

CRISIS COMMUNICATION A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS, ACADEMIES, AND COLLEGES



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CRISIS COMMUNICATION

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR GOOD NAME

You work hard to build a good reputation for your school or college. However, all it takes is a week of media hostility or uninformed gossip to destroy it. Educational establishments are often ill-prepared for a crisis, particularly on the communications front, which can often make a sensitive situation worse. No one likes to think of the unthinkable happening, but a few basic preparations could mean your school or college is better equipped should a crisis occur.

These guide notes address the vital role communications play during and after a crisis.

One in 10 teenagers bullied at school have attempted to commit suicide*

FAST FACT

* UK Bullying Statistics 2014 — Ditch the Label.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CRISIS?

An early decision needs to be taken to determine whether a situation is simply a “bad day” or the beginning of a crisis.

Crisis indicators include:

- Existing resources cannot cope.
- The issue is likely to have an adverse effect on the reputation of the school.
- Things are likely to get worse before they get better.
- The media takes an interest.

A crisis is a volatile situation and requires dynamic actions. Crises might include:

- Sex scandals.
- Drug abuse.
- Historic abuse claims.
- Criminal proceedings against staff.
- Expulsions without adequate explanations.
- Discovery and potential use of weapons.
- Excessive violence or bullying.
- Examination rigging.
- Poor performance.
- A fire.
- Student/staff fatalities.

DO NOT WAIT FOR A CRISIS TO HAPPEN – HERE IS WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NOW

- Assemble a crisis communication team.
- Appoint the following: a head; a spokesperson for internal communications; and a different spokesperson for external communications. Appoint deputies for these positions – it might be that one of the appointees is the member of staff at the centre of the very scandal you need to communicate about.
- Devise a media protocol for the external communications spokesperson. Include who needs to agree statements before they are issued.
- Put your local regional media on a database, including telephone, fax, and email.
- Rehearse how you would deal with communications.
- Include crisis communications in staff training sessions, not forgetting induction training.
- Identify stakeholders and their potential involvement.

Protecting Your Good Name

FAST FACT

Crisis communications cover of up to £25,000 is included in Marsh’s education public liability policy*.

*Terms and conditions apply.

ACTION POINTS FOR COMMUNICATIONS HAVING IDENTIFIED A CRISIS

- Draw up a plan for the immediate future and assign responsibilities.
- Log all enquiries and answers.
- Enlist experienced support staff, including an IT manager.
- Draft holding statements.
- Know the whole situation, write it down, including definitions of terms and circulate to the crisis communication team.
- Agree the extent of stakeholder involvement.
- Decide on and prioritise your audiences, e.g. staff, parents, pupils, media, etc.
- Anticipate questions and prepare answers.
- Consider communication requirements for the longer term, including media monitoring and direct communication with those affected.
- Be wary about making comments that might have repercussions later.
- Think pictures not just words: What is going on behind you during a television interview? What photograph will the local newspaper use to illustrate the story?
- Do not neglect the running of your school or college — crises can absorb a great deal of management and teaching time.
- Agree on non-jargon terminology.

43% of UK children aged 1–15 years own a mobile phone**

FAST FACT

** <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2013/10/03/younger-children-turn-from-phones-to-tablets/>

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In the event of a crisis, the communication channels include:

- Word of mouth.
- Written word.
- Media (newspaper, radio, and television).
- Social media (the internet).

It is important to understand these functions so that you can limit any potential damage and use them to your advantage.

Be selective according to the audience you need to reach. In a crisis, do not waste time and resources on communication channels that are not going to reach those with whom you need to communicate.

WORD OF MOUTH

Research consistently shows that the most potent form of communication is word of mouth. If there is a rumour surrounding a school or college and you know someone who works or studies there, you are far more likely to believe their story than any other source of information. Naturally, your staff and pupils will be asked about the events in a time of crisis. What they say is the most believable. It is vital, therefore, to address internal communications with the same urgency as external communications.

WRITTEN WORD

Although this is not as powerful as the media or word of mouth, a letter, an internal newsletter, or notice board announcement is the only form of communication that allows you to choose your own words and put your message in an appropriate context.

This form of communication is most useful immediately after the worst of the storm, when the media activity dies down and your role is to restore confidence. Care must be taken not to re-ignite the crisis inadvertently during the restoration period.

MEDIA

The media's role is not to help you in a crisis deemed to be within your control, such as a scandal. It is, however, if events are beyond your control, such as the school having to close due to extreme weather.

The media is important. If they are on your side, they can reach all your stakeholders quickly and at no financial cost. If they are unsupportive of your situation, they may become your "opponents". The media operates to entertain and inform — it is their business. It is not incumbent upon them to be impartial.

You cannot treat the media as a single body. The local BBC radio station can carry your story 30 minutes after it breaks, the local daily newspaper 24 hours later. The national newspapers rely on the local press to feed your story up to them and TV stations need dramatic footage to go with the words. The *Times Educational Supplement* may understand your plight, but is usually only out a week later.

**Over 12.4 million people
in the UK are on Twitter***

* <http://socialmediatoday.com/kate-rose-mcgrory/2040906/uk-social-media-statistics-2014>

**FAST
FACT**

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET

The rise of social media has made crisis management significantly more challenging. The instant nature of the medium, its widespread popularity, and the lack of regulation means that rumour and misinformation can be disseminated widely in an instant.

The key to managing social media is to ensure it is being fully monitored, so that you are aware of what is being said, while avoiding the temptation to react to individual posts. Where appropriate, it can also be used in a crisis as a positive communication tool to provide updates instantaneously to a wide audience. Schools and colleges often forget about their own websites during a crisis. Your website is likely to be the first port of call for a journalist writing about the story and it is also a forum where you have total publishing rights – you can publish your side of the story in your own words. Do not miss this opportunity to proactively promote the messages that you want to be heard.



DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Pressure from the media for an interview can be intense and, if you are not used to dealing with them, it can be all too easy to make mistakes. Never underestimate the value of preparation. Write down your messages and make it clear and concise.

Here are some general guidelines to bear in mind when being interviewed by the media, followed by specific pointers for newspaper, radio, and television interviews:

- Never say “no comment”. It gives the impression you have something to hide. Explain why you are unable to answer the question, for example, the outcome is unresolved or confidential, or that you simply do not know.
- Expect the media to play devil’s advocate, but do not get angry or flustered. It is their job to ask searching questions and to test the strength of your case. Beware of the journalists who say they are on your side.
- Do not speculate: stick to the facts. Publishing or broadcasting inaccurate information reflects badly on the media and the school.
- Do not assume that “facts” given to you by the media are accurate. It has been known for interviewees to confirm things that started as guesswork.
- Do not allow words to be put into your mouth. If you do not agree with something, say so and correct it.
- Be calm and confident — this will demonstrate you are in full control of the situation.
- Avoid jargon or technical language — use explanations the general public will understand.
- Correct factual inaccuracies immediately.
- Never comment “off the record” — assume that everything you say will be used.

The Marsh UK Education Forum is a dedicated group on LinkedIn for all Marsh education clients.

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NEWSPAPER INTERVIEWS

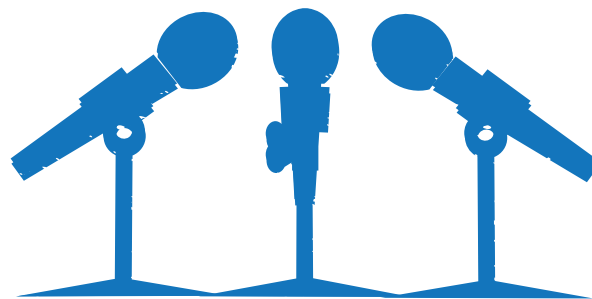
- Fax or email the answers to complex questions that may be misinterpreted. Failing this, make it known you are reading an answer and will do so at a speed so it can be taken down verbatim.
- Do not be rushed into making a statement. Give yourself time to think. Offer to telephone back, write down what you want to say and, if need be, contact a colleague for advice. Always call back if you have promised to do so.
- Make a note of the reporter's name and the publication they represent.
- Complain if you feel you have been misrepresented or badly quoted, but do not focus on minor details.
- Do not expect your comments to be printed word for word. Generally, journalists do not allow you to vet their story before going to print, although it is worth asking if you may verify quotes or check facts for accuracy and legal reasons.
- Never say anything that you would not be happy to see in print.

When denying an allegation made by a journalist, be careful not to repeat it in your answer, for example, "no, it's not a complete disaster". The questions are not printed — only your answers are.

RADIO AND TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

- Do your homework: Will the interview be live or pre-recorded? By telephone, in the studio, or at your school or college? Who will conduct it? Who else will be being interviewed? How long will it last? How much of the interview will be used (so you can time your comments accordingly). Ask what the first question will be. A good time to do this is when the presenter asks you to say something for "level" – this simply means balancing the voices and microphones.
- Contact the presenter in advance in order to brief them. You will probably be better informed than they are, so they will be grateful for the steer.
- Prepare two or three main points you want to address. Prepare answers to potentially awkward questions.
- Practise your responses before the interview.
- Relax.

- Show you are concerned and emphasise you are doing everything possible to solve the problem.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If appropriate, say you will find out and let them know, and then ensure you do.
- Remember that the interview is wholly for the benefit of the viewer/listener.
- Do not repeat a damaging question or phrase that the interviewer uses. The viewer/listener will hear it twice but your response only once.
- Do not brush or touch your microphone. It will muffle your speech.
- Do not assume you are "off camera" or that your microphone is off until you are told.
- Do not be monosyllabic.
- Take control of the interview and lead the interviewer where you want to go with your answers.
- Co-operate with the interviewer and find out what they expect of you.
- Tell the interviewer what you think are the key issues on the topic – in other words, what you want to talk about.
- Never bully or ridicule the interviewer, as they represent the viewer/listener.
- Avoid calling the interviewer by name, as it can sound patronising.
- Keep to the main points and use simple statements backed up by examples.
- Do not get flustered by probing questions. Reply with a positive statement and show a willingness to explain.
- Do not get annoyed if the interviewer keeps asking the same question, but do not feel you have to come up with a different answer. Say you think you've already answered it and move on to another point.
- Correct factual errors if you make any, whether the interview is live or recorded.
- Begin and end the interview with a positive statement.



TELEVISION-SPECIFIC POINTERS FOR INTERVIEWS

- Avoid light shining directly in your eyes.
- Sit well back in the chair, fold your hands, but do not cross your arms. Lean forward rather than away from the interviewer, and do not fidget or rustle papers.
- Avoid swivel chairs. If you have no choice, be very careful not to swing in it.
- Remember that the camera may be on you when you are not talking. Look at the interviewer throughout or the person speaking if there is more than one interviewee. Do not stare at the camera.
- Make a good first impression — dress smartly, avoid wearing distracting jewellery or patterned clothing, and do not wear glasses that darken in bright light.

HOW TO MAKE A COMPLAINT

NEWSPAPER

First of all, contact the author of the article. If the author is unknown or there is no response, write to the editor. If you do not wish your letter to be printed, mark it “not for publication”. If your complaint is still unresolved, contact the Press Complaints Commission.

RADIO AND TELEVISION

Your initial complaint should be to the producer of the programme. If necessary, take it to the programme controller. If you are still unsatisfied, the Independent Television Commission has overall responsibility for television programmes produced for the independent network, but ultimately all complaints (BBC and ITV) are dealt with by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

For radio queries, if the radio station does not deal with your complaint satisfactorily, then contact the Radio Authority.

CALLING A PRESS CONFERENCE OR A PUBLIC MEETING

It can be tempting to deal with the distribution of information during a crisis by holding a meeting – a press conference for the media and/or a public meeting for your key stakeholders.

PRESS CONFERENCE

As a general rule, only hold a press conference to launch a general appeal, for example, for witnesses to come forward. Do not hold one to defend a sensitive position or deal with the media all in one go. Furthermore, consider the logistics: Do you have appropriate facilities that can be used without disrupting the timetable? Do you want journalists, photographers, camera crews, and sound recordists on site? Can you prevent them from coming into contact with the pupils and getting their opinions?

PUBLIC MEETING

You may feel under pressure to explain the circumstance to stakeholders. You cannot talk to them individually or answer all their questions by letter or email.

Before calling a meeting, consider the following: How urgent is the situation? Will it take too long to organise? Who will attend? If the majority of the attendees are likely to be the aggrieved, anticipate their questions and prepare the answers. It might be more appropriate to communicate by letter and then hold a meeting to rally support for a post-crisis recovery plan.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on the insurance products and risk advisory services available to you in time of crisis, or if you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss your insurance requirements, please contact us:



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