience about what happened and how it impacts them.
- Or, because a reporter has a very clear

personal agenda with very little interest in allowing facts to get in the way of what they believe will be a great story (or lead to their next award).

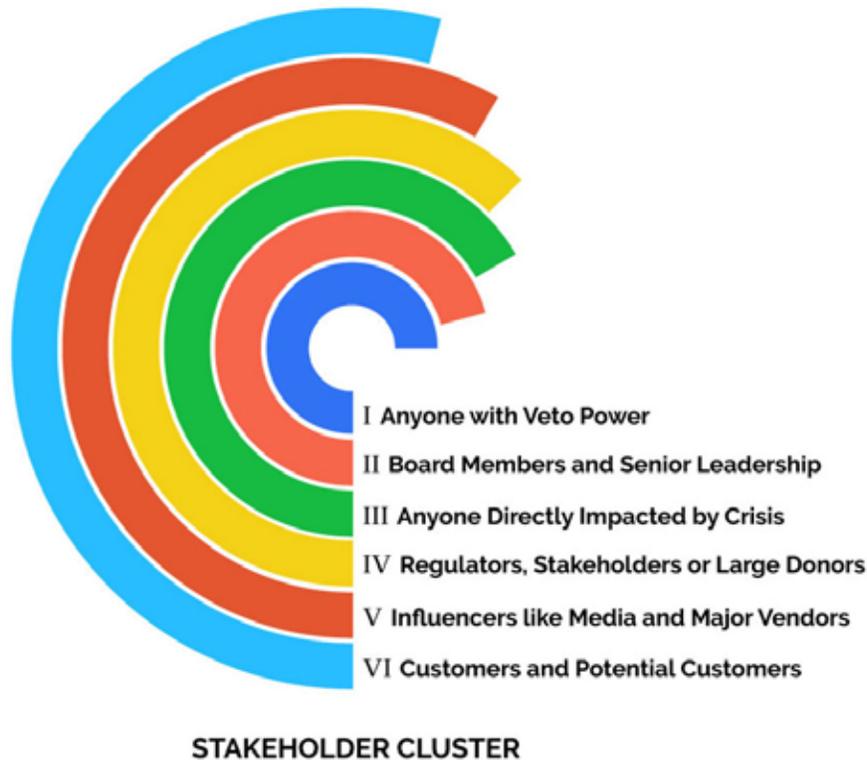
While the second is less common, I have worked with both extremes, from both sides of the microphone. I have worked in news and documentaries prior to transitioning to the agency side.

There are crises that can be anticipated and those that cannot. For example, if you work in the health, construction, or transportation industries, you would be wise to have crisis communications plans in place for events that can result in injury or loss of life.

This article is focused on events that are harder to anticipate and provides insights into structure and response. A crisis, anticipated or not, usually emerges when there is a perceived or real threat against public safety, financial security, or reputation. Frequently, all three are connected.

“ When written in Chinese, the word **CRISIS** is composed of two characters. One represents **DANGER** and the other represents **OPPORTUNITY**. ”





As with many great experiential lessons, the following advice came, for this author, at the price of success, failure, and scars.

Many communications practitioners in times of crisis live by the adage of “Tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth.” And there is value to that. Here are a few guiding principles that have served me well and might be of value to you.

Most situations evolve in real time. Approach each knowing that actions must and will change based on new information, or a changing environment.

In business, as in nature, our instincts immediately deliver four initial options in a crisis: fight (change what is causing it); freeze (do nothing and hope); fluctuate (change how it impacts you); flight (run). Don’t let these instincts drive your decision making.

The way to the head is through the heart. Facts are critical, but 85% of opinion will be influenced by the emotional response you evoke.

Lead decisively even through the maze of changing information and pressure from many stakeholders.

Above all else, do not compromise your values, ethics or empathy.

Before taking any action, I ask myself three questions. 1) What is the worst that can happen? 2) What is the likelihood that it will? 3) What is the severity if it does? The answer to each has helped to inform many of the decisions I need to make when time and/or information is limited.

Immediately deploy tracking tools to monitor traditional and social media. Use metrics such as sources, story placements, impressions, share of voice, tonality and engagement. This will allow you to track how much traction the story is getting using data points for evaluating potential impacts on you.

Deconstruct the article and catalogue each element as fact, fiction or misrepresentation, as well as those that might need more information gathering to understand. For each,

make notes using data that supports your classification. This process will allow you to identify potential strategies and tactics.

Once you have the facts aligned with each of the elements reflected in the article, it is probably a good time to brief the lawyers. There are always significant legal implications to what is said and who says it—if anything is said at all.

It is now time to widen the circle and engage your stakeholders. It can be useful to cluster them, which is helpful in determining what timing and tactics you will use for each.

1. The inner circle should include anyone with veto power.
2. Board members, senior leadership, and those who must deploy decisions and influence others will make up the composition of the second tier.
3. The next tier includes those individuals who have been directly impacted by the crisis.
4. Your fourth tier are those stakeholders who are critical to the success of the organization. These might include regulators, shareholders or large donors.
5. The next tier is comprised of influencers such as the media, and any staff person who comes in direct contact with customer. I include major vendors in this group.
6. Tier six are your customers or potential customers.

The above ranking is not intended to diminish the importance of any single group but rather to reflect an order in which individuals are informed and the level of information which is shared. It is not uncommon for the sharing of information to be done almost concurrently.

And now, it is time to do something. You could:

### Checklist for Reputation Management During Crisis

As we have all observed over and over again, the impact of a crisis on your brand can be significantly influenced by how you handle it. In many cases, it can have an even greater impact than the crisis itself. Think Volkswagen, Wells Fargo, Samsung, Theranos, or Mylan (EpiPen).

I believe that many decisions are also naively made under the false comfort that there is a reliable, slow-paced and predictable news cycle, or that Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat don't factor into the equation. As with all corporate communication, to be effective in times of crisis, practitioners must be agnostic to medium and time. We must use the channels that our audiences prefer, at the times they prefer to use them. Those who follow these simple, common-sense steps have fared significantly better than those who have not.

- Explain in real time what is happening.
- Describe how you are monitoring the situation.
- Describe how you are acquiring information to determine how it happened.
- Share when and how you will provide updates.
- Once you know, describe what did happen.
- Apologize for it happening (If you did it, own it).
- Explain what you are doing to correct what happened.
- Explain what you are doing to prevent it from happening again.
- Share the extra steps you are taking above and beyond to correct and prevent it.

- Do nothing.
- Issue a statement but not do interviews.
- Be available for interviews.
- Utilize trusted third party advocates.

## Potential problem analysis

- 1 Track traditional and social media's tone and volume.
- 2 Deconstruct each article to separate facts from fiction
- 3 Notify and engage legal as dictated by the situation.
- 4 Notify stakeholders.
- 5 Identify options.
- 6 Develop messages.
- 7 Continue to acquire actionable intelligence.

There are times when to do nothing is your best option, and it is an option I frequently recommend. “Do nothing” does not mean you don’t advance any Plan B or Plan C strategies. It means that currently there is nothing you could say that would alter public opinion and the options available to you for messaging, though they might be true and compelling, would not alter the current perception. Or, you believe the story will not escalate or have significant impact if you don’t add fuel to the fire.

Issuing a statement and denying the requests for interviews is valuable when you want to ensure that you maintain as much control as possible in delivering a message while avoiding the reporter using the opportunity to take the discussion in an entirely different direction. However, there is a lot that is also sacrificed. The audience does not get to see or hear the sincerity of the statement from a person of authority and the perception can be that you are avoiding accepting responsi-

bility by avoiding the reporter.

If you make yourself available for interviews, I want to empathize this again: The way to the head is through the heart. Facts are critical. However, there are some estimates that indicate 85% of opinion will be influenced by the emotional response you evoke. Each detail you select, where you do the interview, how well you craft your statements, and how well prepared and trained that spokesperson is will determine how well you will be perceived.

Finally, utilizing trusted third-party advocates who can speak on your behalf provides many benefits, including providing you the opportunity to leverage their brand equity and providing an implied endorsement; “I trust these people, and if *they* trust *those* people, then they must be OK.” Trusted advocates can be effective in several ways such as flexing their social muscle, writing and placing op-eds, and participating in the implementation of solutions.

In crisis, as with any other communication, you need to develop your position, messaging and tone. Specifically, in a crisis, there are many strategies that can be taken. Examples of approaches I have used or seen others try include: Deny that it was you, deny you had any control over preventing it, clarify or reframe what happened, attack the attacker for having a malicious agenda, minimize the event, focus on your good intentions, create a context that provides a broader perspective, position yourself as a victim, take corrective actions and apologize.

I am not a fan of many of these strategies. As I shared earlier regarding guiding principles, I believe organizations should never compromise their values, ethics or empathy.

When working with some executives, I have taken them aside, looked them in the eye, and told them, “When you walk into a room, you need to be the person that we need you to be.” Or more simply, “You need to be the person that your dog thinks you are.” This is most true in a crisis.

It takes good information to make good decisions. During a crisis, it can be easy to become distracted. Information and conditions change quickly. Many people will demand information. Many people will be in your face weighing in with strong opinions and even stronger emotions. Utilize the elements

of your existing crisis plan that allow you to quickly surround yourself with others who can take on specific responsibilities, thereby allowing you to acquire information and the ability to focus on the use of actionable intelligence. Then, as information and conditions do change, course-correct in real time.

Most practitioners have adjusted to the not-so-new normal of anyone being able to generate content, and deliver it around the clock across multiple platforms and channels, live. What becomes more complex and troubling is the escalation of fake news and alternative facts, and compromised journalistic integrity.

I have always believed that the media provides three valuable services: to tell me what is going on, tell me how to deal with what is going on or help me escape from what is going on. The first two provide you with an opportunity to help turn your crisis into an opportunity. If you do not have a crisis communication plan in place, create one. It will provide you with the foundation you need so that, very early on a Sunday morning, when your phone rings, your first response to hearing, “We’re f\*\*ked,” will be, “I’ve got this.” ■

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*Mike Rosen is managing principal at PRR.  
@rosenmike*