

THE ULTIMATE

PR Crisis Communication Plan



The Ultimate PR Crisis Communication Plan

Do you know what to do if a **public relations crisis** happens in your organization? Have you a **PR crisis communication plan** in the event that you are parachuted into the media spotlight for all the wrong reasons? Fail to prepare, prepare to fail, but not if you **follow my 15-step best practice PR crisis communication plan**.

In business and in life **your reputation is everything**. It is in fact more valuable than money, because if you lose your good reputation, losing business will likely be the immediate impact.

I have been **on all sides of PR crises** throughout my [15 year communications career](#) – as a journalist, a PR consultant, a business owner and even as a [reality TV show contestant](#). So I have dealt with many crises in many guises over the years. My advice in this blog post is based on handling many real life PR crises.

Do you want to know how to put the fire out on a PR nightmare on social media?

Social media, community and digital marketing managers don't always come with a PR background so it's important your management team meet to discuss the potential for any PR crisis on your social networks and have a plan in place.

15-step PR crisis communication plan

1) Establish the facts first

When a crisis breaks there is a real danger that a CEO will go into crisis shock and immediately go on the defense. Your first role as a manager is to remain composed, establish the facts and ask the right questions.

- **What is the crisis?**

You need to be able to nail down exactly what the crisis is because you are preparing a communications plan based on this. So succinctly describe the crisis in one paragraph, because that's exactly what the media will do. This will help you focus on the core issue and thus deal with it and not sidelines matters.

- **Who is involved?**

Being able to identify the main protagonists in the crisis is vital. Apart from you or your organization who else is impacted by this crisis? Is it another company, another person (staff member, customer, supplier, creditor, business partner), a regulatory agency or a state body? Don't forget the media will be involved so keep them high up on your list of 'who's involved'?

- **How did it happen?**

You must tie down how the crisis evolved and ultimately erupted. This is necessary in order to be able to communicate the facts. It might be the case that a series of unfortunate events led to this crisis, so ensure you track every incident, episode, action and reaction so that you are not operating in a communications silo.

- **Where did it happen?**

The location of the crisis is probably where the media will descend on first. Is the crisis contained to one location – a company premises, an international location, a third party location – or does it involve multiple locations. You will have to have expertise on site at each relevant location

to deal with the media who will inevitably show up with camera crews and their smart phones.

- **Why did it happen?**

This is probably the most important question to answer. You need to be able to answer this question for yourself but also for the media. If you cannot explain why it happened then it goes without saying that you will not nor cannot learn from the crisis so as to ensure it won't happen again.

- **When did it happen?**

You must document a timeline of events leading up to the crisis and you must delegate the task of documenting all current and future actions also. This will help you manage any fallout from the crisis. Having a timeline will also give you valuable visibility in chronicling the steps that led you to now.

2) The golden hour response

This is why it is called the '**golden hour**'. Do not lock yourself in a room to hide away or to have 'thinking time', you need to take action with your team. The following infographic depicts what action should be taken in the first 60-minutes involving your team.



PR Crisis Communications Plan: The First 60-Minutes

ACTION TO TAKE IN THE GOLDEN HOUR OF A PR CRISIS



MINUTES

Call **emergency services** if relevant
(law enforcement, medical, fire, rescue)



MINUTES

Establish the **facts**



MINUTES

Draft a **holding media statement**
Brief internal stakeholders, your lawyer, family members, local authorities or anyone else



MINUTES

Monitor social media and track specific **keywords** or **hashtags** that may be associated with your crisis. Also watch in real time results for your own name or your company name.



MINUTES

Do you need to **update your draft media statement** based on any new information that has come to light? **Issue the initial statement.**
Brief the spokesperson on the facts, the official statement and a timeframe when you will again speak to the media.



MINUTES

Collect some images or footage that might be useful for the media.



MINUTES

Convene a team meeting and agree next steps and who does what.

3) 'No comment' is not an option

Trust me on this one. What do you think when you hear the words 'no comment?' Yes, me too. We immediately think 'what do they have to hide' or 'there's no smoke without fire.'

The media will always find their story and whether you comment or not, they will have a story about you. This is why you should control the story as much as possible in terms of giving them accurate, timely and relevant information. It also shows trust and transparency when a company comes out so prepare that media statement.

4) Monitor your brand across all media types

If you are not doing so already, set up brand monitoring for your organization's name, the CEO's name and anyone else involved in the crisis.

Monitoring services are offered by a range of companies, but make sure you monitor traditional media, online media and social media. Not all monitoring companies offer blanket offline and online monitoring.

There are also some free monitoring tools available, which you can maximize if you don't have a large budget.

Here's a comprehensive list of [46 free social media monitoring tools from Dreamgrow.com](#).

Google News

Use [Google News](#) to search for top news in your country, state or region. You must localize it to your own location and you can also search for news categories such as business.

The image shows a screenshot of the Google News website. At the top, the Google logo is visible. Below it, the 'News' tab is selected, and a dropdown menu is open, showing 'Dublin, Ireland' as the selected location. The 'U.S. edition' tab is also visible. The main content area displays a list of news stories under the 'Top Stories' heading. The first story is 'Varadkar steals march on rivals as race to be next FG leader begins' by Herald.ie. Other stories include 'Barack Obama to visit Dallas in wake of shootings', 'Theresa May wins support of ministerial colleague in bid for Prime Minister position', 'The Somme and the Rising: asking people to broaden their outlook without abandoning their loyalties', and 'Protesters across the US denounce police shootings of blacks'. On the right side, there is a 'Sign in to get news on topics you care about' button and a 'Dublin' section with more local news. At the bottom right, there is an 'Editors' Picks' section featuring articles from entertainment.ie.

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Google News

News **U.S. edition**

Top Stories

Dublin, Ireland

World

U.S.

Elections

Business

Technology

Entertainment

Sports

Science

Health

Spotlight

Top Stories

Varadkar steals march on rivals as race to be next FG leader begins

Herald.ie • 11 hours ago

Social Protection Minister Leo Varadkar has emerged as the clear front-runner in the race to succeed Enda Kenny as Taoiseach - a contest that will be decided predominantly by Fine Gael TDs.

Kenny must clarify leadership position says Chief Whip [BreakingNews.ie](#)

Taoiseach's week to forget amid career of gaffes [Irish Examiner](#)

Related

Enda Kenny

See realtime coverage

Barack Obama to visit Dallas in wake of shootings

Irish Times • 3 hours ago

US president Barack Obama will cut short his visit to Europe for talks with Nato and EU leaders to visit Dallas where five policemen were shot dead and seven other officers wounded in what appears to be a racially motivated sniper attack.

Theresa May wins support of ministerial colleague in bid for Prime Minister position

Irish Examiner • 11 hours ago

Britain's minister for defence, Michael Fallon, has backed Theresa May in her bid to become leader of the Tory party and the next prime minister.

The Somme and the Rising: asking people to broaden their outlook without abandoning their loyalties

Belfast Telegraph • 2 hours ago

There was a time in Ireland when the memory of the First World War was unacknowledged by the state. That time has long since passed.

Protesters across the US denounce police shootings of blacks

Irish Independent • 7 hours ago

There were protests in cities across the US and also in London on Friday following the police shootings of black men in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and St Paul, Minnesota, and the deadly sniper attack on police officers in Dallas.

Sign in to get news on topics you care about.

[Learn more](#)

Dublin

Well-known Dublin pub remains closed after garda and Revenue raid

Irish Independent • 2 hours ago

Dublin executive punched and strangled man for cycling on footpath

BreakingNews.ie • Jul 8, 2016

Grandmother who slipped on yoghurt is awarded €55k damages

Irish Independent • 6 hours ago

Editors' Picks

entertainment.ie

Here's how you can (unofficially) get Pokemon GO in Ireland

Brian Lloyd

The new TV spot for Ghostbusters is a lot of fun

entertainment.ie

Jonah Hill did an ad for a skateboard shop and it's funnier than some of...

entertainment.ie

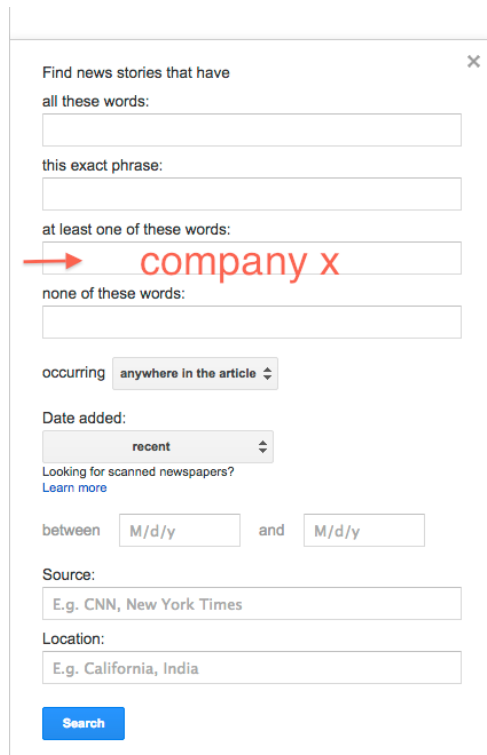
Celeb journalist quits with Best Resignation Letter Ever™ and slaps off...

Brian Lloyd

12 Pieces Of Useless Trivia About Terminator 2 - [iHollywood Now](#)

Google News Archive

[Google news archive](#) search provides an easy way to search and explore historical archives. In addition to helping you search, news archive search can automatically create timelines, which show selected results from relevant time periods.



Find news stories that have

all these words:

this exact phrase:

at least one of these words:

none of these words:

occurring anywhere in the article

Date added: recent

Looking for scanned newspapers? [Learn more](#)

between M/d/y and M/d/y

Source: E.g. CNN, New York Times

Location: E.g. California, India

Search

Google Alerts

Set up a [Google Alert](#) for your company name and/or CEO or specific person involved in the crisis. You can add keywords and publications as well as make it location-specific. You also set how often you want updates emailed to you, so of course in the case of a PR communications crisis you should opt for 'as it happens.' Ensure somebody is monitoring the email address linked to your Google Alert.

The Alerts interface has a blue header with the title 'Alerts' and the subtitle 'Monitor the web for interesting new content'. Below the header is a search bar containing the text 'Joanne Sweeney-Burke Digital Training Institute' with a clear button (X) on the right. Under the search bar, there are five settings, each with a label and a dropdown menu: 'How often' set to 'As-it-happens', 'Sources' set to 'Automatic', 'Language' set to 'English', 'Region' set to 'Ireland', and 'How many' set to 'Only the best results'. At the bottom of the settings area, there is an 'Enter email' input field, a blue 'CREATE ALERT' button, and a 'Hide options' link with an upward arrow.

Omgili

[Omgili](#) (oh my god I love it) is a specialized search engine that focuses on “many to many” user generated content platforms, such as, forums, discussion groups, mailing lists, answer boards and others. Omgili finds consumer opinions, debates, discussions, personal experiences, answers etc.

The Omgili interface has a dark blue header with the text 'Omgili (Oh My God I Love It)'. Below the header, there is a section titled 'Find interesting and current discussions, news stories and blog posts'. Under this title is a search bar with the placeholder text 'Enter your search query' circled in red. To the right of the search bar is a 'Search In' dropdown menu.

Here's a [wiki of social media monitoring solutions](#).

These are the monitoring services that I use for in my business in Ireland.

- [Newsaccess](#) for print, radio and TV monitoring;
- [Zenark](#) for online news website monitoring; and
- [Sendible](#) for social media monitoring.

5) Prepare your statement

A media statement is an invaluable part of your communications crisis toolbox. It will establish the facts for the media, the public, your customers, staff and any other relevant stakeholders. If the facts are not publicly shared then there leaves lots of opportunity for rumor and hearsay to gather momentum and you want to prevent this at all costs.

Don't forget that if an apology is required in your crisis, say it. The media will ask you that question first if you ignore this in your statement.

PRESS RELEASE TEMPLATE
By Digital Training Institute

Headline in less than seven words

→ Sub-headline should explain the headline in more detail

City, month, date, year – Go straight into the ‘what’ in this opening sentence, which has action words and explains the crisis succinctly. Explain now what you are doing, saying, planning, to overcome this crisis or to solve it.

Outline in the second and third paragraph the detail of the crisis, who, what, where, where, why. You don't have to give lots of explanations here but you need to establish the facts that are in the public interest.

Now you include a quote from your official spokesperson. CEO, John Doe has committed to ensuring this does not happen again. “We have established why this has happened, have taken the following steps right now to ensure that our customers are safeguarded and have called in an external agency to review systems. We have identified the problem and a solution.”

Now explain when the crisis will be over if possible and any other relevant details.

Thank anyone who has helped in this crisis and reassure once again that you are going to solve the problem.

Direct the media and the public to your website and social networks for any updates on the crisis and reveal any emergency numbers or email addresses.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

About Company
We are an international consultancy company established in 2000 with offices in London, New York and Hong Kong. We employ 1,000 people and are externally audited by our regulatory agency on a bi-annual basis.

CEO Bio
John Doe is a leading consultant in business management with over 25 years experience working with many of the top Fortune 100 companies.

Media Contact
Mary Smith, Communications Manager

Demonstrate he/she is a safe pair of hands and trustworthy to manage this crisis

Should always be available to respond to media queries

Supply contact details including mobile

Developed by Joanne Sweeney-Burke, CEO, Digital Training Institute
www.digitaltraining.ie

6) Brief internal stakeholders first

Before you brief the media brief internal stakeholders first including Board of Directors, staff, customers, suppliers, volunteers, freelancers or agents. They can be given a short outline of the crisis and what action you are taking. It can be a shorter version of the media statement or a copy of it. I would schedule the email to go to internal stakeholders 3-5 minutes before it goes to the media.

7) Media engagement

You should have a media list on file at all times, but if you don't call the main media outlets and get the contact details of the relevant reporter (industry specific). Don't just send your press release to the general news desk email address. I have a media contact directly handbook on my desk at all times and note any changes in media sources in that regularly.

Once engaged in conversations with the media there are appropriate ways to manage that relationship. I have compiled my top rules of media engagement into this short animated video.

8) One face, one voice

The media will want to speak to a company representative about the crisis. Don't expect to issue a media statement and refuse to speak to the media in person. You can of course say that during the golden hour you will not be speaking to the media as you are gathering facts and taking urgent action, but you should schedule a time when you will be free to speak to the media. This will give you additional time to prepare your crisis communications strategy as well as getting you breathing space from the media. Your Communications Manager should handle all media requests and act as a buffer for you.

However, when the company is ready to speak to the media it is vital that you identify one spokesperson that will do all media interviews throughout the crisis process.

This person should be skilled in media interviews, have all the facts to hand, have a confident persona and articulate at delivering key messages. Do not use

an unwilling company representative who feels ill prepared and ill informed. This will ultimately do more damage than good.

Have your key managers and team members undertaken media training? If not, maybe now's a good time to arrange it.

9) Prepare the nasty questions

This is one of the first tactics I use for my clients when preparing a media strategy. As well as preparing the questions that you don't mind being asked such as 'what does your company do' or 'how have you achieved success/growth', it is absolutely vital that you prepare the questions that you don't want to be asked.

Brainstorm the top 15-20 nasty questions that you possibly could be asked by a reporter and prepared answers to each. While undertaking this task ensure you include questions that you don't believe should be asked, you have to think like a journalist in this instance.

10) Be social media ready

PR executives, CEOs and CMOs will understand the stress that comes with a PR crisis. However, this stress is exacerbated when it spills over to social media. Remember your community matters also in all of this. They have likely shared, supported and sympathized with you over the years so don't forget about or isolate them now.

Simultaneously share your press release on your website and social share it across your online channels. Do not wait for the media to tweet it out. Your community manager should be involved in all PR crisis meetings and have the experience to deal with community engagement around your crisis.

Just as you prepare answers to possible nasty questions for reporters, you should also prepare answers to possible nasty comments from your community.

If your company spokesperson is doing TV or radio interviews why then should he not conduct a Facebook Live from your Facebook Page to your community? This will put you in control of your crisis story and you can monitor sentiment immediately from the public.

You will want to have a highly experienced community manager to moderate and respond to comments and probably have a team working on this.

Prepare a list of tweets and Facebook updates from your press release and also use social media to update on any new information that is in the public interest.

11) Turning a crisis into an opportunity

If you plan for a crisis, have an open and transparent approach, have a well-briefed and competent spokesperson, accept any wrong-doing or faults and take action early, then the crisis could in fact showcase your company as one that is transparent and trustworthy.

An example of this is when the [Virgin Galactic SpaceshipTwo test crashed in 2014](#).

Thoughts with all [@virgingalactic](#) & Scaled, thanks for all your messages of support. I'm flying to Mojave immediately to be with the team.

— Richard Branson (@richardbranson) [October 31, 2014](#)

Sir Richard Branson's dream of commercial space travel was dealt a massive blow after a test flight went incredibly wrong. Killing one pilot and seriously injuring the other, it was a disaster for such an ambitious venture but it didn't turn out to be a PR disaster.

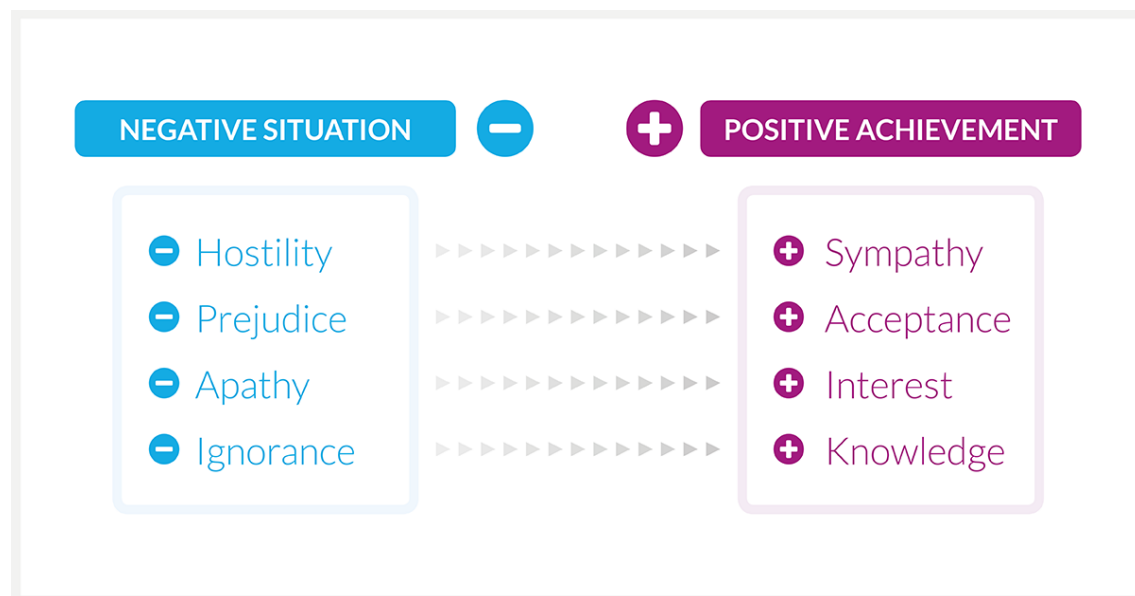
Virgin spokesperson Richard Branson immediately flew over to the crash site in California where he tweeted his deepest condolences on the way and wrote a longer, [emotional blog](#) later that evening.

PR experts were unanimous in praise for the Virgin owner, crediting the way he addressed the deceased pilot as 'brave', influencing the media's narrative in doing so.

12) Shifting public opinion

I studied Frank Jefkins' model PR transfer process as a postgraduate student in 2001, which I still use to this day. He talks about how you can change emotional responses by communicating information.

In your PR crisis communications plan identify which messages will help transfer the negative to positive.



13) Learning lessons

With any crisis there are many valuable lessons to be learned. It is incumbent on the company to sit down and reflect on the crisis and its impact on all stakeholders and not just the company. A report should be drafted on lessons learnt and how to avoid a similar crisis in the future. You should also make any HR changes in terms of delegating PR tasks to a staff member or recruiting an external advisor. Your report should be acted upon as opposed to gathering dust on a shelf or taking up space on a server.

Are there any aspects of this report that you would then share with your stakeholders, would it add value?

14) PR Evaluation of crisis

A full evaluation of the crisis from public relations perspective must be undertaken shortly after it has abated. Identify a person or a team, depending

on the size of your company to undertake it and ensure there are clear terms of reference given for this evaluation.

The evaluation should include the media mentions referencing the crisis, the public sentiment around the crisis, and an assessment of how the crisis was handled by the company. You also need to assess the damage done in terms of other aspects of your business which may include:

- Drop in sales
- Lose of customers
- Lose of suppliers
- Damage to stakeholder relationships
- Share price fall
- Reputation damage
- Social media commentary
- Drop in community members (social media, email or mobile marketing unsubscribers, trial subscribers, members)
- Cancellation of speaking engagements
- Cancellation of sponsorships
- Cancellation of event attendees

15) Bespoke crisis communications SOP

From your PR evaluation of the crisis you will be able to draw up a standard operating procedure document in the event that another PR crisis hits your company. Document every step that you took throughout the PR crisis, noting which aspects worked and which didn't and give a rationale for each.

Recruit external expertise to review your PR crisis communications plan to see if it can be improved in any way. Brief all relevant staff on the new document and upskill any staff members that require training.

Expert views

Elena Verlee is founder of a [technology PR](#) agency that works with startups to billion-dollar companies. She talks about the [4 A's when reacting to bad PR](#). She says that if we are in business it's inevitable that we will face negativity.

No matter what business you're in, eventually you'll piss someone off.

I'm not talking **getting bad PR** or a major **crisis management** campaign like laying off 500 people, or having a product recall where you have a gazillion journalists and customers to deal with. I'm talking about preserving your reputation with the more common one-off "your product or service is not good enough" emails or blog comments, your social media network saying your personality leaves much to be desired, or in another scenario, you jump to the next curve and are 10x better than the status quo and well, it tends to rile people up.

It's always best to plan ahead, but let's get real...most of the time, we don't have the time, and are caught reacting to bad PR.

1. Act quickly
2. Assess the situation
3. Admit the truth
4. Make amends

Case Studies

I asked my community for their PR crisis experience and case studies and here's what they had to say. Please feel free to email me your insights to add to this blog post, email joanne@digitaltraining.ie.

Show transparency with information

Provide as much information as possible to your customers. They really value it and it demonstrates trust, transparency and honesty. – [Fiona Kearns](#)

I recall a specific incident a few years back, in IT company, we had an outage that impacted all our customers. It was not a quick fix as we'd to wait for kit to come from the UK the next day. You can imagine how difficult it was for our

customers. But for a long time afterwards people would comment on how great it was that we shared specific details and timelines.

Panic – We're All Human

Case study provided by Jane Morgan of [JEM 9 Marketing Consultancy](#)

- Prioritize internal communications. When the dust settles those close to you personally and professionally will still be around.
- Be cognizant of emotions, your own and others. Shared experiences offer the potential to deepen relationships. And to blow them up.
- Sit down and discuss together what to do: no running up and down corridors. You need (some kind of) a plan.
- Some people are better in a crisis: who may surprise you. That's ok. It's team diversity.
- Don't make stuff up. If it's sensible to know, make a plan and figure it out.
- Have someone cater for critical needs like eating and tea-making (seriously). It really helps; remember to say thank you.
- Sometime leadership means sending people home so they can be with loved ones and get some sleep.
- Expect some people to take advantage of the situation in a nasty way. Don't focus on it: unexpected goodness emerges too. Just understand it may happen and be ready.
- **Finally remember, this too shall pass.**

Conclusion

Nobody or no company is immune from a PR crisis. We never know when we will directly or indirectly be involved in one. But what we can do is that we can plan for a PR crisis and be able to act strongly if and when it happens.

Have you got your PR crisis communications plan in place? If not, what are you waiting for? Not a crisis, surely?