

Preparing for crisis

# *The Crisis Communications Manual*

*A checklist for how to prepare for your  
corporate crisis*

**Ramsey Poston**

- Tuckahoe Strategies -

A Publication of



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# *Introduction*



Not all crises are the same. Some crises stem from external events such as a “Acts of God,” change in laws, sabotage, or terrorism. While other crises arise from within, employee malfeasance, negligence, sexual harassment claims, corporate impropriety, and product failure.

The long- term success of a business depends on how it manages critical issues when the crisis occurs. The best companies are ready for a crisis and what steps to take before it even happens.

**Simply put, a crisis is anything that threatens your business and can result in financial loss, tarnished reputation, or legal/regulatory action. Any crisis, if not properly managed, can damage the survival of your business.**

Use this guide to create your own crisis checklist to ensure you have taken the basic steps to prepare for a crisis.



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The crisis communications team*

# Crisis Communications Team

*Must be a C-suite function*

Every corporation, small business, and organization should have a designated crisis team in place. At a minimum, this group should meet regularly to discuss threats to the brand and how to react. Follow these steps when establishing the crisis communications team:

- Create a Crisis Communications team. A list of the crisis team members and contact information should be maintained and shared with the team.
- The crisis team should consist of the following company officers:
  - Chief Executive Officer/President/Owner/Founder
  - Chief Communications Officer/VP Communications
  - General Counsel
  - Chief Operating Officer
  - Chief Financial Officer
  - Chief Marketing Officer
  - VP Human Resources/Risk Management





***Ramsey Poston delivers the message:*** Tuckahoe Strategies' president, Ramsey Poston speaking on behalf of a client.

**“** *In a crisis, people want to know three things: What happened? Why did it happen? And what is being done to make sure it doesn't happen again?* **”**

**Ramsey Poston**



## CHAPTER TWO

# *Risk Assessment*

# Risk Assessment

*Understand the potential for danger.*

To understand the potential for danger, companies must first understand the threats. To assess crisis threats it is helpful to conduct a SWOT analysis - a facilitated discussion examining corporate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.



A SWOT analysis should be conducted with the full crisis team and lead the company or organization to mutually agreeable messaging. For some companies, this exercise can be one of the most important meetings because often times it's the first time the executive team have discussed the SWOT elements.

Done correctly, the SWOT exercise requires several hours and the full attention of the executive team. A facilitator should walk through each element, all along writing comments on a whiteboard for all the see. It's usually easiest to begin with the "strengths" because most people are happy to more freely discuss positives. Once each of the categories are discussed, the comments on the whiteboard should provide the start of a crisis plan. The strengths should offset weaknesses and opportunities should be used to address threats.





## CHAPTER THREE

# *Crisis Protocol*

# Crisis Protocol

*Know what to do and when*

A crisis communications protocol is essentially a plan for the immediate steps the crisis team should take when notified of a potential crisis. Sometimes a crisis can be anticipated, other times it occurs without warning. How companies and organizations react in the early stages of a crisis often sets the tone for how it will be perceived and ultimately resolution.

- Below are steps that should be taken in the first hours of a crisis:
  - Assemble crisis team at predetermined location or via conference call
  - Monitor media/social media for information; rumors; updates
- Assess the F.A.C.T.S. (Tuckahoe's branded SOP)
  - Find out what happened
  - Assess the damage/fallout
  - Consider available options
  - Take action where appropriate
  - Speak as the authoritative voice
- Designate primary spokesperson (normally it should be your communications officer but in some instances it could be the chief executive or relevant department head such as general counsel).

# Crisis Protocol

*continued*

## First hours action steps (continued)

- Consider releasing a “holding statement” if necessary. (Holding statements can be used to let key audiences and media know the company is aware of the situation and will provide updates as warranted.)
- Activate “phone tree” if necessary. This allows you to think through in advance who needs to be contacted in the event of a crisis and who is responsible for the outreach – the following should be considered:
  - Outside counsel
  - Board of Directors
  - Crisis communications firm
  - Partners/sponsors
  - Vendors
  - Employees
  - Customers
  - Local police department
  - Hospital
  - FBI



***Dale Earnhardt's death at Daytona:*** The sudden death of legendary NASCAR champion, Dale Earnhardt, ignited a fervor over safety in motorsports. NASCAR turned to Ramsey Poston to create and execute a crisis communications plan.

“ *In a crisis you are much better off playing chess than whack-a-mole. In other words, be sure to have a strategy.* ”

**Ramsey Poston**



## CHAPTER FOUR

# *Materials Development*

# Materials Development

*You'll want certain documents written in advance*

The following materials should be created in advance to ensure no time is wasted trying to recreate them in a crisis.

- **Holding statements**

- Basic “holding statements” should be created in advance simply acknowledging that the company is “aware of the incident” or “assessing the facts” and will provide updates “as more information becomes available.” Note - the statement does not admit any wrongdoing or speculate about allegations - it's designed to be responsive and buy valuable time to better understand the facts.
- Other holding statements can rough out language that requires a statement of apology; reaction to an investigation/lawsuit/and unexpected fatality.
- Statements should be formatted for internal communications via email; use with the traditional media; and, via social media platforms.
- Q&A document - a list of likely questions and agreed upon answers should be considered in advance.

# Materials Development

*continued*

- Media inquiry call form - will help anyone who gets a call from the media, stick to a script while taking important information such as:
  - Reporter's name
  - Media organization
  - Contact information
  - What they are calling about
  - Deadline







*Everything can change in a single moment: Ramsey Poston was notified that lives were lost when a company plane went down in a residential neighborhood. He went into action and ensured the company had a message and a plan.*

“ *Readiness is a key ingredient to bringing calm to chaos.* ”

**Ramsey Poston**





## CHAPTER FIVE

# *Prepare*

# Prepare

One of the worst mistakes companies make – other than having no plan at all – is to go through the time and effort to create a plan and then forget about it.

The crisis team should meet on a regular basis to review the crisis plan and to monitor threats and weaknesses. It's a good practice for the crisis team to meet at least once per quarter. As personnel are added and subtracted, it is critical the new members are updated on the plan and prepared to take action.

Members of the crisis team (likely VP Communications) should establish contacts and build relationships with the communications personnel with any external entities that could be vital to successful resolution to acute crises such as first responders and law enforcement. In most cases this includes:

- Local and state police
- Nearby hospitals
- Local fire departments/EMTs
- State and federal bureau of investigation



*Founding father, Benjamin Franklin*

“ *By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.* ”

**Benjamin Franklin**



## CHAPTER SIX

# *Repair*

# Repair

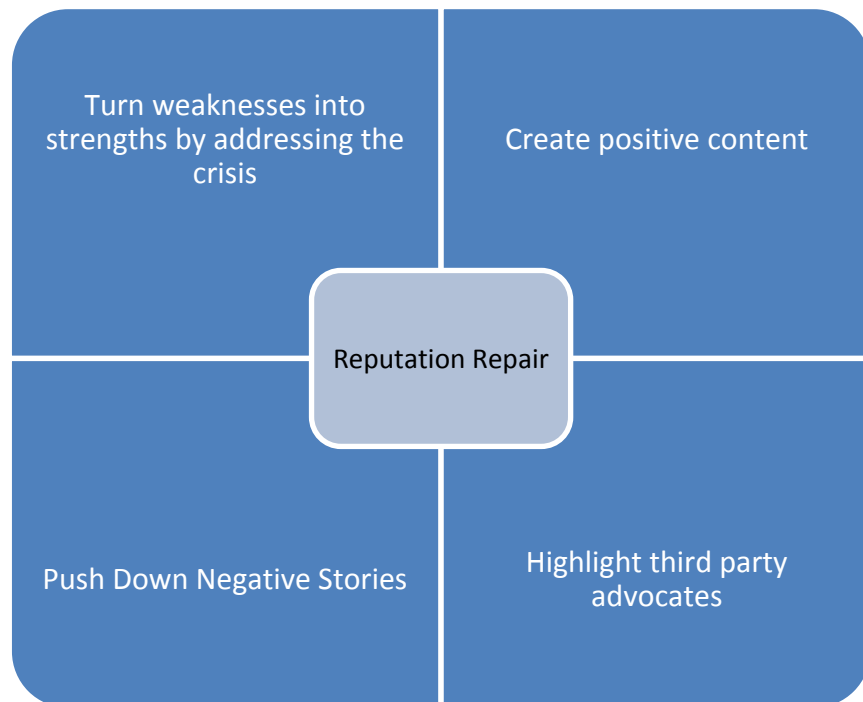
*Never stop managing the corporate reputation*

- Following a crisis (and sometimes the threat of a crisis) it's not too soon to assess the damage and begin work on a plan to repair the corporate reputation.
- It is essential to identify opportunities to turn weaknesses into strengths by addressing the source of the crisis. For example, a company experiencing a safety crisis should strive to become a leader in safety; a company experiencing an cyber security breach should strive to become the industry leader in cyber security, and so on.
- These steps are essential to restoring confidence among employees, customers and key audiences.
- It is also important to refocus attention back on your core products and services.
- Identify opportunities for third party validation such as customer testimonials

# Repair

*continued*

- Focus on “owned content” to tell your story in a positive and forward looking manner
- Invest in highly targeted online ad campaign to communicate essential changes made to address crisis



# Conclusion

## *Turn crisis into opportunity*

Crises happen. Sooner or later your company will face challenges that threaten its ability to conduct business. Successful companies and executives anticipate and prepare to manage chaos efficiently. In fact, the value of preparation truly pays off when companies can manage to turn a crisis into opportunity.



The Chinese word for crisis carries two elements, danger and opportunity. No matter the difficulty of the circumstances, no matter how dangerous the situation, ... at the heart of each crisis lies a tremendous opportunity.

The sooner your company can pivot to offense and control the message in times of crisis, the sooner it will succeed. Being ready for turbulence provides you the power to set the record straight, respond to false allegations and positively influence key audiences.

Contact us for

# *Free Crisis Consult*

Have questions about your readiness? Tuckahoe Strategies will provide you with an assessment.

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