



Crisis Communications Plan

How do Conferences React?

NAIA Crisis management is probably the most difficult aspect of public relations. Crisis situations that arise at events or involving different universities cannot be completely planned. No matter how much planning is done for a problem occurring, every situation is different. Yet how you handle yourself when in a crisis can make or break your information as credible in the eyes of the public.

The main purpose of a crisis communications plan is to protect an organization's integrity and reputation by managing public relations during and after an emergency or negative situation.

This document assumes each of your member institutions has a crisis management and communications plan for their campuses, but you may become involved as an additional source of information for the media. It offers suggestions in how to plan and execute communications during a crisis, especially if a situation were to occur at a conference event on a neutral site. It would also be assumed the event venue would have their own plan, yet some circumstances could make you the primary contact for a crisis management and communications plan.

Ultimately, getting the right information out in a timely manner is needed to have a good crisis communications plan. The media and the public will fill in the blanks for any information you don't provide. Sometimes a crisis may include something as tragic as death or serious injury, but could also be something humiliating such as someone connected with a member institution getting caught doing something against the law. In any event, preparing for the worst possible scenario will help a crisis situation go as smoothly as possible if one does occur.

Where to start?

You should consider forming an advisory group to help you think through what procedures your conference would follow. Your "crisis team" could be made up of people from your conference, such as athletic directors, coaches, SID's, facility managers or others that might relate to your potential type of crisis. After you've assembled your team, the first unpleasant thing you do is actually ask yourself, "What could go wrong?" This is a difficult exercise because we don't like to think in the negative but you should have the discussion to ensure you cover all possible scenarios. It's better to think it, plan for it and never use it than it is to face a crisis with no plan at all. After you've determined what might happen, you'll need to decide how likely each scenario should be communicated.

Just a reminder to never underestimate any crisis situation. Remember that most crises are a single, isolated event, but some can possibly lead to a complex chain of crises that the originating catastrophe sets off.

What are the types of crises you might encounter?

There are two general categories that could most likely affect conferences:

- 1) Single catastrophic event surrounding an athletic event
 - a. Major crimes resulting in theft, kidnapping or bodily injury
 - b. Emergency medical situations at events affecting players, administrators and fans
 - i. Fires, explosions, and chemical spills
 - ii. Natural disasters like tornados and floods
 - iii. Structural integrity issues with event facilities
 - iv. Accidents involving student-athletes travelling to an event
- 2) Negative integrity issue with member school
 - a. Athletic Department Scandal
 - b. Negative conduct by a student-athlete
 - c. Serious outbreaks of illness/disease

What are the best methods in dealing with any crisis situation?

Unlike a catastrophic event, an athletic scandal becomes a process of managing image issues more than anything else. Athletics must be focused on image in order to keep fans coming back to watch the contests. The way fans look up to teams and players is a key factor in generating success for athletic organizations and minimizing negativity is crucial.

Whether in a crisis event or managing a negative situation with a member, both of these suggestions are applicable.

- 1) Timeliness is one of the biggest factors in handling a crisis. Quick response is imperative when a crisis occurs. Basically, if the member or conference does not inform the public of its stance in the event of a crisis, the public will fill in the blanks by itself without asking any questions.
- 2) The press conference is probably the best way to deal with a crisis. Having media involved on a conference call or at a location allows you to best convey information and have the best chance for it not to be misinterpreted. You should look at other factors in order to carry out these actions in the best way possible.

Plan for situations that could occur at a conference event.

These additional suggestions would apply to a conference event, especially if held at a neutral site.

- 1) Have a pre-arranged meeting place for your crisis communications group. Have a list of which of your crisis team members will be in attendance and inform them of a meeting place if a situation occurs. You should also consider "code" words that could be given to team members to let them know the severity of the situation.
- 2) Have an accurate and up-to-date list of media contacts and their cell phone numbers. You may need to contact key media with basic information such as phone numbers to call, meeting places, and initial news conference time and location. You will also want to consider utilizing certain social media platforms including websites, Facebook and Twitter.

3) Consider having a crisis press release "template" prepared. This would minimize potential mistakes in releasing information that you don't want to prepare during a crisis.

4) Have a designated spokesperson. This person should be the conference commissioner or other person best qualified to handle the job. The person needs to be able to handle the questions of a media conference, when he or she will be center-stage to answering some possibly controversial questions. The responses of that person will be extremely important should best represent the image and beliefs of the conference. You should also anticipate the "tough questions" and have the crisis communications team discuss how those types of questions will be answered.

5) Gather all facts and verify them. Be sure to take responsibility for answering all questions possible. If there is something the media or the public will speculate about, the best route will be to get that information and to provide it as quickly as possible. The last thing you'll want to happen in a crisis is have the media or another source uncover information before you have the opportunity to process and respond to it.

6) Set up a media center. Having a place for the media to congregate during a crisis is a good idea just for the stability aspect of it. It also gives you a point to hold press conferences and stage any personnel helping convey information on your behalf.

7) Do not release names of dead or injured until relatives are notified. Out of respect for families involved, this should be enforced during crises involving death or injuries.

8) Respond to all media inquiries, but if you don't know the answer, say so. It is better for you to respond with, "I don't know right now, but I will try to get that for you as soon as possible," then to try to make up any sort of response. The conference and yourself needs to maintain credibility. It is better to say, "I don't know" than to risk giving out the wrong information.

9) Do not speculate. Credibility during a time of crisis is extremely important. Speculation into something may ruin that credibility. Once again, "I don't know" is better than giving out the wrong information. Also, never speak "off the record" with the media regarding your situation.

10) Manage the information. You will want to control the flow of information to the media. Being as open and honest as you can at the time will minimize rumors and conjecture of the event. You'll also want to keep record of all media sources you utilized and stay in contact with your sources after the event. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis or managing the image of a conference, communications are critical. Being able to quickly reach media sources to manage the correct flow of information is critical in a crisis.

Of course it is impossible to prepare for every conceivable type of crisis. Just remember that information is the most important element of a crisis. The public wants it. The media is desperate for it and you don't always have it - or at least all of it. And the fact is, initial reports on a crisis often get it wrong. They're eager to get something out and it's often flawed. All of these factors emphasize the importance of having a crisis communications plan.

Nonetheless, the best-prepared organizations have learned how to form a crisis communications plan that lays out what your team has identified as the types of crises that you might experience. Having prepared for how your conference will communicate in the case of a negative or catastrophic event is one of the best insurance policies any conference can take out.