Open in Case of Emergency

Crisis Communications Management in the Time of COVID-19

A chapter from

Ben Delaney's Nonprofit Marketing Handbook

A hands on guide to marketing & communications in nonprofit organizations

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Managing communications in a crisis

It's bound to happen. One of your major funders cuts you off. Your ED is accused of sexual harassment. The CFO makes off with your bank account. There's a fire in your office. You've been hacked and your client records are exposed. Your reputation is at stake. Your funding is at stake. Every nonprofit may have to deal with problems like these at some time. How you deal with them can make a substantial difference in the health of your organization, and indeed, whether or not your organization survives.

Dealing with situations like these is called *Crisis Management*. How you handle a crisis is vitally important. Every member of the leadership team needs to be aware and involved, and those in Marketing and Communications can be vital to a successful resolution of the situation. In this chapter I'm going to offer a few tips, some of which are based on my personal experience managing communications during crisis.

First an anecdote. At a community-based organization (CBO), a surprise inspection by the fire marshall resulted in a notice to abate (meaning that they had to correct any problems with the building or cease operations). The landlord, the Board of Directors and the staff were near panic. What was going to happen? They had 5000 square feet full of stuff, a staff of 11, and limited resources.

"Information" got out quickly and created an immediate ruckus. One long-term volunteer started telling clients that the organization would soon close. She advised the staff to start looking for new jobs. Customers and staff alike were asking how long the organization would be in business and what its fate would be.

This was a classic example of the need to manage the message. The leadership team had to respond to the people who were calling, writing, tweeting, and emailing, all with increasing concern about the fate of the organization. A local newspaper ran an article with a headline announcing that the CBO was about to be evicted. All of this happened over a couple of weeks, and created an intense sense of urgency.

While this organization did not have a written crisis management plan, crisis management had been given a lot of thought and discussion. I don't recommend being that casual, but that is, at the minimum, where to start with your own crisis management and communications planning.

The Board knew about the Order to Abate before the newspaper article appeared. Knowing that the situation sounded ominous, they went to work crafting a comprehensive, coherent and consistent message that everyone would use when talking about the situation. The Board worked on this message for several days, consulting by way of email and phone calls, until a short message that was accurate, truthful and calming was agreed upon. Immediately, the message was used in consistent response to emails and posted on social media accounts and the organization's website.

In addition, the organization added a page to their website where they posted news and allowed the community to comment and talk among themselves. A GoFundMe campaign was started in response to the many people who had asked what they could do to help.

This turned out to be a successful example of how thinking about crisis communication management before an event occurs makes it easier to respond. Because the leadership team had started working on messaging early, the communications were effective, the panic quelled, the GoFundMe page raised several thousand dollars, and time was extended for compliance with the order.

Are you ready to handle a crisis? Let me share a few tips on handling communications during a crisis.

Don't wait for an emergency.

"You have to anticipate a crisis in order to deal with it when it comes." Daniel Kennedy, PR and MarCom authority

One of the most important aspects of dealing with a crisis is being ready for it. It is far easier to think about your emergency response in the calm before the storm.

An organizational crisis management plan should be prepared by every nonprofit. Developing this plan should be a collaborative effort involving your leadership team, the Board of Directors and other key stakeholders in your organization. The plan should include what to do in various types of emergencies, such as a fire, an earthquake, a tornado, a serious injury, a broken pipe or a heart attack, as well as unexpected media coverage or allegations about the organization, whether true or not. It should include a list of contact information for the people who may need to be reached in case of emergencies, such as the police, the fire department, your landlord, your insurance broker and others. Your plan should include managing clients at your site, evacuation procedures (and what triggers them), and other aspects of likely, and unlikely, events at your organization. Of course, you want to be certain that your overall crisis management plan recognizes the differing requirements of various situations and addresses them.

Your crisis management plan should be easily accessible and should be reviewed at least once a year to make sure that it is still up-to-date and appropriate. In the case of some types of emergencies you will want to have periodic drills to help the staff understand how to respond in various situations.

Every comprehensive crisis management plan should include a crisis communications section. It's important to coordinate with your leadership team to make sure that communications efforts align with and augment the crisis management plans that have been adopted. It's also vital that you are prepared to defend your reputation and to show that you are handling the situation well.

Let's look at what your Crisis Communications Plan should include.

Crisis Communications Plan Checklist

Start with a general plan, and then think of special situations and what they will require. Here are some of the key items to include in your crisis communications plan:

- The person, or people, who are authorized to speak publicly about an event or situation. Typically, designated members of the Board, the Executive Director, and/or a media specialist are the only people authorized to make public statements. Everyone else in the organization, including Board members and staff, should refer questions to the designated spokespeople. This is a "must do" and is critically important.
- Try to anticipate the various types of situations that may arise. For example, there may be workplace violence, or a serious injury at the work site.

There could be a fire, explosion, or leak of toxic materials. There could be a natural disaster, like a hurricane, tornado, earthquake or flood. There could be accusations of sexual or other harassment. Malfeasance on the part of your Board or staff leadership can occur, or merely be alleged. These types of situations, as well as the ones that are unique to your organization or location, should be evaluated, and appropriate responses prepared for those that are most likely.

- List the people or teams that will be gathering information and how that information will be provided to the communications team. Include people to talk with: an attorney, an insurance broker, an HR expert, or a CPA, for example. The board and staff leadership should develop an approval process, and that process should be evaluated periodically. The plan will include the approvals needed before releasing information.
- Your communication strategy should incorporate the right media for the situation: social media, your website, traditional media, external and internal communications channels. One of the biggest advantages of having a crisis communications plan is that your message placement is predetermined, enabling you to act quickly and avoid bad decisions. Even so, remember that every situation is unique, with unique communication needs. You'll often have to adjust on the fly.
- Include a list of local journalists that you want to contact. List each with the topic/beat he or she covers. Be sure you have your statement ready before you contact the press, and get it first to those who have been friendly to your organization.
- In addition, have a list of your other stakeholders that you'll want to contact in various situations, before you

go public, if possible. For example, if there's a fire, you may need to contact your staff and clients right away. As you draw up this list, consider priorities: who do you contact first, second, and on down the list? If there's a political situation, you may want to contact your local representatives or department heads with whom you do business. Think about your bankers, funders, individual donors, advisory board, and anyone else who needs to hear what is happening directly from the organization. Be ready with an elevator pitch for Board and staff to use casually. Keep in mind that your loyal supporters can help spread your message – draft them as ad hoc boosters, and keep them informed of changes in the situation and the official messaging. This is a critical element in your plan for successfully handling a situation.

- You also want to think about how you're going to get information to your staff. Think about what will be necessary if they are at work, or not, and be ready to let them know what's going on, and what is expected of them. Warn them against speaking to anyone, especially the media, about what is happening. Instead, emphasize that they should refer questions to the authorized spokespersons.

What to do when they unexpected occurs

Your communications plan gives you a head start on how you will be communicating in the event of a crisis. However, it's impossible to preplan what you're going to say. These pointers will help you be prepared when you need to act quickly. But remember – the situation will change, and you need to be ready for the unexpected.

- **Get the facts. Then act thoughtfully.**
  When a crisis is upon you, you need to get in front of the story as quickly as possible, and you need to do

that in a thoughtful way. Approach your information-gathering from a journalist's point of view: Who, What, Where, When, and Why. Use those questions to guide you as you collect facts. Don't jump to conclusions. Check back with people as the situation changes. They may have new information, and you may have new questions. Be sure you understand the situation and be aware that it may change rapidly. Stories evolve and change – everyone expects that. But retractions or major corrections can hurt credibility.

- **Identify the people who are directly affected by the situation.**
  It's important to understand who the audience and stakeholders are in any given situation. Sometimes you need to collect information from them, sometimes you need to get information to them. Knowing your audience and stakeholders in any given situation is critical to effective communications. Develop lists of likely stakeholders and audiences who will have or need information in various situations.

- **Get expert help.**
  Don't rely just on yourself and your in-house team in a crisis situation. You may need to consult an attorney. You may want to talk with your insurance agent. You may have other stakeholders who can help due to specific knowledge of the situation or expertise in a specific domain.
  Be sure you talk to your experts before you craft your statement, because what they say might directly impact what you say. Remember, though it may evolve over time as the situation changes, you have only one chance to get the first message correct, and to get in front of the situation.
  Develop a list of advisors who you will contact in various situations.

- **Work with your board and the other people directly involved to arrive at a consensus on messaging. Then, craft a statement that you will use consistently to explain the situation.**
  Once you are confident that the situation is understood, and stakeholders identified, work together to determine how you want to talk about the situation; honestly, of course, but in a way that helps you manage the communications and the perceptions of what's happening.
  Be sure to consider the impact of your statements on all of your stakeholders. Choose your words carefully. You don't want anyone, especially your funders, to consider the organization unreliable or a bad risk. Express your concern and compassion, but don't admit or assign guilt. (A caveat: If your organization has obviously done something wrong, admit it, explain your plan for correcting the problem, and discuss how you will prevent a reoccurrence.) Present the situation realistically, without being overly emotional, and without blaming people. Don't make the situation look hopeless. Your reaction needs to be seen as appropriate, proportionate, and well thought out.
  Write down, and agree on, three versions of your official statement. These are used for different audiences and platforms – the short statement on Twitter, the mid-length one on Facebook, and the long one to the press, for example. (I usually start with a long version and edit down.) The written statement helps assure that your story is presented consistently, no matter who is speaking. This consistency helps your credibility.
  Distribute your approved statement to the Board and others designated to speak for the organization, and emphasize the importance of sticking to it.
- **Roll out your message.**
  Your plan should include rollout timing. What's the

priority of getting the information out on different platforms? This will differ depending on the situation, but it's important to pre-think so you can react quickly and precisely when you need to. Here are a few of the stakeholders that you will probably want to contact in almost any situation that you deem to be a crisis or emergency:

- Proactively contact local media, especially if they have already started to cover your story, and offer to talk with them as soon as possible. Chose journalists who will report accurately and don't have an axe to grind. Think about the impact of your language, and test it on a few people before you roll it out.
- Contact your major funders and supporters. Let them know what's happening. Provide the official statement and answer all of their questions. Do not wait for them to contact you.
- Reach out to your staff and make sure that they understand what's going on, what you're doing to deal with the situation, and how it's going to impact them. They rely on their jobs to pay the rent. It's only reasonable to let them know how their employment might be impacted, or not, due to the situation. Be sure they know who the official spokesperson is and that they should refer all questions to her.
- Your social community will want to know what's happening. As you probably have noticed, bad news travels fast. You may be surprised at how quickly you start getting calls and emails from concerned stakeholders. These can include your clients, your vendors, and anybody you interact with. So be sure that you're ready to get your information out through social media, including the possibility of an email blast.

    - Any other stakeholders that haven't been covered need to be reached with your consistent messaging.
- **Be alert and be nimble.**
  Your planning should acknowledge the fact that you can't plan for everything. Any crisis situation can change rapidly. You need to be ready for that change and ready to adapt to it. New information may mean that you need to change your messaging or that you need to reach out a second time to the media or stakeholders. In any crisis, be ready for rapid developments, and be prepared to act quickly as the situation changes. If negative messaging occurs on social media or newspapers/TV, be sure to address it and get the accurate story, i.e. your thought-out messaging, to those individuals. Do not let their negative messaging go unaddressed.

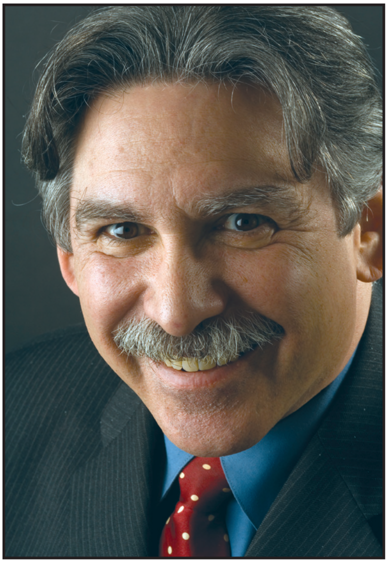
After the storm has passed

After your crisis has passed, you need to mop up. Contact your press list and other stakeholders again with information that summarizes what happened, who was affected, and how the organization dealt with the issues. Talk about measures put in place to prevent such a situation from happening again, or how the organization will be better prepared to deal with it in the future. Remember to include your staff, so that they understand what happened.

Finally, do a debrief with your leadership team and Board to examine how well your planning worked. Make the necessary changes to your overall crisis management plan and to your crisis communications plan. And remember – review these documents at least annually.

When all this is done, you've earned a time to relax and unwind. But don't get complacent. It could all happen again tomorrow.

About the Author



Ben Delaney provides organizational leadership and consulting at a strategic level. Over thirty years of executive leadership, marketing, serial entrepreneurship, and evaluation enables him to enhance the effectiveness of mission-driven organizations and social enterprises.

Ben leads and collaborates on teams that enhance the mission, values, culture and impact of organizations that serve the community and the world. He has had top executive responsibility in organizations showing consistent growth and triple bottom line impact. He considers mentorship and team development essential aspects of leadership.

Ben focuses on several areas of significant impact:

- Effective marketing and communications as part of every nonprofit's strategy for success.
- Use of business best practices to further social and beneficial causes.
- Social enterprise and Corporate Social Responsibility.
- Evaluation, especially building evaluation into new programs.
- Leveraging strengths through collaboration and partnership.

Ben's background includes business management, strategic planning, marketing, research, publishing, systems analysis, computer programming, and writing. His clients have included dozens of Fortune 500 companies and many universities and government agencies, in more than a dozen countries.

With over 100 articles and three books in print, Ben is a well-respected observer of marketing, technology, and the interface between technology and human activities. He has appeared frequently on television and radio, has been cited in major publications around the world, and has won multiple awards for marketing and writing. His presentations, both in America and abroad, are consistently highly rated.

Ben served on the Board of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of the Social Enterprise Alliance and was President of his local neighborhood association. He has served as Executive Director of two nonprofits. He lives in Oakland, California.

Ben is available to help your organization succeed. As a dynamic speaker or as an advisor to your leadership team, he enjoys helping nonprofits succeed. You can contact him through his website, www.BenDelaney.com or by emailing NPMH@BenDelaney.com.

There are more than a million nonprofit organizations in the United States and every one of them needs to tell its story, find clients, solicit donations, sell services, and encourage its volunteers. Yet few have a marketing department, and many have serious challenges in meeting their communications and marketing goals.

Addressed to the MarCom manager in small to medium sized nonprofits, this book assumes that the reader has little formal knowledge of marketing. It provides a hands-on reference that can be referred to frequently, providing checklists and actionable tips to make marketing easier and more effective. It also explains how to use System Marketing™, to create a successful marketing and communications program.

This book is the guide that nonprofit marketers have needed for years. This second edition adds new information on marketing automation and crisis communications management. It concludes with a glossary, index and additional resources for the nonprofit marketing team.

Rave reviews for the first edition:

★★★★★ Ben Delaney does not just share ideas on the effective tools for marketing and communication in small and medium size nonprofit organizations. He goes further to give you clear guidance on how to apply these tools to get your desired results.

★★★★★ Extremely Insightful and well written, Ben Delaney's handbook has filled the void of non-profit marketing tools. As a marketing professional I have used this as a tool to not only provide me with a refresher, but also to educate and inform the other board members of the charities I am on. This book is extremely insightful and well written. Excellent Resource!

Platinum Award Winner: 2014 MarCom Awards competition. MarCom Awards.

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