

Navigating Through Crisis

Part I: Protect Trust

by Ann Taylor

In this first part of a five-part series on crisis management, Ann Taylor, recipient of the Public Relations Society of America's Gold Excalibur Award for Crisis Management, examines the five steps to successfully navigate through a crisis.

PLAN NOW FOR THE INEVITABLE

A misconception about crisis — an unplanned event that radically increases scrutiny and threatens organizational reputation — is that it occurs suddenly, without warning. Often, before it erupts, crisis smolders while warnings go unheeded. Even events that appear wildly unpredictable did not occur without warning.

This is the warning, and the chance to prepare is now!

Living in the shadow of pandemic, social upheaval, and a reckoning of racial inequity, crisis now seems indiscriminate. Even purpose-driven, ethical, well managed companies are vulnerable to additional self-inflicted harm, if they fail to prepare.

Despite the inability to predict the exact features of a crisis, every crisis follows these phases: from pre-crisis, to acute, to resolution and recovery. And every organization can and should prepare for, not just the unforeseen, but the unimaginable. There are five steps to navigate through a crisis:

1. Protect trust
2. Accept responsibility
3. Repair damage
4. Learn lessons
5. Bounce forward (not back)

ABOUT ANN TAYLOR



Bringing more than 30 years of experience in innovation and leadership, Ann's career has focused on building brands, engaging audiences, and creating consumer preference in real estate and land use. Her newest venture, Wide Ranging + Co., provides brand, PR, and creative services to businesses in responsible land use and the built environment. Contact Ann at: ann@widerangingco.com

ABOUT ELEVATE MARKETING ADVISORS

Elevate Marketing Advisors develops marketing and business development campaigns to invigorate your brand, differentiate your firm, and drive business to your bottom line so you stay focused on design and delivery of your discipline.

We are driven to help people and firms realize their beyond through relationship, advocacy, and an elevated client experience. We do this through a daily commitment to our guiding principles:

- Embrace Authenticity
- Reject Mediocrity
- Invest in Relationships
- Deliver with Intention
- Have Fun and Kick Ass!

Navigating Through Crisis Part I: Protect Trust, continued

Each step deserves to be examined, understood, and incorporated into an organization's crisis strategy. However, without step one, none of the others will succeed.

Step 1: Protect Trust

Scenario: Within minutes of an accident, a news helicopter hovering over the construction site runs live feed that airs on multiple websites. It's instantly in social media feeds shared by text messages across international borders. The company's crisis communications team has not even ascertained basic facts on the ground.

The single most important thing an organization can do to protect trust in this acute phase is to have prepared in advance to be responsive, truthful, and transparent. According to the head of crisis management at one of the world's largest PR agencies, more than a quarter of crises spread internationally within one hour. However, on average, companies take 21 hours to defend themselves in any meaningful way.

Tools to prepare:

- Develop a crisis communications plan for the types and magnitude of crises you can foresee yet recognize the actual event may not follow any of these scenarios. Update at least annually.
- Clearly identify roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including third-party advocates who can be allies. Build communications channels before they are needed.
- Create a robust alert and notification process with up-to-date contact information.
- Script pre-approved external messages including a holding message to acknowledge an event has occurred with a promise to provide updated information as soon as possible. Follow through with updates as soon as possible. Promises kept at each stage rebuild trust.
- Prepare a dark website: a non-visible website that goes live in the event of crisis. The site stores information that can be tailored quickly to provide updates concerning the crisis, along with news releases, company statements, and contact information. Anticipate that basic information news media will need to report the story and this makes their job easier.
- Develop a social media plan with prepared posts that mirror the dark website messaging. At the first alert of crisis, stop previously scheduled posts that would be inappropriate with the new Circumstances.

Knowing no organization can perfectly insulate itself from crisis brings a measure of humility and humanity to your strategic leadership. The opportunity hidden within crisis is that it reveals the true character of your leaders. When lessons learned have been harnessed to improve operations, organizations have reemerged, more trusted than before.

**Coming Next: Navigating Through Trust
Part II: Crisis Management, Accept Responsibility**