

# Crisis communications for charities

A best practice guide

by Kay Parris

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## Welcome

A charity's reputation is one of its greatest assets. Donors, beneficiaries and supporters all invest their trust in the charities they're involved with, and that trust is inextricably linked to the reputation the charity enjoys.

A badly handled crisis is one of the greatest risks to any organisation's reputation. While crises can't always be avoided, they can be managed – for better or for worse. And that's where well-prepared communications professionals are worth their weight in gold. A good crisis plan, thoughtfully prepared and skilfully executed, can stop a crisis becoming a catastrophe.

That's where this guide comes in. Working with Champollion and a steering group of experienced and battle-hardened comms experts, CharityComms has produced this practical guide to creating and implementing your own crisis comms plan.

We can't stop crises from happening. But we hope this guide will help you be prepared for when they come.

**Vicky Browning**, director,  
CharityComms

# Sponsor's welcome

All organisations, large and small, will at some point face a situation which risks causing them some degree of reputational damage. As communications professionals we know that the way a crisis is handled can have a long-term impact on how the organisation is perceived, and that the communications team will usually be on the frontline when a crisis occurs.

We developed this guide with CharityComms in order to provide guidance and direction for teams faced with such situations. The guide looks at the difficult question of what a successful crisis communications response should look like, and ways to ensure that brands and reputations can survive relatively unscathed. We also know that much of the key to success in handling a crisis communications response lies in good planning, and have set out some principles which can help teams to be prepared for the worst.

The deployment of senior, well-trained spokespeople during the heat of a crisis is essential, and we hope that this guide will provide some helpful tips on training your organisation's senior team. We have looked at how to handle incoming media enquiries quickly

and professionally, while maintaining strong and positive relationships with journalists in challenging circumstances. We also know that communications professionals need the support and buy-in from an organisation's leadership in order to deliver a crisis communications response effectively – and that this can sometimes be extremely challenging. We have offered guidance on how to work with your senior team in order to safeguard the reputation of your charity.

At a time when reputations are built – and sometimes seriously damaged – online, social media is likely to be a focus for communications teams during any crisis. Alongside the risks, this guide looks at the opportunities presented by Twitter and Facebook, and at ways of making sure that social media works for you, rather than against you.

A crisis communications situation can present an opportunity for your organisation, allowing you to bolster your reputation through the professional and honest way you handled the crisis. We hope this guide helps you to achieve this.

**Estelle McCartney**, managing director, Champollion

# Part one:

# Defining terms

## 1 WHAT IS A CRISIS?

“ An event, accusation or perception that seriously threatens the reputation or even the viability of an organisation.

*Trevor Morris, professor of public relations, Richmond University*

A crisis (from the Greek krisis: 'decision') involves a pivotal moment, when the right things must happen to avert calamity.

A sudden, major threat can seem to come from nowhere – such as when criminal activity by a senior figure is exposed, or a natural disaster suspends services. Or it can develop gradually, say from financial difficulties or a run of low-grade bad news stories.

The crisis may or may not pose an immediate existential or operational danger to your organisation. Yet the way it is dealt with and communicated could change the way you are perceived – a critical measure for long term survival.

Some kinds of crisis are predictable, or even consciously created, in that they arise from decisions made by the charity – for example: the closure of a service or regional

branch, mass redundancies, a risky but calculated change in policy direction. In such circumstances the communications team gets a head start in managing its response, so long as the right systems and relationships are in place.

Very often, however, an unguarded comment or a silly mistake finds its way into the public domain, with unforeseeable consequences that can range from awkward to dire.

Whatever the initial trigger for the crisis, the level of interest in the story of what has happened – be it press, public, staff or supporter interest – is what determines whether or not the situation will escalate. And this is why the communications response is so critical to a successful outcome.

### **Straight talking**

News of a critical development often comes first to the comms team, with PR implications that



4 The response reflects a culture of crisis-preparedness in the organisation.

5 People's expectations are managed: damage limitation is a success; sometimes total avoidance of any adverse publicity, loss of supporters etc may be impossible.

6 As part of an organisation-wide response, the comms team plays its part in ensuring that the crisis itself is dealt with, not just the story of the crisis.

7 The resolution of the crisis is clearly communicated.

8 Where applicable, the comms team exploits any opportunities that may arise from the crisis to get positive media exposure for the charity or its causes.

When such principles are in place, you can reasonably expect that:

- Your charity survives/operational disruption is kept to a minimum and swiftly addressed.
- Your stakeholders remain loyal, having felt well-informed, valued and respected throughout the duration of the crisis.
- Your brand and reputation survive relatively unscathed, or even benefit from your handling of the crisis.

### How will we know a good crisis response when we see one?

"It's decisive, swift and appropriate."

*Ann-Marie Evans, communications consultant and former interim head of communications, Alzheimer's Society*

"It involves understanding, preparation and strategic thinking, both internally and externally."

*Saadia Usmani, media consultant, Shor Communications*

"It's realistic; you need to understand the reality and not think it's a disaster if something gets out."

*Estelle McCartney, managing director, Champollion*

"The best crisis never sees the light of day, but often it's about talking it down the page rather than off the page."

*Matt Hopkinson, former chief press officer, NSPCC*

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## CASE STUDY: SUCCESS IN A CRISIS

**We now treat risk and opportunity as interchangeable**

### **Macmillan Cancer Support: tackling critics head on**

In July 2014 Macmillan spotted a few supporters doing the Ice Bucket Challenge for us after noticing a Facebook craze in aid of a cancer charity in New Zealand. We thought this would appeal to other supporters so we set up a text to donate code and asked people to get involved. Communication was all about maximising visibility, driving reach and engaging supporters. Donations started to trickle in.

Shortly after, a sudden wave of celebrities took on the challenge for ALS in America. To maximise the opportunity we stepped up our comms activities particularly via social media and paid for Google search terms. We secured great coverage of our supporters doing the challenge on outlets like MailOnline and BuzzFeed. But alongside positive mentions it also created a backlash, with some people believing we'd stolen much needed cash and profile from ALS's UK counterpart, MNDA (the Motor Neurone Disease Association). As a result we reviewed our marketing and comms activities and focused on articulating our early role in the challenge while reminding supporters they had a choice and thanking those who chose to do it for Macmillan.

Donations peaked over the August bank holiday and we raised an incredible £4.5m. The swift move from opportunity to crisis was a major learning and we revised our approach: we now treat risk and opportunity as interchangeable. We learnt to expect the unexpected and the importance of dealing with negativity head on.

**Marc Silverside, director of communications, Macmillan Cancer Support**

## CASE STUDIES: SUCCESS IN A CRISIS

**There was a debate and it was crucial we were part of it**

### **Refugee Action: protecting reputation, exploiting opportunity**

In summer 2013 the Home Office started its 'Go Home' van advert campaign. One of Refugee Action's services supports people, often at the end of the asylum process, who are considering returning home.

After many years of building successful relationships with communities and key stakeholders, this Home Office campaign threatened to completely undo years of important work. The public and some media outlets were now associating our service with the Go Home campaign, which was increasingly generating public interest.

There were risks in being too public with our response, as our priority had to be the relationships we held at a local level as well as with our main funder, the Home Office. On balance though, there was a debate happening and it was crucial we were part of it.

Despite objections from the Home Office, we made our view on the advert very clear and at the time found ourselves being one of very few charities in the refugee sector openly speaking out against the campaign. As a result we were able to capitalise on the large number of media opportunities that were available.

***Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications,  
Refugee Action***

### **British Heart Foundation: containing a fire**

When we had a large fire in one of our furniture and electrical stores, we put our crisis communications plan into action. We established the issue as low-risk, collated the facts, nominated our key spokesperson and sent out a press release to local media explaining what had happened and how we needed their support. We kept the local media constantly updated with the story by announcing when the store would be reopening and how they could still support the charity (in terms of donations etc) while the store was closed.

***Laura Preece, media manager, British Heart Foundation***

# Part two:

# Ready, steady, crisis

## 1 BEING PREPARED: PLANNING FOR A CRISIS

You can't prepare for every eventuality – and nor should you try. Many emergencies are unpredictable by their nature. Besides, there's a risk that, by being tied to an instruction manual, you overlook the specifics of the unique situation you're in and limit your ability to make good judgements and take quick decisions just when you need it most.

Nonetheless, you should understand both your charity's particular vulnerabilities and the generic bases that need to be covered.

A good crisis communication plan is unlikely to create staff who are overly concerned with risks and dangers. Rather it breeds confidence, because people know that if something goes wrong there are clear steps that can be taken to address the problem.

The plan should include these key elements:

### 1 Know your vulnerabilities

Certain kinds of crisis are more likely to hit certain kinds of charities than others, so to be forewarned is to be

partly forearmed. Some charities produce detailed crisis scenarios allowing staff to refer to guidelines for dealing with a whole array of different crisis situations. Senior managers and field experts should be invited to brainstorm periodically about potential risks and how they can be managed or monitored. Keep risk assessment data in your crisis planning toolkit for reference.

### 2 Create a crisis response team

The crisis response team should be led by your chief executive (CEO), with your comms director (or equivalent) and legal officer playing key advisory roles. In a large charity, heads of department will be obvious candidates for the team, since any real crisis will affect the whole organisation. Ad hoc specialists from the organisation may also need to be drafted in if the nature of the crisis demands it. Ensure the team meets periodically to keep its identity alive, refresh awareness, review protocols and so on as needed. Beyond the inner circle of the core crisis response team, ensure all staff who could have key roles to play in a crisis are involved from the planning stage.

we had a situation in one  
of our communications  
departments something  
management  
we had to clarify the  
communications manager of first  
communications

### Roles and responsibilities in the crisis response team

- Comms director and any other relevant comms people – for media statements, briefing spokespeople, web, social media, internal comms, monitoring
- Policy director or deputy – to read and summarise reports or documents, policy position and response
- Head of fundraising or deputy – to consult re impact on donations, potential for fundraising and supporter care
- Head of legal or deputy – to check what we are saying/doing
- Director of services – to check calls, provide data, approach external organisations with support
- Director of HR – in case the issue may relate to members of staff or impact on staff

*Extract from a charity crisis-preparedness document*

### 3 Create protocols and checklists

Provide copies of a 'crisis checklist' and/or any other appropriate protocol materials for all members of the crisis response team and ensure they are familiar with their contents.

These should include clear practical instructions about what steps must be taken, by whom (see above) and who must be contacted in the immediate advent of a crisis, with out-of-hour contact details.

### First tasks

- Convene group for initial meeting – within one hour of story breaking or issue coming to our attention
- Pull together facts and intelligence as much as possible and prepare holding statements, briefing etc – within 2 hours
- Pull together communications to executive board, trustees and our supporters plus other external and internal communications as relevant – during first day
- Pull together full response including letter to ministers, policy briefing, forward plan, etc – within 24 hours

*Extract from a charity crisis-preparedness document*

#### 4 Identify and train good spokespeople

You will need several spokespeople, including potentially the chief executive. You may already have made sure that key figures in the organisation are media-trained; your crisis response spokespeople are bound to include at least one or two of the same characters. Usually your CEO will be the lead spokesperson and, in serious crisis situations, only the CEO will do. However, if you have other senior figures who are gifted media interviewees, use them whenever appropriate.

Be aware that the 'trained spokespeople' base is not automatically covered by general media training or experience in giving interviews, speeches and presentations. When a crisis hits, specific conditions apply.

If at all possible, and certainly if your charity is or has been crisis-prone, ensure spokespeople are specifically trained in crisis media skills. A good

course will involve them role-playing in real-time crisis scenarios, with situations escalating, journalists door-stepping and so on, to give them a taste of the pace and pressure of a crisis unfolding. See case study on simulation training, page fifteen.

#### 5 Foster a strong internal communications culture

Effective crisis communications cannot happen without pre-existing, well-oiled systems of information-sharing and engagement among managers and staff. Most importantly, senior management team and departmental team meetings must be regular events in which participants are expected, encouraged and enabled to voice any concerns, to the right people (usually their manager in the first instance) as soon as they may have them. More details on involving and informing staff follow in the next section of this guide.

#### 6 Raise awareness

Staff should know how to recognise

“ We had a situation in one charity where someone followed our instructions to contact comms as soon as something blows up – but without telling their management. So we had to clarify the guidance: tell your manager first and then contact comms.

Ann-Marie Evans, communications consultant and former interim head of communications, Alzheimer's Society

danger signs in any situation they deal with and how to raise the alarm, to the right people. Provide awareness-raising resources, briefings or training as needed. Resources could include something as simple as a few bullet points stuck to desks or noticeboards – so long as they are kept up-to-date and staff members are reminded to consult them.

### 7 Stakeholder distribution and cascade lists

News of a breaking crisis can reach anyone in the world within seconds; you want to be sure that your stakeholders hear it from you first. Create a checklist

of every stakeholder group and key individual who must receive agreed communications messages in a crisis: senior management, staff, service users, volunteers, supporters, trustees, patrons, press, public or government bodies and anyone else.

Establish text, email and social media distribution lists/networks and cascade systems for these groups, with clear indications of who is responsible for contacting each group or individual and in which format. Where applicable, use multiple media platforms to raise the odds of reaching contacts rapidly.

### Comms cascade

Charity communicators hold hands with many people, understanding that each stakeholder perceives the organisation in their own way, based on their needs and agenda. It's important to empathise with both internal and external stakeholders and consider the degree of threat that the crisis may potentially have on them, using the ripple effect as a model.

Those closest to the crisis and most affected by it must be contacted first, using the fastest communication method available. Processes must be in place for representatives in each area or department to take on their role to cascade agreed information down or across to key staff, trustees and volunteers, especially those who may be out at public-facing events.

It's important to understand that keeping people informed and up to date diminishes speculative rumours and safeguards the reputation of the organisation. If a crisis is likely to go public, then being open, honest and upfront with your stakeholders will keep them on your side in the long run.

*Saadia Usmani, media consultant, Shor Communications*



### 8 Crisis alert and sign-off systems

Create an early alert contact system so that anyone who communicates with outsiders in any capacity has a heads up on what can be said.

Embed an emergency sign-off procedure, so communicators know how to get quick authorisation for any written material.

“ Our early alert system is simply an email group with everyone who has a touch point with the public – so supporter care, the web team, the social media team, the press office, the helpline and so on. It’s a way of alerting people to breaking issues they may be approached on and also ensuring we are all saying the same thing.

*Matt Hopkinson, former chief press officer, NSPCC*

### 9 Monitoring system

You may already use media and social media monitoring services to keep abreast of what is being said about your charity. These will flag up any worrying comments that begin to appear. They are also crucial after a crisis has hit, when you need to check how your communication efforts are being received from hour to hour. If you don’t already use media monitoring systems, you won’t want to spend time setting one up once a crisis has already hit. So investigate the options and do it now. Two free options are Google Alerts: [google.com/alerts](https://www.google.com/alerts) and Hootsuite: [hootsuite.com](https://www.hootsuite.com)

### 10 Ready-made holding statements

It might help to keep one or two basic holding statements ready to use if and when a crisis erupts before you’ve had a chance to develop a position. Hopefully you will be able to draft a crisis-specific holding statement very quickly, but, for example if you are a small charity and could foresee a situation where no one in authority is immediately available to give any kind of initial statement, staff in the office may need to know there is something they can use straight away. Eg: “We are investigating the situation and will be posting more information on our website as soon as it becomes available.”

### Big plans?

"We are small, so there is less of a structure in place, and less capacity to plan around the issues that could come up. Of course, the CEO and directors need to know and would always be involved, but beyond that it has to be flexible: Who is available? Who is affected?"

"You can't cover every eventuality in a plan, and it's not desirable to try and do so."

"A plan protects junior staff; they can know that if it's not on the checklist, it's not their fault if it hasn't been done."

"For us there are many fast-moving political issues in the different countries we work with, so we can't be too prescriptive. We do have a plan, but not really a checklist."

*Selected comments from comms managers, gathered by CharityComms*

### Get practical

Make sure your plan is backed up with practical tools and resources, such as:

- Emergency contact lists
- Designated phone-line or emergency hotline numbers, which can go live as needed
- Conference call/video conferencing facilities or numbers, ready to use
- Designated Skype name/number

we are smaller, there is less of a structure in place, and less capacity to plan around the issues that could come up. Of course, the CEO and directors need to know and would always be involved, but beyond that it has to be flexible: Who is available? Who is affected?"

## CASE STUDY: SIMULATION TRAINING

**Our directors view crisis planning as an organisational priority**

### **Making it real for senior management**

Our comms team had a robust media crisis management plan in place, but it became apparent that the roles other parts of the organisation would need to play in a crisis – fact-finding, dealing with/resolving the issue, communication to staff/stakeholders and so on – were less defined and less widely understood.

An external trainer was brought in to run a crisis simulation session with our board of directors and chief executive. They first spent time learning how to identify a crisis, as well as the importance of planning, prioritising and delegating. Then they took part in a true-to-life scenario developed by the trainer for the organisation.

The simulation included realistic materials and activities, such as filming outside their offices, mock TV interviews and newspaper headlines. The directors also had to deal with a crisis as it escalated and took various twists and turns, allowing them to experience the pressure first-hand and feel the adrenaline.

Following this training, our directors have come to view crisis planning as an organisational priority rather than a media team requirement. There is no better way of gaining buy-in for the need for a robust crisis plan than by letting senior leaders experience for themselves:

- how quickly an issue can escalate out of control
- how easy it is to overlook key tasks in the heat of the moment
- what it feels like to be put on the spot, having what you say challenged and criticised; and
- how your organisation/crisis can quickly get linked to past events or the external environment, which can skew how things develop.

There is now much greater support, engagement and understanding in our organisation of what is needed in a crisis and the roles people are required to play. Our crisis plan has been updated and refined and the training is revisited annually.

*Charity communications manager*



## CASE STUDY: COMMUNICATIONS AT THE TOP TABLE

The best crisis communications happen before there's a crisis

### Scope: Proactive comms can prevent a crisis

The best crisis communications happen before there's a crisis. Scope is closing eight care homes. Most were built in the 70s. Most are pretty remote – one's on a hospital site. There's a real limit to the kind of life residents can lead. One home has only four bathrooms for 27 people. New technology and new ideas have transformed care. In 2015, disabled people, the government and councils want something different.

But more than a hundred disabled people live in these homes. The families are really worried about where relatives will go and are campaigning vociferously to keep them open. They've picketed a high-profile fundraising event and our AGM, engaged national and local media and forced a debate in parliament.

This makes for really challenging communications. But it isn't a crisis.

We went public with our plans as early as we could – October 2013, a full nine months before the first closure. We mapped out the really complex network of national and local stakeholders and thought about the best way and time to tell them the news – always telling people most affected first. We worked to turn a really complex message into plain English. We got buy-in for an open and proactive approach. Each individual closure has a series of milestones, which give us a structure for on-going communications.

We have closed three homes – in each case everyone has moved into somewhere else that suits them. People are starting to see there are better options out there. But the scrutiny continues. *Panorama* began an investigation. The only option was to be as open as possible, and welcome the chance to explain what we're doing. We invited the producer in. We facilitated numerous visits to care homes and meetings with residents and their families. Eventually they decided there wasn't a scandal here. Just a difficult decision that some people didn't like.

The project isn't half way through yet. We are fortunate that communications is at the top table when it comes to decisions on care homes. We will test, review and revise as we move through the project, gain experience and learn more. We will continue to be open, proactive, prepared – but we will adapt and be flexible too.

**Daniel Mazliah, head of communications and campaigns, Scope**

# Charity staff and volunteers are the most critical stakeholders operating as a system to provide support in a crisis

## 2 UNDERSTANDING STAFF ROLES AND ENSURING INVOLVEMENT

A charity's staff and volunteers are its most critical stakeholders. In an ideal world they are effective, engaged operators helping to drive forward your goals and lending their support in a crisis. At the other end of the spectrum, they are disengaged, discontented, ineffective and potentially disloyal.

Either way, they represent your organisation at all times, communicating with one another and with the outside world, both during and outside office hours. You need to have your staff on your side.

### Internal communications culture: a sure foundation for crisis comms

Preparedness, trust and engagement among staff are prerequisites for effective crisis comms. These things take time, and arise from effective, credible communication systems and commitments inside your organisation, which will pay dividends when a crisis breaks:

- Encourage senior managers to be visible and accessible, and to communicate honestly and usefully with staff help to foster a climate of transparency and trust.
- Regular meetings between senior managers and between managers and staff are the most

important medium for ensuring everyone is briefed on the latest developments and can raise any issues or concerns.

- Crisis briefings that come directly from a trusted CEO, or are cascaded down through the regular team meeting system are likely to be handled and received well. By contrast, scepticism and mistrust are understandable when staff who are unaccustomed to being told anything, suddenly find themselves herded into a one-off, emergency staff meeting.
- Whatever the combination of meetings, emails, bulletins, message boards, newsletters and so on that you use, a reliable, transparent communications system makes people feel valued, taken seriously and respected enough to know what's going on – even when the news is very bad or worrying.
- On a more basic level, good internal comms mean the channels are already in place to deal with a crisis. For example, your staff guidelines on who to contact in a crisis need to be noticeable: displayed on noticeboards, included in staff handbooks/intranets, emailed out or mentioned periodically through reminders in ebulletins or meetings.

### Staff and volunteers: your most vital audience

In a small charity with no dedicated resource, internal comms often gets lost in a crisis. Yet staff and volunteers are probably the most important audience to communicate with effectively.

When you have people who manage specific audiences – in our case media, digital, donors, stakeholder/parliamentarians – there is someone who is always on top of what communications have gone out to these groups and when. If staff and volunteers are lost from the comms cycle, problems can arise.

Staff and volunteers can be your best recourse in a crisis but they need to be one step ahead of what is being said publicly and given clear tools and if appropriate key messages, so they are empowered and understand what role they can play.

*Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications,  
Refugee Action*

our top  
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(See also *HQ and beyond*, CharityComms' best practice guide to internal comms for charities with regions, branches or groups: available at [charitycomms.org.uk/articles/hq-and-beyond-communicating-across-multiple-locations](https://charitycomms.org.uk/articles/hq-and-beyond-communicating-across-multiple-locations))

#### Role of the comms team

For crisis communications to be effective, a relationship of trust must exist between the communications team and other departments. The relationship between comms and the legal team is often particularly important; differences in the imperatives driving the two departments can easily create conflict if there is little sense of common purpose and kinship between them. The head of communications should be a member of the senior management team or, if this is not possible, should be afforded 'special status' with the senior management team – which

means, for example, unfettered access to and the fullest possible information exchange with the CEO.

The role of communications in a crisis must be understood. The head of comms should be a linchpin of your crisis response team and must be involved in all crisis planning from the outset.

At the same time, the limits of this role must be understood by the communications team itself and by the organisation at large.

If the crisis is mainly a 'communications crisis' – for example, a campaign slogan devised by the comms team has caused offence – then the comms team itself may be the only department that can solve the crisis.

However, any crisis involving the operation of the charity or one of its functions must be solved at source.

The comms team can tackle the story of the crisis but not unless the crisis itself is tackled and solved.

While this point may seem obvious, other departments are sometimes tempted to leave the whole crisis for the comms team to tackle.

Perhaps this is due to the proactive role comms teams tend to play in crisis work, or perhaps because the first indication of a crisis may be that the story has hit the media. Once the media story appears to fade, the crisis is considered solved. But of course, this is generally far from being the case.

### Comms team in a crisis

“Our role is to make the organisation aware of the severity of the situation from a reputation/media point of view; to help them understand the various scenarios, the risks attached, and crucially the timeframe that we are working in. Our role in communications, especially in a small charity, is often to help speed up the process.”

*Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications, Refugee Action*

“Often comms gets left to deal with a crisis almost on their own just because it came via a journalist. I sometimes ask myself: would the post room have to deal with it if it came in a letter? Or the social media team if it came in a tweet? A crisis is never just a comms crisis. People across the organisation need to come together and focus. If it's to do with service delivery for example, then the relevant department needs to work hand in glove with comms to deal with it.”

*Matt Hopkinson, former chief press officer, NSPCC*

“Managers don't always appreciate that the situation is potentially damaging. It may be that the crisis really isn't that bad, but it will look bad. The comms team needs to be able to convey this to managers and therefore convey the need for an appropriate response.”

*Tamsin O'Brien, former head of media and PR, Oxfam GB*

“... for crisis communications to be  
... the legal team is vital in  
imperatives driving the  
... between them

### 3 CRISIS LIVE: IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

“ Before a crisis, you will have invested time in building relationships, for example with MPs, journalists and internal staff. It is during a crisis situation that you will see a return on this investment. This is where your relationships and your programme of briefings come to your aid’.

*Estelle McCartney, managing director, Champollion*

“ Our top question is: Are we in the wrong? Should we apologise?

*Charity communications manager*

Whether a crisis has come out of nowhere or an existing problem is threatening to reach crisis proportions, the head of comms is often the person who needs to press the emergency button. Once a crisis has been named, your crisis response plan should be consulted immediately and steps

taken to safeguard the survival and reputation of your charity.

The reality, of course, is that many small (and probably plenty of larger) charities may not have developed a crisis response plan. Don't panic! Whether or not you have a crisis comms plan in place, the following

before a crisis, you will have invested time in building relationships, for example with MPs, journalists and internal staff. It is during a crisis situation that you will see a return on this investment. This is where your relationships and your programme of briefings come to your aid’.

## clarify your position and ensure it is defensible. Most importantly, determine whether or not your organisation is at fault. If your culpability is clear, check any legal implications then prepare your apology – never be afraid to say sorry. At the same time, don't be panicked into over-apologising for a minor mistake or firing off an apology that turns out not to be justified.

checklist will help make sure you get your crisis communications off to a good start.

### **Crisis communication: essential first steps**

#### **1 Convene an urgent meeting**

of the crisis response team (or, if none exists, a meeting of the senior management team) plus any other obvious key staff, according to the nature of the emergency.

**2 Ensure the meeting is briefed** as fully as possible, by someone close to the source of the crisis.

**3 Make an initial judgement** about what kind of crisis you are dealing with – are lives or limbs at risk or is the main danger reputational? (Clearly any urgent non-comms actions would be taken at this point, to avert or minimise danger.)

**4 Clarify your position and ensure it is defensible.** Most importantly, determine whether or not your organisation is at fault. If your culpability is clear, check any legal implications then prepare your apology – never be afraid to say sorry. At the same time, don't be panicked into over-apologising for a minor mistake or firing off an apology that turns out not to be justified.

**5 Agree initial messages** (most likely holding messages) for internal and external stakeholders, including press. What is it that each particular stakeholder group should know immediately about your crisis?

There may be one or two main messages that go out to all stakeholders and a few tailored messages for individual groups. But try to keep it simple.

**6 Use your cascade system**, if you have one, to disseminate your initial message. If you do not have a cascade system, draw up a list of all stakeholder groups and use appropriate mechanisms to ensure the right people contact the right groups, rapidly, through multiple digital media and any other suitable channels.

**7 Ensure your crisis response and comms team have ALL the facts**, not just when crisis hits, but all the way through the crisis.

**8 Identify your spokespeople** (ideally media and crisis-media trained). Ensure they know they must be contactable. Ensure they are fully briefed and rehearsed before every interview. See also page eleven.

**9 Agree how ongoing comms and media updates** will reach different stakeholder groups; ensure senior managers support the approach to be taken and clarify sign-off procedures.

**10 Ensure the comms lead takes a key ongoing advisory role**, briefing senior managers about changing media and communication issues and options – and the likely consequences of different courses of action.

### What's the worst that can happen?

Once the crisis has broken, it is important to work through a "what's the worst that can happen?" exercise if you think things might escalate, particularly with nasty issues of reputation.

Discuss how a damaging situation may pan out when it is public – will there be staff protest/dissent? Will celebrity supporters be critical? Could trustees resign in protest? Are there other related issues that might be brought up in connection with this crisis?

Your discussions need to be very carefully handled – especially if you include senior managers in them, who might have their own jobs on the line. If you are in a senior media/comms role you need to be prepared for this and remind senior leaders that when things are public it can rapidly change the dynamic – that's why disaster scenario training exercises are effective, with trainers adding in new information as the scenario progresses.

*Tamsin O'Brien, former head of media and PR, Oxfam GB*

### Under attack: firefighters' checklist

- Who is at fault? Us, a contractor, someone else, external human error?
- Should we apologise? ie can we defend this position or should we admit we got it wrong?
- Will admitting culpability have legal or financial implications?
- Would a third party be better at defending what has happened?
- Can we contain this by responding to individuals directly?
- Does there need to be a policy decision to head off negative publicity eg sack someone, change policy position?
- Are there strong mitigating circumstances?

*Extract from a charity's crisis preparedness checklist*

## CASE STUDY: COMMS IN A CRISIS

**Tell it all, tell it fast  
and tell the truth**

### **British Heart Foundation: top tips on getting it right**

- 1 Lead from the top. Our director of marketing and engagement leads all crisis communications.
- 2 Establish your crisis communications team quickly depending on the issue. At the BHF, this could include our newsdesk service, our out-of-hours service, our regional networks and our digital team (website and social media).
- 3 How big is the issue? Our director of marketing and engagement will class a crisis communications issue as low, medium or high risk to the BHF.
- 4 Pause and think. Once the facts are collected, consider whether you need specialist advice – for instance are there legal implications to the communication? Are we the right organisation to be speaking to the media on this issue?
- 5 Buy time. When you need to respond quickly you can buy time using: “The issue is under investigation and we should have more information shortly.”
- 6 Nominate and brief a sole spokesperson (usually our CEO) and limit other staff speaking so you are delivering a consistent and clear message.
- 7 All messaging should revolve around the principle of: “Tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth.”
- 8 Use the right tone for the issue – put people and supporters first.
- 9 If the issue is already in the public domain it's best to comment and control.
- 10 Stick to the facts and don't speculate.
- 11 Maintain a watching brief on the issue. Nominate a lead to monitor media and log all contact.
- 12 Ask internal communications to brief staff as appropriate.
- 13 Brief public points of contact – reception and regional staff.
- 14 Keep the media updated as the story evolves.

**Laura Preece, media manager, British Heart Foundation**

The next section of this guide focuses specifically on dealing with the media during a crisis.

# Part three:

# Media spotlight

## 1 THE MEDIA CHALLENGE: HOW MUCH TO SAY AND WHEN

“ How transparent do you want to be? If you offer no response and someone gets hold of it, things could look worse than they are.

*Charity communications manager*

Your key media tasks will be to put out statements, respond to media queries and offer spokespeople for interviews.

While statements may appear through traditional or social media, we'll save considering particular issues around social media until the next section.

### Handling media queries and statements

#### Your first statement

The immediate task of your crisis response team is to obtain a full briefing about the erupting or imminent potential crisis.

Following discussion, the comms lead should advise on whether or not any public statement should be issued at this stage.

There could be an argument for saying nothing to the media for now – if and only if you are confident that:

- there is no current or likely media interest **and**
- the crisis can be quickly resolved.

Even so, you should draft one or two statements that can be used if and when the story does go public.

Should the story be public already, you need to issue an initial holding statement as quickly as possible and then prepare to make further statements as soon as you can. Your holding statement should show that you are:

- empathising with any victims of the crisis;
- taking the problem seriously;
- working to investigate or tackle it; and
- intending to report back with news as soon as you have it.

It's crucial that you meet with other members of the crisis response team and discuss the fullest possible briefing of currently-known facts before you issue your holding statement. Even a bland statement can cause damage if it seems to lack empathy, make assumptions, or miss an obvious fact that is already in the public domain.

“ Be careful not to rush out that first statement, over-apologising or apologising for something that’s not your fault. You can be passionate – ‘this is terrible, we won’t stop until we find out what happened and resolve it’ – but don’t over commit or speak out of turn.

*Matt Hopkinson, former chief press officer, NSPCC*

### Media message checklist

- What’s the first thing we want to say? – immediate response
- How are we responding as the story unfolds? – within 24 hours
- How is the story developing and what’s our full position? – within 48 hours
- Are we involved/culpable – what can we say?

*Extract from a charity crisis-preparedness document*

### Never say “no comment”

If a journalist takes you by surprise – asking questions about a crisis you didn’t know about or have not yet agreed a position on – it may be tempting to say “no comment” and hope that, since you have given nothing away, the story will die.

It won’t.

Saying “no comment” is always a terrible move. The messages conveyed by those words are:

- “I refuse to tell you what is going on”
- “I have something to hide.”

Often people say “no comment” because they panic in the

misguided belief that a journalist must be given an instant response to a question – and they have no prepared response to offer.

In fact, it is always acceptable to tell a journalist you will get back to them – as long as you do. Simply clarify what question is being asked, ask the journalist to email you any details they have seen that you haven’t, check their deadline and agree a time by which you will be able to offer a comment. Be realistic but efficient about this and get back to them when you say you will.

### Preparing to comment

Ensure you are constantly updated with the changing facts of the crisis

itself and any changing media responses. This means those in your organisation closest to the source of the crisis, or in closest contact with the source of the crisis, must understand their responsibility to keep comms up to date with every new development.

For its part, comms must understand its responsibility to keep monitoring, sharing and responding to how the story is playing out.

Once you're sure you've understood the facts and their implications, you need to think about your timing and content.

#### Timing your statements

1 The general rule is "act fast but think carefully." You want to move quickly to put your side of the story before unnecessary PR damage is done by delay. You also want to be seen as responsive, efficient and aware of the urgency of the situation; but it's better to delay a statement slightly than to rush out an inadequately-considered comment that could backfire.

2 Once you have put out your initial statement, keep a watching brief on how the crisis and the story around it (they could of course be one and the same thing) are playing out. Your statement may soon need updating or changing entirely.

3 Don't expect to be in a position to issue a 'final statement'. You can influence how the story runs but you can't dictate its longevity.

4 While our 24/7 news culture may seem to necessitate statements or comments 'on demand', it can in fact allow you more flexibility to issue statements to a timetable that suits you. If your statement missed the 08:00 round-up, it can catch the 09:00 or 10:00 bulletin.

5 By the same token, while there will be news media updates throughout the day, you should resist any pressure to offer continual bulletins of your own. You could end up inadvertently injecting new life into a story that would otherwise have faded.

6 Consciously use time to your own advantage where possible. For example, social media allows you to post comments whenever suits you, whether or not traditional media channels choose to report them. And you can arrange a press briefing or conference at a time that works for your cause – such as when you are in a position to announce that your disrupted service is back up and running, or that you have suspended the trustee whose alleged misdemeanours have brought your charity into disrepute.

#### Be realistic

Organisations vary wildly in size and capacity, so timing guidelines that work for one organisation could be hard for another to follow. We would generally recommend that organisations set realistic timelines for their own context, and work towards these.

*Helen Wharton, associate director, Champollion*

Don't be careful not to rush out the  
we're all what the hell is your  
or speak out of

### Don't feed the beast

I've found that some organisations, in their attempt to be open and transparent, have constantly updated the media following a crisis. But this can have the effect of encouraging them to run more and more stories and updates that in some situations they wouldn't have run. It's far better to update at regular pre-agreed intervals and to do it to all media at once. That way you are being transparent and open, but without fanning the flames of your own criticism.

*Charity communications manager*

#### Media statements: content and style

- 1 Know the facts and represent them as accurately, directly and transparently as possible. Your position must be defensible.
- 2 Be honest: is your charity blameless in what has happened? Have you really been misrepresented? Or did you make a mistake? Everyone does sometimes, and your reputation is more likely to withstand a clean apology than an attempt to wriggle or blame others.
- 3 On the other hand, don't be tempted – perhaps by decency or the desire to look decent – to take more blame than is justified. The most credible position is straightforward and proportionate.
- 4 Blameless or otherwise, it's essential to show empathy to those who may have suffered or been upset or angered by this crisis. Obviously the tragedy of an injury or death is seen as much more important than your attempts at either self-justification or earnest confession. The same holds true for the possible distress of disrupted service users, or those who have been offended by unguarded remarks associated with your charity.
- 5 If there are genuinely extenuating circumstances or contexts, don't be afraid to mention them. It may be important for people to understand that you have had to end provision of a particular service because of government cuts; or to know that you were the last charity of your kind to end this provision, keeping it going until there were no further avenues left to explore.
- 6 Where possible, detail the action you are taking to investigate and remedy the crisis.
- 7 Keep statements short, clear and to the point.
- 8 Don't forget to report any success you have in resolving the crisis. The media will eventually stop ringing, but people may have been left with a negative impression of your charity. A good news story can turn around, or at least begin to turn around, the damage done.

# communications with a difference urgently action

“ Your communications team may need to be working out of their comfort zone, especially in a small charity where this kind of thing doesn't happen very often. It is crucial that senior management is able to provide the appropriate level of support and guidance.

*Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications, Refugee Action*

## When the phone rings

Make sure you have a process in place for taking media calls. The team needs to know who is and who is not authorised to comment, including on social media.

When the crisis hits, you need to be aware of what's being said, both in the press and on social media. This will help you decide how you can respond and influence the direction the media is going with the story. While you may have drafted some media responses in preparation, these can change when you are faced with the reality of a backlash.

Understandably, what the media wants is information, information and information. If the story has been picked up widely, you will need to distribute your statements on numerous channels including your website, social media pages and email. Remember, when on the phone to a journalist, try to stick to your official statement.

Make sure you respond to all media requests quickly to ensure your side of the story is included in any article. If you need time, release a holding statement while you draft a longer one.

Take time to consider what's being said when drafting a statement. If people are upset, think about what they want to hear from you and say as much of that as you reasonably can.

*Natasha North, marketing and communications manager,  
Pancreatic Cancer Action*

## Putting your spokespeople to work

“ The guiding principle is to be as transparent as possible, but are you ready? Is it defensible? Are your speakers fully prepared and sure of what they're saying?

*Estelle McCartney, managing director, Champollion*

“ There's nothing worse than knowingly offering someone to the media who may be completely out of their comfort zone and end up causing more damage than good.

*Saadia Usmani, media consultant, Shor Communications*

You will need a spokesperson, both when attributing any quotes that go out with your statement and to be available for print or broadcast interviews. Even if it's just for a short quote in a press release, you should offer a named and senior source.

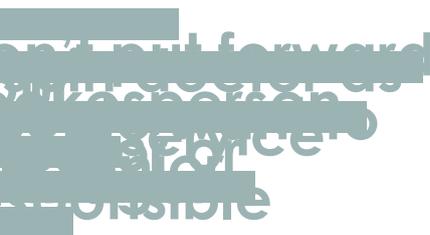
In some serious crisis situations, only your CEO or equivalent will be an appropriate person to speak for the organisation. In others, senior leaders of specialist departments will be the obvious go-to people. It is also a good idea to cultivate a small pool of media-trained service users or volunteers who

are available to comment should a journalist ask to speak to someone on the ground.

Any obvious candidates for media interviews should have undergone media training well before any crisis breaks. Ideally they should also have undergone crisis-specific media training.

However, it's quite likely that you will need or want to put up a less predictable interview candidate – perhaps, for example, a credible third party who can vouch for your charity. Clearly in these

the guiding principle is to be as transparent as possible, but are you ready? Is it defensible? Are your speakers fully prepared and sure of what they're saying?  
There's nothing worse than knowingly offering someone to the media who may be completely out of their comfort zone and end up causing more damage than good.



circumstances, there will be no time for formal media training.

#### Preparing for interview

Whether trained or untrained, your spokespeople need to be briefed and prepared for their interview.

Being briefed means they have all the facts they need for the interview and understand the 'line' your charity is taking on the crisis. They should have a crib sheet to refer to, with bullet points or Q&A giving the key messages.

They must also have reason to be confident that the line you're asking them to take is defensible.

Get someone from the comms team to stand in as an interviewer, throwing them questions, including difficult questions, so they're sure of what they are saying and are able to handle unexpected turns in the conversation with confidence.

Flag up or remind your spokesperson of the following media interview tips:

- Answer the question, clearly and unambiguously. No jargon, side-stepping, waffling or unnecessary detail.

- Have in mind one or two particularly key, short messages you want to convey when the opportunity arises (or even if it doesn't).
- Use bridging techniques to move from less helpful topics to a key message eg: "That's an important point and it will need addressing, but I think it's also important to emphasise..."
- Admit what you don't know, then bridge to solid ground eg: "I'm not in a position to answer that at this time/You would need to ask our trustees about that ... but what I can tell you is..."
- Be people-centred; express empathy for anyone affected by the crisis.
- Engage with the interviewer, maintaining eye contact (particularly if on TV) and trying to relax and be yourself.
- Remain calm and courteous at all times, even if the line of questioning is challenging or aggressive.

Beyond this, refer to the guidance above for issuing statements; much of it applies equally to interviews.

“ Don't put forward a spin doctor as your spokesperson – people want to see a service director, or the senior manager responsible for the particular area of concern, not a PR professional!

*Ann-Marie Evans, communications consultant and former interim head of communications, Alzheimer's Society*



## CASE STUDY: HANDLING A MEDIA SURGE

### Mind: Responding under pressure

Late in the evening on 11 August 2014 I was flicking through the news channels for one last look at the headlines before heading to bed. The breaking news ticker caught my eye. Hollywood actor Robin Williams had been found dead, a suspected suicide. A rush of emotions kicked in – sadness that this brilliant actor had passed away but also a surge of adrenalin – this was going to be a busy few days in the office.

I knew a story like this would trigger huge media interest in Mind, which we would need to handle correctly under great pressure to protect our reputation as a charity that provides reliable and expert advice on mental health issues. One key risk was that our comments would be mixed with sensational and graphic details about the case, thereby undermining our position on the safe reporting of suicides.

I immediately started putting our crisis media protocols into place, getting out a statement at 1am. When a high profile story about mental health and suicide breaks we swiftly issue a comment to newsdesks signposting them to Mind as a place that can offer people support. We also remind journalists of the importance of avoiding excessive detail about the method of suicide and to report sensitively. Evidence shows that copycat suicides can occur as a result of extensive media coverage.

By morning the news dominated every TV and radio channel. The story broke too late for the front pages but our phone was already ringing off the hook from journalists looking for commentators to fill their air time.

When an exceptional incident occurs prompting an unprecedented number of calls it's important to delegate roles in the press office quickly. Tasks were divvied up from writing background briefings and writing comments to arranging interviews and undertaking a three hour interview stint on GNS, the BBC's general news service. From morning until night we fielded media enquiries to get the important message out that it is OK to ask for help when you are struggling with your mental health.

A story of this magnitude continued to be front page news the following day and unfortunately, despite recommending that the press cover the story cautiously, many of the tabloids reported with irresponsible graphic detail. We issued a statement expressing our concern and found ourselves quickly ushered back in the studios for interviews to comment on how inappropriate reporting of suicide can lead to imitative behaviour.

By the end of the week Mind had appeared in 242 broadcast interviews and over 100 print and online articles. It was our website's busiest day ever and we gained over 8,000 new Facebook fans and 2,000 Twitter followers.

The huge exposure helped Mind reach millions of people with messages of support. It prompted the nation to stop and think about mental health, from radio phone-ins where callers talked about their own experiences to people sharing Tweets with their loved ones who might be struggling.



## CASE STUDIES: INFLUENCING MEDIA COVERAGE

The risk was that the local media would pick up the story and it could escalate

The following, all genuine cases in which charities acted successfully to contain or influence media events, have been made anonymous by request.

### 1 Children put at risk

**Scenario:** A health charity supporting a condition that effects both children and adults. Each year in the summer the charity runs holidays for children in order to give parents/carers some respite. It's an opportunity for the children to mix with other kids with similar experiences and build their confidence. On one of the holidays a child went into hospital with an emergency admission (not uncommon with this condition) but recovered and was able to return to the holiday. However, it was then discovered that they had contracted MRSA while in hospital and the other children on the holiday – which it was important for parents/carers to feel was a safe environment – were now at risk.

**Risks:** that the local media would pick up the story and it could escalate into a tabloid story or that a parent spoke to the media and that the charity's service of holidays for young people could be damaged.

**Action:** The contact details of all the parents/carers were pulled together. It was agreed that the priority was for the director of services to email and phone each parent individually, explaining the situation and to communicate further in a follow-up letter. Parents appreciated the swift personal contact – this meant that the charity managed to avoid a parent going to the media. A reactive statement and Q&A were prepared should the charity be contacted by the media who could have heard from a disgruntled parent or from the hospital.

## 2 Pornography charge for a former employee

**Scenario:** A charity for children and young people up to the age of 19 with residential schooling and healthcare. The charity was alerted by local media that a former employee was charged and appearing in court for downloading pornography involving children and young people.

**Risks:** That the charity had employed a member staff who was putting vulnerable young people at risk; raised questions about the recruitment and screening processes of the charity; fears that incidents may have happened to vulnerable children and young people while this individual was employed; parents withdrawing their children due to reputation damage, leading to significant loss of statutory fundraising; damage to the charity's high-profile partnerships with NHS organisations.

**Action:** It was agreed not to issue a statement proactively, but to prepare a reactive statement should the charity be approached by media. A Q&A sheet was produced, including up-to-date information on the charity's recruitment and screening process for staff working directly with children and the key spokesperson, the director of services, was briefed. Local and trade media did contact the charity following the court proceedings but as the Q&A addressed all questions honestly and transparently there was no negative media coverage.

## 3 Incident with guns outside a hostel for the homeless

**Scenario:** a short-term hostel for the homeless in a central city location but also with a residential population. There was a history of some resistance to the presence of the hostel, particularly as the hostel residents were there short-term and grappling with issues such as alcohol and drugs. When a shooting incident took place outside the hostel, the circumstances were unclear, but the residents in the area blamed the hostel and the incident was reported in the media.

**Risks:** That local residents could force the closure of the hostel, which was supported by the local authority; relocation, which in turn could prove difficult as local people would be reluctant due to the perceived risks.

**Action:** A notice/letter was delivered to all local residents from the chief executive of the charity; the CEO then held a meeting at which local residents could ask questions and share their concerns. The local authority and other stakeholders were contacted to inform them of the incident and to reassure them that the incident had been well-handled in co-operation with the police. A statement was sent to local media and Q&A prepared. There was no coverage in local/regional media and the hostel remained open.

## 2 SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CRISIS

Any comment about an organisation can now be disseminated around the globe in a flash.

On the downside, Twitter or Facebook can create an instant media crisis for your charity; on the upside, a rapid rebuttal post might be all it takes to put out a fire.

By embracing social media, you can ensure it works for you rather than against you, whenever possible. Indeed, a PR incident can sometimes be avoided entirely by getting straight on to Twitter as soon as something awkward happens – telling the story as you want it told, before anyone else does.

Make sure you understand how social media works, keep abreast of what's being said about you and act effectively to make the best of your own social media output.

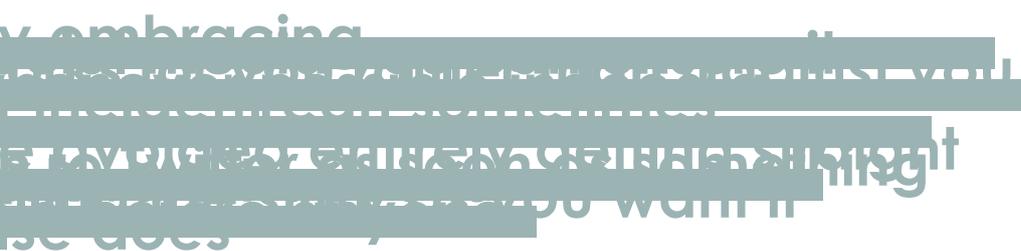
A few basic things to consider are:

- Monitor the obvious social media channels and any key blogs in your field. Use a monitoring technology such as Google Alerts

or Hootsuite to do this easily and for free.

- Where adverse stories appear, check what reaction they are getting – comments, retweets and so on.
- Loyal staff, volunteers or supporters may rally to your defence through their personal social media accounts if you are unfairly attacked. This can sometimes be much more effective than responding yourself.
- Some critical posts are best ignored. If they are mean-spirited or lacking credibility, they will damage their author's reputation, not yours.
- Your staff and volunteers have a right to freedom of expression on their personal social media. Ensure they are well-informed and engaged representatives of your charity. Make sure they understand that their private posts may be seen as linked to the organisation.

To optimise your social media approaches in a crisis, follow these top tips and expert insights:



## Social media in a crisis: top 10 tips

**1 Be quick, be proactive:** Social media outlets do not depend on the news cycle – you can post immediately. This gives you a chance to take control of the online conversation from the very beginning of a potential crisis – even if you can only say that an incident has occurred, that you are looking into it, and that you will keep people regularly informed.

**2 Keep your social media team up to date:** Don't forget about the social media team – especially if they do not sit within the communications team. It is important that they are briefed and up to date on developments – especially as they may often be the first point of contact between your organisation and media and other stakeholders.

**3 Speak with one voice:** Twitter users might contact your chief executive or senior team directly. The organisation needs to speak consistently about a crisis – and tweets coming from individual accounts need to adhere to the agreed lines and messaging.

**4 Maintain consistent messaging:** Similarly, it is essential that your messaging on social media remains in line with all other media or stakeholder communications coming out of an organisation.

**5 Focus your efforts and identify suitable social media channels:** You may need to use more than one social media outlet – communicating perhaps with opinion formers and the media on Twitter and with service users on Facebook. You should keep a consistency in the messaging and timing of your posts across different channels, and target your resources to the channels used by your audiences.

**6 Drive audiences to holding statement/official response:** You will not have the capacity to respond to every individual tweet, but can use social media to guide people towards a single source of information where you can articulate your position. This could be a holding statement or official response/Q&A on your website.

**7 Use your legal experts:** Remember that everything you say on Twitter is public. If your crisis communications work requires the sign off of your legal experts, remember that you must apply the same legal advice to social media outputs as you would to any other statements.

**8 Set the right tone:** As with all your external communications in a crisis, your tone on social media should be informative, helpful and convey that you are doing what you can to rectify the situation – you should never be defensive in your response.

**9 Maintain engagement post-crisis:** Social media can be an important means of beginning the process of rebuilding and re-establishing the reputation of your organisation. Once the crisis is over, don't stop engaging with those who contacted you. Keep people updated on positive progressions within your organisation and remind them that they are important to you.

**10 Update your processes:** Make sure you do an internal review of the crisis once it's over, so that your social media guidelines and protocol can be revised and improved ahead of any future incidents.

*Helen Wharton, associate director, Champollion*

## Social media crises: lessons I've learned

### 1 Respond to complaints

There's nothing worse than people complaining with no response from the organisation. Make sure you check your social media over the weekend. The best thing to do is to get the complaint off social media – give them a named personal email address to contact and get back to them as soon as you can. Even a holding email saying you are investigating their complaint is a good start.

I do think it's good practice to respond to your supporters and to pass their opinions on. But remember, it is usually just one person's point of view. If lots of people agree with the feedback then it can become a crisis where you need to act; this Odeon Facebook feedback got nearly 300,000 views and over 25,000 comments: [facebook.com/ODEON/posts/523396924342167](https://www.facebook.com/ODEON/posts/523396924342167)

### 2 Careful what you tweet

Sometimes you'll get the tone wrong. Or 'cross the streams'. As social media managers we often have our personal accounts on our phones or home PCs. Be very careful. Personally, I would never tweet something I wouldn't be happy with my grandma or future boss seeing. Never tweet in anger!

### 3 Don't rise to troll bait

I increasingly see deliberately controversial articles posted, which are designed to get a response. Think carefully about whether responding would be wise. Does the article constitute feedback about your brand that could go viral? A complaint? A reputational risk? If not, I wouldn't get involved.

### 4 Find out who can help

A social media crisis is a problem for everyone, so push for senior people to be involved. Even in smaller organisations there will be someone who should work with you to deal with a crisis – maybe even the CEO.

If you're the only person in your business who deals with comms, get your senior leader involved or think about a mentor. You can also reach out to your networks on Twitter.

### 5 De-personalise and learn from others

Remember, we're all human and we all make mistakes from time to time – check out and learn from the worst social media fails of 2014, according to Inc. magazine: [inc.com/rebecca-borison/top-10-social-media-fails-2014.html](http://inc.com/rebecca-borison/top-10-social-media-fails-2014.html)

When it happens, craft a response that addresses the points raised and try to respond to everyone at once – use tools like Twitlonger ([twitlonger.com/](http://twitlonger.com/)) to share longer posts if you need to. Follow your plan. Try to de-personalise. Call on your team and wider network for support. Get away from your desk for a while when you can.

Pin this US Air Force social media response poster above your desk: [afpc.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-091210-037.pdf](http://afpc.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-091210-037.pdf)

Taryn Ozorio, digital specialist and former digital manager, Mind



## CASE STUDY: HONEST WORDS AND PICTURES

**The crucial lesson is to get accurate information and images out quickly**

### **RSPCA: Reacting to an emotional situation**

We investigate 160,000 complaints on animal welfare annually; unsurprisingly, some cases provoke criticism, much now emerging on social media channels within hours of the original incident. Our reactive communications need to be quick, factually correct and empathetic, but reflect and put across the RSPCA position – a combination that can be difficult in an emotionally charged world.

One such crisis emerged from an inspectorate visit following a public complaint on the condition and quality of life of a street dog that had been rescued from Romania by another animal welfare group. A Facebook page had been set up to 'save' this dog, which had been taken to a veterinarian to assess its health and welfare; the vet recommended it was suffering and should be euthanised.

The dog was disabled but, more worryingly, had developed pressure sores from its harness, which it used to get around. The Facebook page, which showed a cute photo of the dog, soon became viral with over 200 comments an hour, crossing over to the RSPCA page with the inevitable petition set up to stop the faceless, uncaring people in the RSPCA from killing the dog.

This all happened over the weekend, so getting accurate information was difficult. Fortunately, we could say within hours that it was not the RSPCA but an independent vet who had recommended euthanasia. However, we still needed to convince the public this was an animal welfare issue. We did this by posting a photo of the dog showing its poor condition, which even to an untrained eye did not look good.

The public fury evaporated when a second veterinary opinion was obtained and a solution was agreed to assess the dog's welfare with regular visits to the vet. The crucial lesson is to get accurate information and images out quickly, but not at the expense of each other.

**David Bowles, head of public affairs, RSPCA**

# Part Four:

## Learning points

### 1 TROUBLE SHOOTING: OVERCOMING STUMBLING BLOCKS

As if a crisis isn't enough to deal with, communication professionals can find their hands tied or their best efforts sabotaged by difficulties and disagreements inside the organisation.

Unless such difficulties are resolved, you could find your charity fails to bring an effective resolution to

the issue at the heart of the crisis; fails to put out credible, consistent messages to its different audiences; or fails to keep a steady grip on the situation, ensuring follow-up and completion once the immediate crisis abates. Any of these consequences could prove very costly.

#### Up against it:

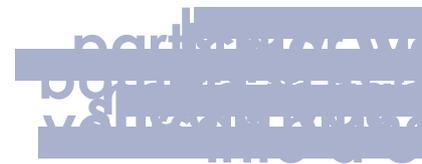
Typical stumbling blocks encountered by charity communicators tackling crisis comms:

- Lack of understanding of PR in the organisation
- Information cover-ups and inaccuracies
- No media training for spokespeople
- No awareness among staff
- Communication breakdowns
- Information leaks
- Delays in turnaround time due to red tape
- Attitudes of senior staff
- Failure to follow clear directions and processes
- Lack of clear and detailed note-taking/records.

Most of these difficulties can be avoided by the strategies already discussed in this guide:

- Nurturing relationships between comms and other departments
- Awareness-raising about the role of comms in good times and bad
- A good crisis communications plan
- Media and crisis training for key staff
- Clear, honest, sincere and prepared spokespeople
- A strong, effective, transparent internal communications culture
- A trusted, calm and influential comms lead and effective comms team.

You are the expert on your organisation and will know which particular weak links or rigid barriers you may need to tackle. Should you find yourself plunged into a crisis before such difficulties are overcome, at the very least, it helps to know what you are dealing with. At best you may find that the crisis itself creates the momentum needed for necessary changes to happen. If change comes too late to help you overcome one crisis, it may happen in time for the next one!



## Three thorny issues and how to tackle them

### 1 Dishonesty and inaccuracies

You need to be sure that the facts you have been given are accurate and honest. If in any doubt, ask questions, get things in writing and double check any information that will go public. We've all seen how burying information can lead to further embarrassment. So, if it's a case of a member of staff going to court, do you have all the background on their case?

### 2 Attitude of senior staff

There will always be someone who feels their voice should be heard above all others and their advice followed. Diplomacy is key if you think a senior manager's advice may actually cause further damage. Be sensitive and sensible; try and present the scenario from alternative viewpoints (ideally in writing) – including the perspectives of another member of the senior team in the equation. You need to present your case confidently if egos take over; just make it clear that you considered the potential consequences of both approaches... then hold your breath.

### 3 Shoddy records

Many teams run into trouble because of inadequate record-keeping. It's essential to brief all those involved with the crisis to take note of everything that's said pertaining to the crisis – in phone calls, emails, meetings, memos or anything else, whether from staff, service users or external bodies. Note down time, content and any actions. If your crisis escalates and you end up in court in a year or even two, don't rely on your memory alone to safeguard your reputation.

*Saadia Usmani, media consultant, Shor Communications*

### Legal challenge

"The legal team has a procedural background. It can create a struggle, because the legal advice is often to say nothing and managers, quite rightly, take heed of legal advice. So the thing to do is to include the legal team from the beginning, make sure they understand the importance of comms and comms understands the value of legal expertise."

### Emotional rescue?

"In a crisis the emotions of senior managers can get in the way – it's often indicative of the passion they have for the charity, but as a result it can become easy to let emotion influence how they want us to manage our response to a crisis. When they are prepared for media interviews they are great, but in a crisis their media training can go out the window. They revert to using complex language and acronyms and the key messages are lost."

### Calming comms

"Your body language will help determine how things run. It's about staying calm and reassuring senior people that you're on it, you're handling it and you'll advise them of what to do. It's a bit like when a child looks at you for reassurance. Obviously you build up this trust over a period of time."

*Selected comments from charity comms professionals, gathered by CharityComms*

It can be a case of saying: right, now we need to rethink the next 12 months

## 2 AFTER THE STORM: MOVING ON

“ It can be a case of saying: right, now we need to rethink the next 12 months.

*Charity communications manager*

You will know when you have passed through the eye of the storm. A suspended service is back up and running; a new CEO has replaced the disgraced one; your crisis

response team meetings become less regular and less tense; you stop holding your breath when the media monitor drops into your in-box.

## easy to say when your reputation has recovered from severe damage

Indeed you might become aware that your crisis comms approach has reaped positive gains for your charity. Perhaps, for example:

- Your CEO has gained a new following because of the sincere and honest way s/he spoke out on the crisis.
- Membership figures are up. People who had never heard of your charity before are now aware of what you do and impressed by the principled and professional way you seem to go about things.
- The issues debated publicly during the crisis have given you a new campaigning platform.

Yet it's not always easy to say when a crisis has fully ended. It could take years for your reputation and supporter base to recover from severe damage; even a minor crisis could leave a slightly negative tone rumbling quietly on through media coverage of your charity's work, or relationships with partner agencies remaining cooler than before. It's important to reach a point where you can review how the land lies and begin to move your charity communications forward accordingly.

### Post mortem

Make the effort to evaluate:

- Which elements of your crisis comms plan were particularly helpful
- Which were unhelpful/need changing

- What you should add to your plan for the future
- Which communication channels and approaches worked
- Which didn't
- What were the key messages you tried to put out to your stakeholders?
- Did they stick?
- What other messages were conveyed about you in the media?
- Are they still sticking?
- How would you assess your status and reputation now?
- What are people saying about your brand? (If possible, commission some research at an appropriate moment. If not, formulate a simple straw poll among a few representatives of each stakeholder group.)
- Have your supporter-base or membership figures been affected?

### Next steps

As soon as you have good news to share about resolving your crisis, make sure you do share it, properly, with all your stakeholders. This will probably mean using multiple media channels to make sure everyone hears the news, plus following up with further stories to ensure the news has sunk in and can be built upon.

Beyond this, depending on your post-mortem findings, make decisions about how you should be tackling the next chapter in the life

## Lay low for a while

of your charity. You might decide to:

- Amend various procedures to protect you against a future crisis of the same kind, or to improve the way comms will be able to deal with a crisis next time.
  - Lay low for a while. Lick your wounds, stay out of the media spotlight and plan for a comeback a bit later down the line.
  - Plan for a longer term 'post-crisis' comms footing, with the crisis response team still meeting and a deliberate comms effort being followed – to report on different steps of recovery, repair relationships with your stakeholders and ultimately rebuild your brand.
- In some cases you may be able to take advantage of opportunities arising from the crisis; eg:
    - ♦ launch a new campaign on issues that fired the public's imagination for the first time during the crisis
    - ♦ Make more use of a spokesperson who found favour with the press during the crisis
    - ♦ Launch a membership drive while people are still talking about you.

### Back to the future

#### Awareness-raising

"For small charities, if carefully managed, a crisis can give you the opportunity to be out there and get some exposure – something that can be difficult when you don't have a brand presence."

*Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications, Refugee Action*

#### Even the darkest cloud...

"While the Jimmy Savile case was horrible, we and the police were able to use it to encourage people to come forward and report abuse happening right now. We both saw huge surges in people picking up the phone to ask for help. So to some extent we turned a very dark story into a positive for victims of abuse."

*Matt Hopkinson, former chief press officer, NSPCC*

# Acknowledgements

## OUR STEERING GROUP

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Ann-Marie Evans, communications consultant and former interim head of communications, Alzheimer's Society

Zoë Grumbridge, head of fundraising and communications, Refugee Action

Matt Hopkinson, head of news, HMRC and former chief press officer, NSPCC

Sarah Knapp, group head of media, campaigns and engagement, Age UK

Estelle McCartney, managing director, Champollion

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## ABOUT CHAMPOLLION

Champollion is an independent communications consultancy. Experts in public policy, and with a strong track record in the charity sector, we help clients build their reputation and profile. We know how to establish, run and manage projects – and have a first-rate track record of media delivery and stakeholder engagement programmes.

We have extensive experience in crisis communications, and help clients to protect their brands and reputations. Our services include crisis training and simulation, and media crisis training. We also often act as a frontline press office during times of increased media interest in an organisation.

Our online communications agency, Champollion Digital, matches extensive experience in campaign strategy and policy knowledge with technical know-how, offering creative solutions to influence and engage online audiences. We are able to offer our clients a full range of digital services, including offering a digital press office and managing social media outlets.

Champollion Political is the dedicated public affairs arm of Champollion group. We work with organisations to influence matters of public policy engaging directly with decision makers and influencers in Westminster and Whitehall. Specialists in communicating public policy arguments, we build strategies, map audiences and craft messages to meet the objectives of our clients.

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## ABOUT CHARITYCOMMS

CharityComms ([charitycomms.org.uk](http://charitycomms.org.uk)) is the professional membership body for charity communicators. We believe that effective and inspiring communications should be at the heart of every charity's work for a better world. We're here to improve the standard of communications and champion its role in the sector.

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