

American Library Association Crisis Communication Information Resources & Tools

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

The Institute for Crisis Management defines a crisis as: *A significant disruption that stimulates extensive news media coverage and public scrutiny that disrupts the organization's normal business activities.*

Some of the common elements of a crisis are that it:

- Occurs suddenly.
- Demands quick response.
- Interferes with organizational performance.
- Creates uncertainty and stress.
- Threatens the reputation of an organization.
- Escalates in intensity.
- Causes outsiders to scrutinize the organization.
- Permanently alters the organization.

TYPES OF CRISES

Sudden Crisis — A disruption in the organization's business that occurs without warning and is likely to generate news coverage. Examples of a *Sudden Crisis*:

- Death, serious illness or injury of management, employees, contractors, visitors, etc.
- Sudden death or incapacitation of a key executive.
- Accidents that disrupt telephone or utility service.
- Any natural disaster that disrupts operations and endangers employees.
- Workplace violence.

Smoldering Crisis — Any serious organizational or business problem that is not generally known within or outside the organization, which may generate negative news coverage if or when it goes public and could result in fines, penalties, legal damage, awards and unbudgeted expenses. Some examples of a *Smoldering Crisis*:

- Indications of an undercover investigation by a news organization or law enforcement.
- Violations of government regulations, which could result in fines or legal actions.
- Action by a disgruntled employee, such as the disclosure of confidential information to government agencies or media.

A *Smoldering Crisis* may start with adverse government actions; false accusations; indictment of an employee; lawsuits; damaging rumors; computer tampering; special interest group attack; whistle-blower threat or actions; activist demonstrations; terrorism threat or action; or damaging rumors.

RESPONDING TO CRISIS

Dealing with bad news

ALA's Library Advocates Handbook

By Patricia Glass-Schuman, ALA Past-President,

Inevitably, all organizations must deal with bad news. Budget cuts. Trimmed hours or closed branches. Parents who want to ban books from the library.

While bad news is never good, it can be turned into a positive media message. For example, when a teenage hacker crashed Seattle's King County Library System's computer system, closing the library down for three days, the story centered on the marvels of the technology rather than its failure, thanks to the library's quick and thoughtful response.

Some bad news you can see coming — budget cuts are generally in the works for weeks. Others, like crimes, cannot be anticipated.

Here are a few tips for handling bad news:

- **Don't overreact.** If only one small paper carries the story, respond only to that paper rather than sending out a release to all your media contacts. If they don't know about the bad news, you probably don't want to tell them about it.
- **Be strategic.** If the news is huge, a press conference is appropriate to communicate the facts, new developments and the library's response or message. It will save you time and resources to hold one press conference rather than take a dozen individual interviews.
- **Speak with one voice.** The most common mistake in crisis communications is to have several spokespeople saying different things. Have one spokesperson, or make sure that all your spokespeople are saying the same thing.
- **Understand interview topics and formats before accepting interviews.** During these times, it is very important to be sure you understand the nature of a talk radio show or TV interview before you agree to go on. Don't speculate. Know who else will be on the show, if there will be call-ins and what the host's position is before making a choice to go on. If you don't think you'll be given a fair hearing, it might not be best to accept the interview.
- **Focus on the solution.** Explain how the library is going to address the situation or say that the library is looking for a speedy solution.

- **Apologize when appropriate.** “We apologize for any inconvenience to our users. We are doing our best to...” Empathize. Convey caring and understanding.
- **Have all the facts before responding.** Often, when news just breaks, not even the media has all the facts. Make sure you know exactly what is going on before responding to something that could just be a rumor or an exaggerated allegation.
- **Prepare briefing materials.** As soon as you can, have briefing materials for the media, with accurate facts included.
- **Let lawyers review statements before releasing them.** If this situation has legal implications, make sure you consult with a lawyer before making a statement. Avoid “legalese,” but make sure that what you’re saying is OK to say.
- **Stick to the high road.** Avoid criticizing or getting personal with your opponents. Don’t be defensive. Staying focused on your message and on the high road will ultimately be your best weapon.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (TEMPLATE)

Goals of the plan:

- Fashion a response with key messages that are consistent with [Name Library] mission.
- If there is going to be a response, choose the appropriate tactic to deliver the message.
- Choose the appropriate communications channel to deliver message to key audiences.
- Develop a written response and release it through traditional and new media.
- Manage reaction to response.

Crisis Response Team Members are (if Applicable):

NAME	Title	Business/After-hours contact Information
	Communications Lead	
	Social Media Lead	
	Spokesperson	
	Policy Expert	
	Digital Content Manager	
	Legal	

Team Tasks:

The Crisis Response Team will:

- Discuss and analyze the crisis.
- Agree on next steps.
- Create response.
- Review response with legal counsel, if necessary.

- Assign an internal point person to handle calls from media and facilitate contact with spokesperson.
- Inform key decision makers of the crisis and implementation plan.
- Implement the response. Advise key staff about the results.

Staff procedures (*Assign Tasks*)

[Name Here] will regularly discuss media coverage and related activity to determine emerging trends and extraordinary coverage and activity. These trends will be reviewed by the crisis team and brought to the attention of key library leaders

The Crisis Response Team will include [Name Here], [Name Here] and [Name Here]. The team will determine if the criteria have been met that indicate that there is a crisis.

Examples of media coverage and related activity that will be reviewed against the criteria of a crisis will include the following:

- National print columnist or radio or TV commentator attacks [Library Name] and its policies.
- Print editorial attacking [Library Name] and its policies appears in newspaper.
- Attacks via Social Media regarding key [Library Name] issues.
- Local politician attacks [Library Name] and its policies, and the attack receives national coverage.
- Series of unrelated articles appear in different publications that cast [Library Name] in a negative light.
- Unrelated TV or radio stories that cast [Library Name] in a negative light.
- [Library Name] leadership or staff receives more than 10 letters or e-mails on any one related topic that attack [Library Name] policies, etc., within a 90-day period.
- A court rules on a matter of great concern to ALA, or in which ALA is a plaintiff.

ID Possible Crisis Issues

Issue: Budget Cuts

* Librarians know shrinking budgets demand a lot of hard choices, but when it comes time to make those decisions, we just ask elected officials and the public to think about how many people turn libraries for access to computers and technology and for education and career development services and programs.

Issue: Book Challenge

* Although every book may not be a perfect fit for every reader, the freedom to choose for ourselves from a diverse set of ideas across the social and political spectrum is a hard-won right for every American.

Issue: Drug Use in Library

*Our nation's opioid epidemic is not simply a library concern – it is a nation-wide issue that demands community-wide solutions. Libraries frequently join with other agencies to become part of the solution.

Issue: Homeless patrons

* As library staffs continue efforts to assist patrons in need, many libraries are offering staff development resources that will help staff implement library use behavior policies and respond to challenging users effectively.

ID Distribution Channels

- Staff
- Press Lists
- Social Media Channels
- List Servs
- Webpages

Media Response Protocol

[Name Here] serves as the main contact for calls about ALA issues from reporters and encourages staff to inform [Spokesperson] of media inquiries. [Name Here] will vet and coordinate media interview opportunities for library spokespersons.

Spokesperson designates will include the following: [Name Here], or appropriate staff. In addition, when appropriate, spokespersons will be selected from the following groups in the order as indicated:

- The order of spokesperson is [Name Here], [Name Here], and then [Name Here]