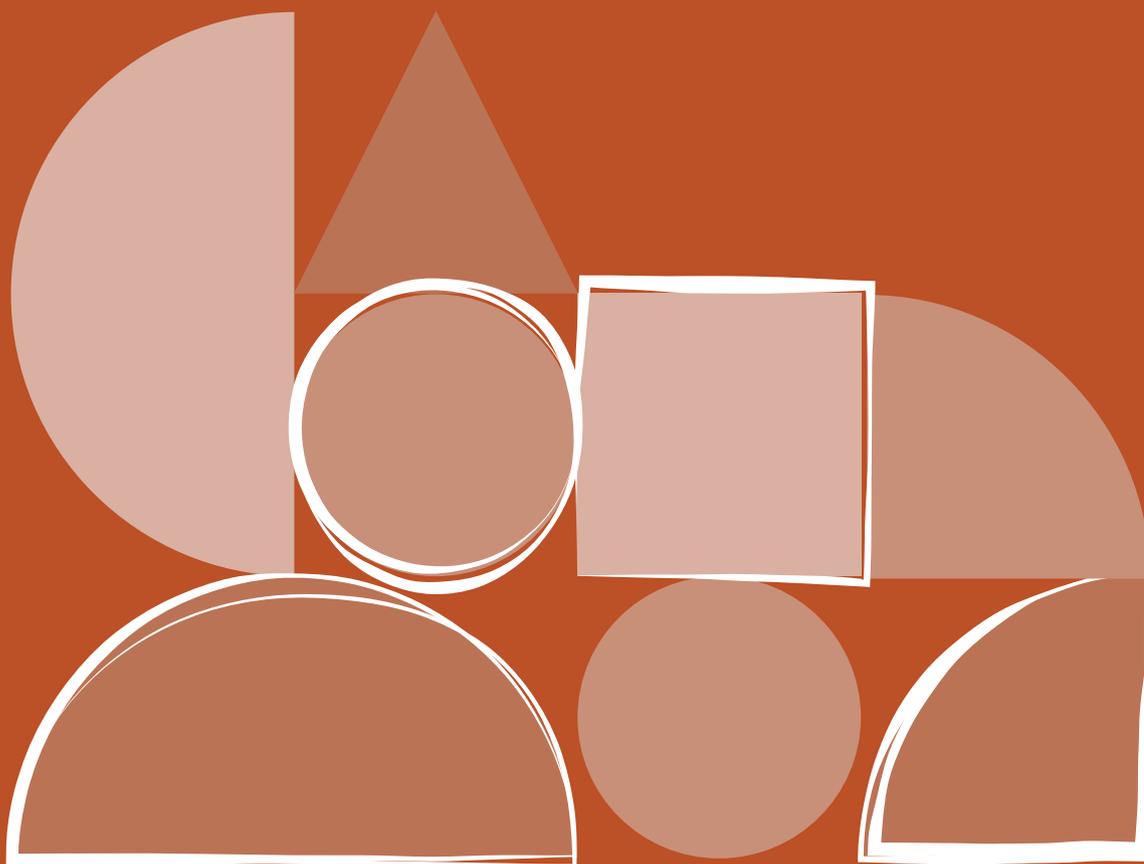


Communications  
Building Blocks

# Quick Guide to Crisis Communications

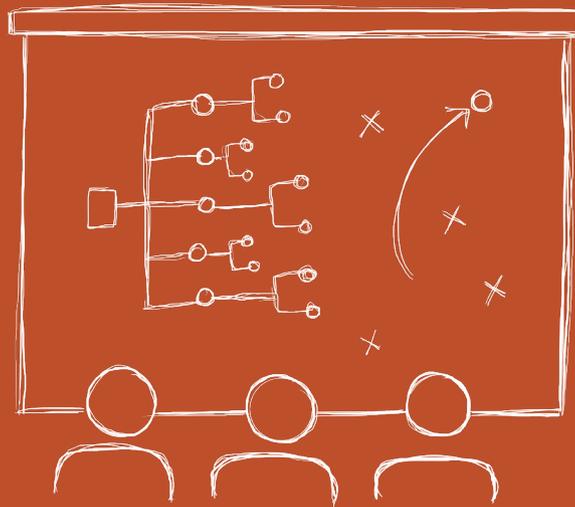


Regardless of the size, purpose or influence of your business, no one is immune to things going wrong. Combine this with the 24 hour news cycle, increasing use of social media and the rise of active consumerism—not to mention the media’s interest in finding a scandal—the chance of a small issue escalating into a crisis is higher than ever.

2 If mishandled, this can be devastating to your brand. Reputation is the most valuable asset your company owns. It takes years to develop it, but mere minutes to destroy it. However, taking the time to consider what you would do should the worst happen before it does can ensure your business has the right tools to weather the storm.

## **What is a crisis?**

A crisis can be loosely defined as any situation which presents a real threat to your business and its reputation. They can come in many forms and levels of severity, from operational issues like supply chain delays or manufacturing outages, to product failures or recalls, to events which have a clear human impact, such as injuries onsite, redundancies and strikes. Implementing a clear, robust and well-considered crisis communications plan will help you and your teams to quickly determine the nature and likely impact of any situation, enabling you to take the most appropriate action to resolve the issue and get your business back on track.



## Preparing a crisis communications strategy

It is impossible to predict every potential risk and how they may play out. However, having a clear plan which guides you through each step of the process will ensure that you're not only ready to do the right thing, but that you and your team have the confidence to carry it out.

## **Step 1: Put together your crisis comms team**

Typically, it will be the responsibility of the Marketing Team to manage the crisis communication response. However, depending on the structure and staffing of your business, this response team may be made up of people from other departments too. Your plan should clearly outline who is involved, their roles and responsibilities, who is ultimately in charge and all contact details.

## **Collaborating with different departments**

**In most crises, it will be necessary to inform and work with other departments outside the crisis communication team. These could include:**

- **Customer Support**
- **Executives**
- **Legal**
- **Operations**
- **People Ops and HR**
- **Product/Engineering/Technical**
- **Sales**
- **Security**
- **External trade bodies (where relevant)**

Again, your plan should clearly outline who are the key contacts in each of these departments. If your business is part of a multi-divisional or global organisation, consideration will need to be given to how any crisis or issues will be communicated between different teams or regions and when this will be appropriate.

### **External agencies**

Working with an external PR agency through a crisis can not only alleviate pressure on the Crisis Communications Team, but can add a valuable, objective point of view to your approach. They should be informed of and worked into your crisis communications strategy as soon as possible.

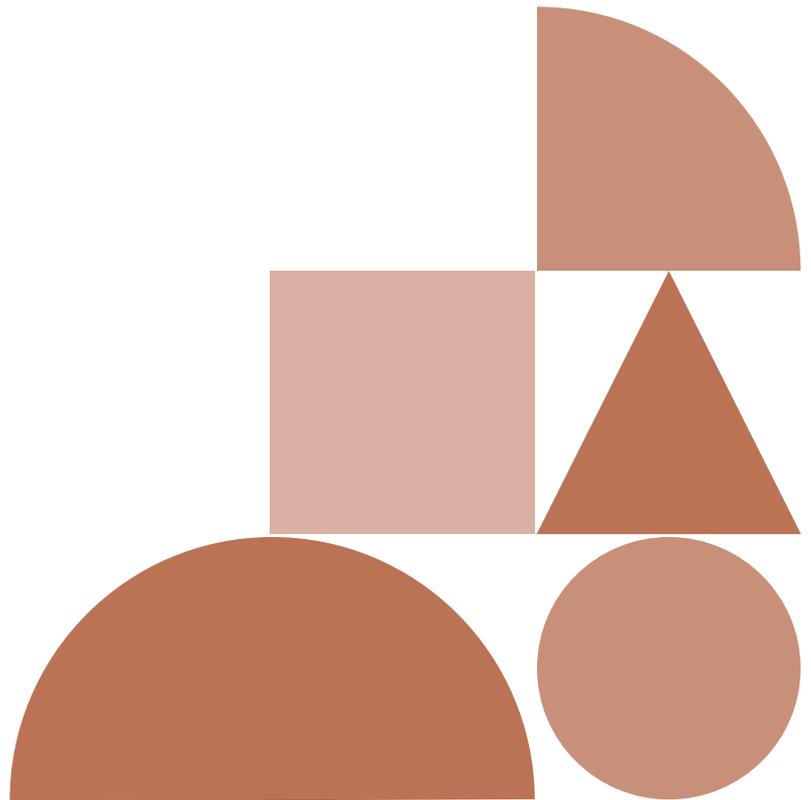
## **Step 2: Identify likely risks to your business**

Unless you have a crystal ball, it is impossible to predict how a crisis may arise. Sometimes they begin as small, seemingly innocuous issues, sometimes you are completely blindsided by a phone call. However, thinking about potential contingencies and how they could affect your business can help provide a response template that can easily be adapted to any situation.

**This begins by thinking about any potential issue your business could face. Some examples of common crises are:**

- **Financial irregularities**
- **Unethical behaviour**
- **Executive misconduct**
- **Security breaches**
- **Failure of health and safety procedures**
- **Product recalls**
- **Regulatory issues**
- **Employee disputes**

Next, you need to identify how likely these are to happen and how damaging they could be. The most likely and most damaging contingencies are the ones you should prepare for. To do this, it is advisable to draft up some example scenarios, including example statements, correspondence with key customers and even media interviews. These can be invaluable future guidance.



### **Step 3: Identify key stakeholders**

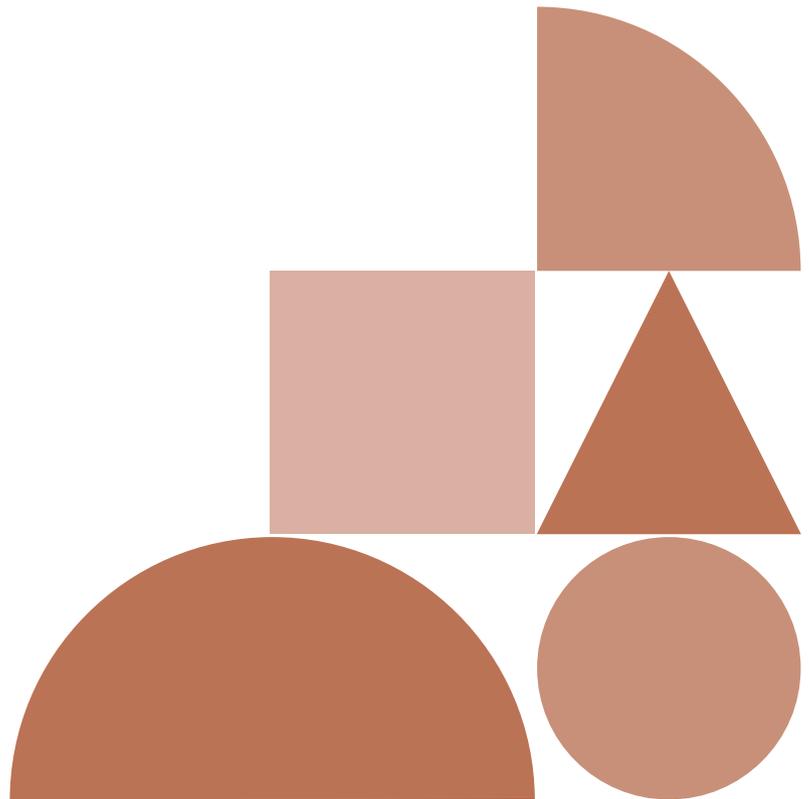
In a crisis, it is easy to accidentally miss key people out of your communications. As part of your crisis communication plan preparation, take some time to establish who your key stakeholders are and whose decisions and opinions will be vital in a crisis.

**Key stakeholders to consider may include:**

- **Those affected\***
- **Staff**
- **Customers**
- **Investors**
- **Community stakeholders**
- **Industry stakeholders**
- **National stakeholders**
- **Third-party allies e.g. trade bodies**

\*Whatever the type of crisis, these will be your first priority.

When drafting up your example contingencies, consider which of your stakeholders will be the most impacted and draft up some example communications with them. These may take the form of example emails or letters to key customers or staff, web copy or social media posts.



## **Step 4: Identify your key lines of communication**

Companies often use a combination of channels to communicate with their staff, customers and the wider industry they work in. Identifying which platforms are the most crucial to your business can help you to ensure any messages that need to be distributed during a crisis are done so in an efficient and effective way.

**These may include:**

- **Your website**
- **Social media channels**
- **Email lists**
- **Trade and local media**
- **Staff intranet**
- **Noticeboards**

You may also want to set up a 'dark site' or hidden section on your website where you can post any updates or information for media.

## Step 5: Outline basic procedures

With your team in place and some idea of the kinds of crisis you may face, the next step is to establish the basic procedures you will follow as soon as you are alerted to a crisis.

### You may want to consider:

- **How can issues be escalated to alert the crisis communications team?**
- **Who declares a crisis and how will it be communicated?**
- **How will key information be gathered and shared within the crisis communications teams?**
- **How will the severity of a crisis be determined and by who?**
- **Who decides on the next steps to be taken?**

Remember that if your business operates in a number of countries, crises may break in the news at different times. Your crisis communications strategy should consider how this would be dealt with.

## Step 6: Communicate your plan internally

Once this basic information has been identified and put into a comprehensive and clear plan, it's time to communicate it to your wider business. This can be done through a clear issues management policy that outlines where staff can go for more information, how they should conduct themselves on social media and how to escalate any issues or media enquiries that come to them.

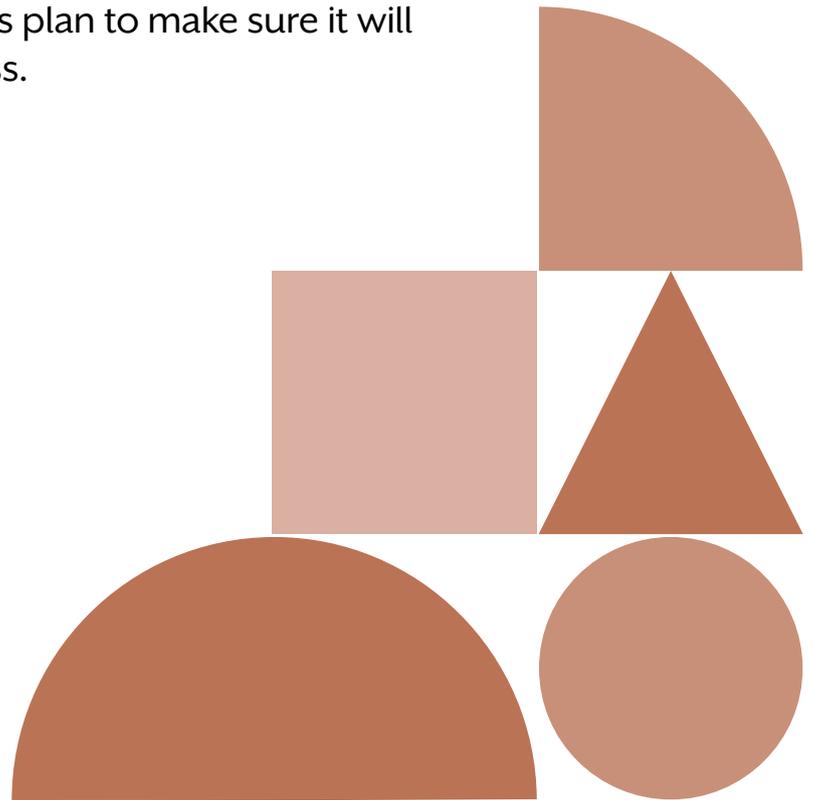
Digital and physical versions of your plan should be kept in an easily accessible place.

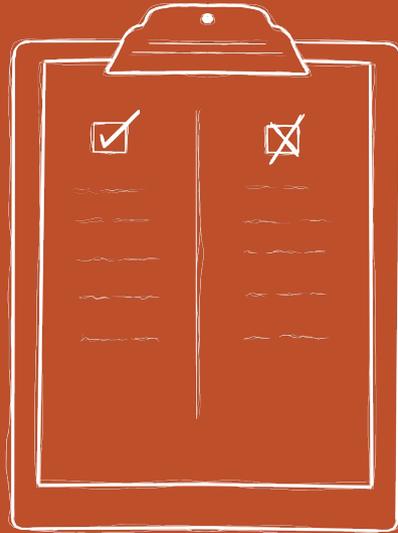
When a new person joins the business, especially in one of the key roles identified in the crisis communications team, they should be made familiar with the procedure as part of their induction process.

It is vital to sort out any internal issues first. There is no point preparing a considered crisis communications plan if people won't engage with it. [Learn more about internal communications in our guide.](#)

## Step 7: Training

To ensure your crisis communications team is ready to react to a crisis, it is important that they receive regular crisis-related training. This may involve running mock crisis war rooms in-house, asking team members to undertake training courses or simulations run by external agencies or sending spokespeople for crisis-specific media training. These also present an opportunity for you to further refine your crisis communications plan to make sure it will truly work for your business.





## During a crisis

**A crisis has been declared and it is time to put your careful planning into action. How you behave as a business will be vital.**

## **Some Dos and Don'ts during a crisis**

### **Do take some time to consider your response**

Whilst you must respond quickly, take a little time to make sure it is appropriate for the situation (holding statements can help!)

### **Do mean what you say and act accordingly**

No one is expecting you to be superhero, but they do expect a business to act with integrity, honesty and humanity.

### **Do use all the platforms you have available**

Spreading your messages out across all relevant channels can help you to reach a wider audience.

### **Do keep a record of what happened**

Keeping track of what happened and how it developed can help you to be better prepared in the future and potentially help to prevent a crisis reoccurring.

### **Do consistently invest in your reputation**

Relationships formed with media and stakeholders before a crisis can be vital for a businesses' survival. Don't dismiss the power of PR.

### **Don't ignore a crisis or point fingers**

Silence implies guilt. Pushing the blame looks weak. It is important to take responsibility for your actions and to show those affected that you care.

### **Don't forget about internal communications**

Your staff should be your biggest brand ambassadors. Keeping them up to date in a crisis can be instrumental in retaining reputation and preventing loss of morale, both of which are vital to a business' survival.

### **Don't hesitate to lean on external support**

External agencies can provide a valuable objective perspective during times of crisis.

### **Don't hide senior management away**

In times of uncertainty, people look for guidance from the top. Ensuring there are lines of communication that run from the top to the bottom of a company is key.

### **Don't panic!**

With careful action and considered communications, it is possible to come through to the other side of a crisis stronger than before.

## First steps

1. Take steps to look after the people affected and their families
2. Alert crisis communications network
3. Issue immediate holding statement (ideally by the CEO) with a clear indication of when the next update will be
4. Establish the facts. Consider:
  - What happened?
  - Where and when?
  - Who was affected?
  - Who is involved?
  - When did we learn about the incident?
  - What is the impact/likely impact?
  - Is there any immediate danger?
  - Do we understand the entire issue?
5. Suspend normal brand/promotional campaigns
6. Give media contact details and dark site URL
7. Start monitoring print, radio, TV, online news sites, social networks etc.
8. Prepare an initial statement and action plan – what needs to happen next?
9. Handle media firmly, calmly and helpfully

## Responding

Forming a response to a crisis can be nerve-wracking. Getting it wrong could potentially be more damaging than the crisis itself. However, the most important thing is to show you care. Getting accurate, reassuring messages out as timely as possible is vital. Waiting to respond until you absolutely have to will put you on the backfoot, and 'no comment' should never be an option as it implies indifference and even guilt (even if there isn't any.)

It is essential that internal teams feel like they are kept up to date with any developments. Whatever statements are released externally via social media or the press must also be published internally at the same time via staff mailing lists, intranet or verbally. It is not good for employees to find out about something that affects them directly from the media

## **Holding Statements**

Whilst the facts are being established, it may be necessary to put out a holding statement. This is a short announcement that covers the facts of the situation as they are currently known, and the steps you are taking. These should be followed up with updates as the situation develops.

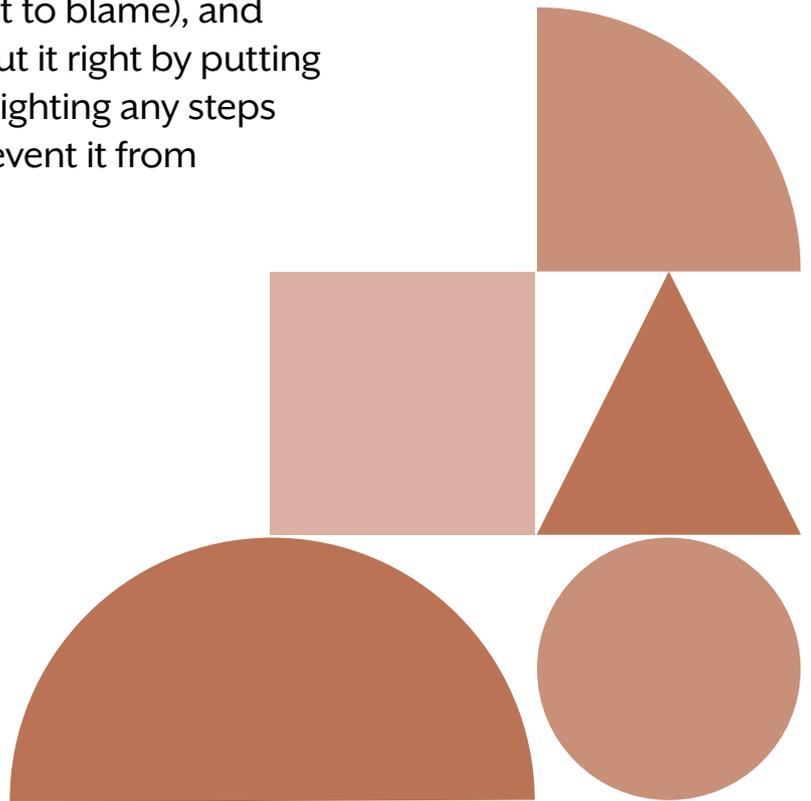
### **Example**

1. There has been a serious incident at our Stockport site. Emergency services are on the scene and we are working with them to ensure every employee is accounted for. If you are in the area, please keep away from the site whilst the situation is brought under control. We will update you as soon as we can.
2. The situation at our Stockport site is ongoing but we can report all staff members are safe and accounted for. We are preparing a full statement of what happened which will be release shortly. In the meantime, we would like to thank the emergency service for their amazing work.

## Full Statements

Holding statements can only suffice for so long. Once more facts have been established, it may be necessary for you to put out a longer, more considered response. When writing a statement, it should cover three points:

Your response should recognise something has happened, show regret for the impact it has had on people (even if you are not to blame), and explain how you resolve to put it right by putting the issue in context and highlighting any steps you have already taken to prevent it from happening again.



## Example

This morning there was a serious fire incident at our Stockport site. All staff were immediately evacuated and, whilst three people received on-site treatment for minor burns and smoke inhalation, we are relieved to report that everyone is safe. We will continue to support our staff through this situation and whilst their workplace is shut down. We are cooperating fully with the authorities to determine the cause of the fire and are conducting full fire safety audits of all our other operating sites as a precaution. We will provide further updates as more information comes to light.

Sometimes you might not fully understand the situation. This is okay. Acknowledge that you don't have all the facts, promise to keep people informed to the best of your ability when information becomes available.

## Best practice for when dealing with the media

Whether you need to deal with the local, trade or national press, working with the media requires diligence and care.

### 1. Be proactive and helpful

In general, it is always best to be proactive with the press by releasing an initial statement, answering questions when they are asked, and so on. If a story begins to break in the press, or is gaining traction on social media before you have had the opportunity to release any kind of statement, reaching out to a number of key media platforms with information can be helpful and effective. Stick to the facts, be as open and transparent as you can reasonably be, without compromising employee or client confidentiality or broaching commercially or legally sensitive subjects, and make sure you are consistent across all platforms.

Creating a bank of prepared materials for the media, including key facts and figures about your company, can help save time in a crisis and show cooperation with the media.

## 2. Carefully manage enquiries

All employees, especially front-of-house staff, should understand that no comments should be made to unknown callers and ensure that all media enquiries are referred to the Crisis Communications Team or external public relations consultants. This should be outlined in your issues management policies.

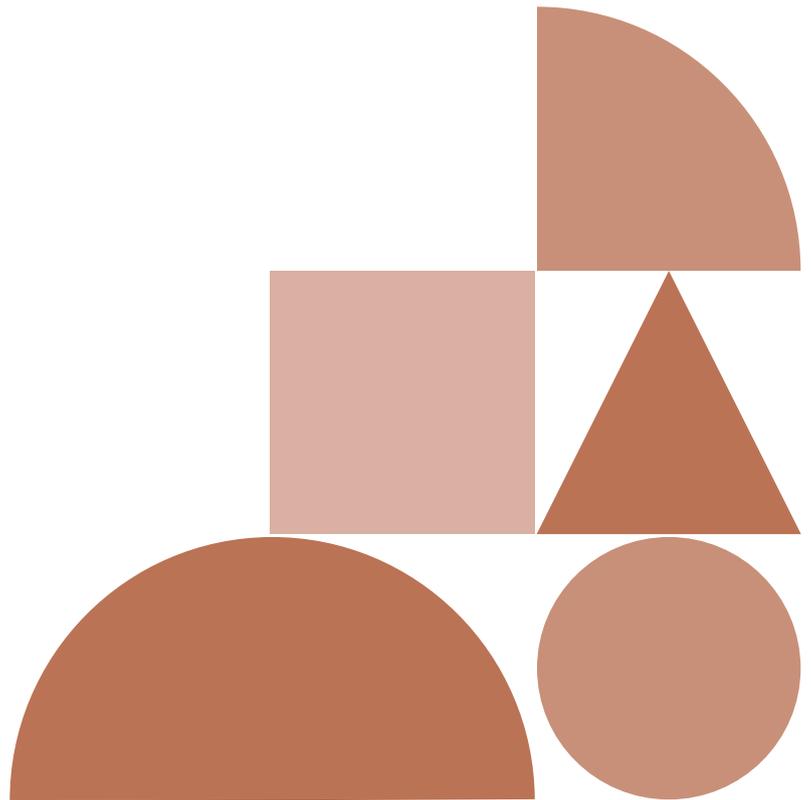
## 3. Keep in touch

Stay in touch and get back to journalists when you say that you will, even if there is nothing new to report. Most reporters appreciate being kept in the loop and will be understanding if the information is limited. If you are in any doubt about how to respond to a question, say that you need to check the answer and will get back to the journalist involved, then make sure that you do.

Keeping a media log of any incoming enquiries can be helpful to ensure no requests for information are missed.

#### 4. Monitor and call out false reporting

As soon as a crisis is identified, it is important to begin to monitor any media coverage. Alerts can be set up to flag any mentions of your company on social media and key media outlets should be regularly checked by designated monitors. Any incorrect or misleading coverage should be rapidly corrected with the media platform.



## Best practice for when dealing with social media

Social media can be a very helpful tool in a crisis, but it must be handled with care. Unlike traditional media, you have to act fast and be mindful that whatever you put out will be seen by thousands of people almost instantly.

### 1. Stick to the facts and keep calm

As with media updates, keep to the bare facts and update regularly. As well as keeping your key stakeholders up to date, this also shows that your company is willing to be transparent. When responding to any comments made online, always ensure your tone is calm, active and human (no one wants to feel fobbed off with an automatic response!). Quell speculation with facts and solve any problems you can.

A regular post could be scheduled to go out directing people to a single place where information can be updated (e.g. website), rather than trying to keep lots of platforms up to date.

## **2. Monitor, monitor, monitor**

Alerts should be set up to monitor any mentions of your company business during the crisis period. There are a number of free and paid tools available, and you should identify a team of monitors and first responders to manage this.

## **3. Cancel any promotions**

Some situations may call for a social media blackout. This may be a complete blackout, with no posts going out at all, or a partial blackout, where all posts relating to a particular topic are limited. This should be decided by the crisis communications teams and enacted immediately.

## **4. Respond with caution**

Whilst many of your mentions on social media may not require engagement, in some situations, it may be better for you to respond, especially where you can do so in a helpful and positive way. The decision of if and how to respond should be made by the designated first responders, but it is first advisable to consider the following: is the comment real? Is someone just trying to stir the pot? How much influence do they have?

## 5. Never delete responses

It's often said there is no such thing as delete on the internet. Simply removing unwanted criticism or complaints, even if they are unwarranted, makes a company look weak and guilty. It is better to respond helpfully and positively wherever possible.

Staff also need to be aware of the proper ways to react to a crisis. A clear social media policy will ensure all employees understand how to use social media responsibly.



## When it's all over...

Once the disaster has been averted, it's tempting to push it out of your mind and get back to normal as quickly as possible. However, there are a few things to do before the moment has passed.

## Review, refine, reapply

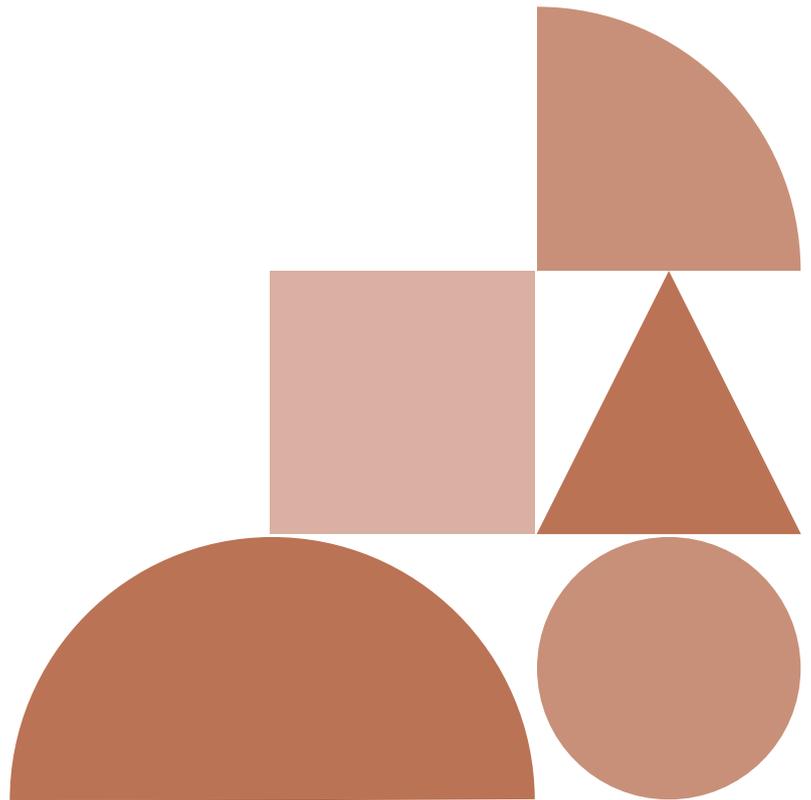
It is only when these situations arise that we have a real chance to understand how strong or weak our approach is. It is important to ensure that detailed information is kept, and crisis communications plans are reviewed and updated after every crisis.

### Key questions to consider may be:

- Were there any tangible impacts which indicate if our approach was successful? E.g. share price/enquiries/sales recovered quickly, feedback from staff/media/industry
- Was the media coverage we received balanced?
- Did we refute inaccurate claims?
- What was the impact on staff? Did we keep morale high? Did they behave as we wanted?
- How did the crisis comms network perform? Did we feel effective and efficient?
- Were there any glitches or surprises?
- What do we feel could be done better next time and what do we need to be able to do this?

## Reconsider?

Before jumping back into your existing PR and marketing plans, take some time to review the messaging you will be using going forward. Is it still relevant? Is there something else you need to be communicating to your customers?



## How can Smith Goodfellow help?

We have supported both small and large businesses through a variety of different crises - from small, localised issues to large-scale, industry-impacting incidents.

### We can:

- Evaluate potential threats to your reputation
- Create or refresh a crisis communications plan bespoke to your organisation
- Help you to communicate this plan within your organisation, ensuring engagement at all levels of the business
- Provide support during a crisis, from helping to craft statements to handling media enquiries
- Implement PR and marketing strategies to secure and grow your brand's reputation, both before and after a crisis.

Want some support to put  
this guidance in place and  
create a crisis communications  
strategy uniquely tailored to  
your organisation's needs?  
Get in touch - we can help!



Graphex House,  
Adcroft Street,  
Stockport SK1 3HZ

0161 477 1415  
[pr@sgpr.co.uk](mailto:pr@sgpr.co.uk)