Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety ®

CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
A Key Business Continuity Component

"Information is like water—it can be a lifesaver, in the right amount, at the right time, and if the quality is good. Good information is more than just accurate. It's also complete, consistent, timely, and appropriate to the audience."

Maxine Hayes, MD, MPH, State Health Officer, Washington State Department of Health (Retired)

Business disruptions come in all shapes and sizes—the best way to prepare is to expect the unexpected. For two years, the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) has helped businesses prepare for and respond to natural disasters and other causes of loss through its **OFB-EZ**® business continuity program. OFB-EZ recognizes the importance of crisis communication by encouraging businesses to obtain and maintain key contact information for their employees, customers, vendors, and others, and to make sure communication systems will operate even if the business is closed. The key is knowing when and how to communicate essential information to keep those you rely on, and those who rely on you, in sync. In this article, we will specifically address the crisis communication necessary for a business' employees and specific external stakeholders in relation to a business continuity plan.

Crisis COMMUNICATION Plan

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

A serious threat which, under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances, necessitates making critical decisions.

— Rosenthal U., 't Hart P., Charles M., "The World of Crises and Crisis Management"

WHAT IS A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN?

A Crisis Communication Plan outlines the procedures for collecting and conveying information to interested parties during or immediately following an emergency or crisis.

— The Business Continuity Management Institute (BCM Institute)[1]

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[1] BCM Institute promotes and develops the disciplines of business continuity management and disaster recovery planning for a variety of industries and clients around the world.

WHY COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Information is critical during catastrophic events and emergencies. Precise, timely, and relevant information is essential for businesses to maintain trust and credibility; for employees, customers and vendors, it can help in decision-making that may affect personal safety or productivity. Most importantly, it is vital to help provide rapid and appropriate assistance to those who need it following a crisis.

Given its important role, crisis communication must be part of an effective business continuity plan, and not come as an improvised afterthought. Every business should have a crisis communication plan to ensure that accurate information is provided before, during and after a disruption, minimizing problems caused by untimely or misleading communications.

WHO TO CONTACT

Most businesses have multiple stakeholders who should be included in a crisis communication plan. That said, the most important and immediate targets are employees who need to know about damage to workplace facilities and the status of operations. Once employees are provided with this baseline information, it is important to reach out to others based on the specifics of the problem the business is facing (e.g., damage to the building, length of likely closure, financial needs, etc.). This could include key customers, suppliers, creditors, utility companies, and neighboring businesses, as well as crucial business partners such as insurance agents and financial institutions.

WHAT INFORMATION TO INCLUDE

A business' crisis communication goal should be to provide timely, accurate, and clear information to prevent inaccuracies and rumors. To accomplish this objective, a message containing the following verified information should be sent to all stakeholders as soon as possible after a disruption has occurred:

✓ What, when, and where a disruption has occurred

✓ How serious the problem appears to be

✓ How the business has been impacted (e.g., damage to facilities and operations)

Additional information should be sent to employees including:

✓ Who is expected to report to work

✓ Where and when to report to work

✓ Where to direct questions

✓ When more details will be available

All communications should be tailored to the recipient, considering what they may be experiencing as a result of the disaster. If possible, it is helpful to be specific and stress positive outcomes. This not only helps to maintain the business' good reputation, but it also provides practical information regarding when and where the business will be "open for business."

KEY STAKEHOLDER INFORMATION

EMPLOYEE

Is it safe to go back to work (and what is being done to assure my safety)? Do I have to report to work? Will I be paid if the office is closed? How and when will I be paid? Will I have a job after this crisis is over?

CUSTOMER

When will I receive my order? How will you make this right?

SUPPLIER

Will you be canceling your order? When should we resume deliveries? Where should we ship your current order?

CREDITOR

When can I expect payment?

NEIGHBORING BUSINESS
(if disruption is caused by your business)

How are you taking care of this matter? What are you going to do to prevent this from happening again?

HOW TO CREATE A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

1. ASSIGN A COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Identify a crisis communication coordinator. This person is responsible for managing the communications process, developing messaging, and working with the business owner or other senior management on preparation and implementation.

2. CREATE MESSAGE TEMPLATES

Prepare message templates ahead of time to save time and energy. As part of a table-top (practice) exercise, it is easy to create message templates. However, starting from scratch after an actual emergency has occurred can result in factual or tonal mistakes. If there is warning of an impending disaster (e.g., a hurricane or blizzard), it may be possible to refine the message templates before the actual event.

3. CREATE AN EMPLOYEE EMERGENCY CARD

Create and distribute a wallet-sized emergency card which includes critical information that may be needed during or immediately after a disaster. Even if you operate a largely paperless office, a small employee emergency card is a useful resource that should be easy to access if electronic devices are down.

SAMPLE EMPLOYEE EMERGENCY CARD

4. DECIDE WHEN TO POST INFORMATION UPDATES

Set up a post-disaster communications schedule. The most critical information should be released as soon as possible following a disaster. However, once the situation stabilizes, it often makes sense to post information at set intervals, such as every day at noon. This is more convenient for various stakeholders and reminds the business owner of the need for frequent updates.

SAMPLE PREPARED MESSAGE TEMPLATE (FOR EMPLOYEES)

FIRST NOTICE

A severe storm has developed over _____ and is estimated to continue through __:__am/pm. Please relay this information to all affected individuals in your department/work area, including any onsite visitors.

NOTICE OF DELAYED OPENING

Due to the current weather conditions, the _____ will have a delayed opening on _____. The office will open at __:__ am/pm. Please call _____ or check the _____ website to verify the status of the office prior to your commute.

NOTICE OF CLOSURE

The _____ will be closed _____ due to the severe storm. Those employees who are expected to report to work will be notified. It is anticipated that the _____ will reopen _____, depending on conditions. As more information is available, we will contact you by _____ by __:__ am/pm. Please call _____ or check the _____ website to verify the status of the office prior to your commute. Optional: Employees who were scheduled for work today will receive their regular full day wages according to their normal work schedule.

NOTICE OF RE-OPENING

The _____ will reopen _____. Those scheduled to work are expected to report to work at their designated starting time. However, we do not expect any employee to take unreasonable risks attempting to report for work. Each employee must observe conditions in his/her own area and determine whether aftermath conditions or circumstances will make the trip unduly hazardous. You must notify your supervisor as soon as possible if you will be unable to report to work or if you will arrive late.

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE THROUGH

Communicating during or immediately after a major disaster can be almost impossible, as thousands of people attempt to reach friends and families to confirm their safety or to report on their own situation. While cellular communications are often the most reliable during a power or weather emergency, the huge call volume can strain the cellular network, making calls difficult.

To overcome this obstacle, a business' crisis communication plan should include multiple means of reaching key stakeholders, such as text messaging, emails, a business telephone hotline with recorded messages (as well as the capability of allowing the caller to leave voice messages), social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), a business' website or intranet site, or a third-party emergency notification system.

START YOUR PLAN TODAY

Having a crisis communication plan in advance of a disruption helps to minimize the likelihood of misinformation, assure an effective communications flow, and increase the timeliness of messaging. Although every disaster has unique challenges, planning for crisis communication in advance allows business owners to identify what may be needed and make preparations accordingly, freeing up time to handle the actual disruption when it occurs. The plan should include key contacts, templates and detailed procedures on how and when to share information and with whom. The goal is to gather all critical information in one place, so it is easily accessed and consistently communicated. For more information and helpful resources for business continuity planning, including the OFB-EZ Toolkit, visit www.DisasterSafety.org/open-for-business.

HOW TO USE A PHONE TREE

A phone tree is a communication process that starts with the communications coordinator or a designated administrator who shares urgent messages with pre-identified key employees. These employees in turn contact another list of pre-identified staff, and so forth, until all employees are reached. For a post-disaster phone tree to be effective, it should include up-to-date contact information, and as many contact methods as possible for each employee (e.g., landline and cellular phone numbers, business and personal email addresses, social media account user names, and emergency out-of-state contacts).

Phone trees are most efficient when they work both ways. Employees should be instructed not to just wait to be contacted; they should also know who to contact at the business (and how) to report on their safety and to receive any urgent messages.

With its non-technical language and streamlined layout, any business owner can create an easy-to-use recovery plan tailored to the individual business, providing confidence if the worst occurs.

SAMPLE PHONE TREE

Phone Tree – Acme Corp Staff

Recipients

Caller		Name	Mobile	Home	Alternate	Office	Home Email
1. Phone Tree Activator* Mobile: Office: Email:	2	*Employee A**					
	3	Employee B					
	4	Employee C					
	5	*Employee D**					
	6	*Employee E**					
	7	Employee F					
	8	*Employee G**					
	9	Employee H					
Employee A*	10	Employee I					
Employee D*	11	*Employee J**					
	12	Employee K					
	13	Employee L					
	14	Employee M					
	15	Employee N					
Employee E*	16	*Employee O**					
	17	Employee P					
Employee G*	18	Employee Q					
	19	Employee R					
	20	Employee S					
Employee J*	21	Employee T					
Employee O*	22	Employee U					
	23	Employee V					