

How To Handle Communications When Crisis Hits: Part One

There are few guarantees in ministry today. Unfortunately, one of them is the inevitability of a potential crisis occurring in our country, your community or even your church that could have a major effect on your congregation and even your reputation.

A crisis is an event, precipitated by a specific incident, natural or man-made, that attracts critical media attention and lasts for a definite period of time. Recent church crises include a devastating hurricane in Houston, a gunman in Nashville, or a public moral failure of a national leader.

When your church finds itself in the midst of a crisis, the ripple effects can disrupt lives and operations for the foreseeable future if public opinion is not properly addressed and stewarded.

Skillfully managing the perception of the crisis can determine the difference between an organization's life or death. In the pitched battle between perception and reality, perception *always* wins.

If this feels ominous and overwhelming to you, take heart. There is a solution – you can prepare for the inevitable crisis by a proactive and preventative method for preempting potential crises. Finding yourself in a crisis situation is bad; not being prepared when a crisis occurs is devastatingly worse.

Develop and maintain a Crisis Management Plan

THE QUICK SUMMARY - [PR Matters: A Survival Guide for Church Communicators](#) by Justin Dean

Is your church prepared to handle a crisis well? Do you have a plan in place for how to deal with negative comments on social media? Are you afraid to try new communications methods?

In *PR Matters*, Justin Dean provides practical advice on how to communicate the gospel well and reach more people in a world that wants Christians to be bland.

A SIMPLE SOLUTION

Most people think of Public Relations (PR) when a crisis hits. And frankly, by then it's too late.

PR matters because without someone keeping the story straight, the world around us is going to keep knocking it off its track. If you don't tell your story, someone else will make it up for you. No one has an agenda to get your story straight, only you.

However, like a two-edged sword, successful PR means increased awareness of your organization to the world – a good thing. But as your external awareness is increasing, so is the

risk of something going wrong.

All your efforts to positively manage the perception of your organization and get your message out can come crashing down at any moment.

That is called a crisis.

Just because a crisis has never happened before, doesn't mean it won't ever happen.

A "crisis" is defined as a problem that can endanger the church's reputation and/or financial position and can occur as a result of a legal, management/employment, advocacy, political, or public relations issue. In short, a crisis is anything that can derail a church or organization from its mission, whether for a short period of time or indefinitely.

You can never know what will happen or when it's going to happen, but you can do your best to prepare for almost any scenario by having a Crisis Management Plan.

There are five steps to developing and maintaining an effective Crisis Management Plan:

1.

Form a Crisis Communications Team. The Crisis Communications Team should consist of the key players that you will need to convene in the time of a crisis. It is important to decide who those people are now, so you don't waste time debating about it when a crisis hits.

2.

Document a Plan. A crisis plan isn't just a loose plan you have in your head. It needs to be written down, rehearsed, and constantly adapted. It needs to be something all the key players know about and understand.

3.

Anticipate Common Crisis Scenarios. You won't be able to anticipate and plan for every type of crisis, but you can anticipate, even predict, many of the most common ones. The idea is to identify the most likely scenarios, and start planning now for what you will do if any of those scenarios become real life.

4.

Stay Informed. You can't just create a plan, throw it in a binder, and store it on the shelf. You need to be constantly prepared and ready. That means having a pulse on the public perception of your church, the internal perceptions, current events, political issues, laws that may affect your church or its members, potential threats, security issues, and so much more.

5.

Keep it Updated. You can't just write a crisis plan up and stick it on a shelf. It will become a living document that you should update monthly.

Justin Dean, [*PR Matters: A Survival Guide for Church Communicators*](#)

A NEXT STEP

Does your church have a Crisis Management Plan?

If you answered "Yes" to that question, review your current plan in the context of the five steps listed above, with particular focus on Step 5, "Keep It Updated."

If you answered "No" to the question, organize a meeting with your senior leadership team and board. At that meeting, introduce the concepts of a Crisis Management Plan by reproducing this SUMS Remix and giving to all participants.

For the initial meeting, focus on Step Three, "Anticipate Common Crisis Scenarios." In a focused discussion, develop a list of common crisis scenarios that could occur at your church and trigger a crisis. Keep going until you can't think of any more. Narrow the list down to the top five that are most likely to happen at your church.

For those top five, write up specific plans for each scenario. In order to accomplish, pretend that the scenario actually happened, and walk through each step you should take, writing it all down on a chart tablet.

After this meeting, create a Crisis Management Planning Team, and have that team develop all five steps listed above. When they are finished with their work, have the team present their Crisis Management Plan to the appropriate groups for approval, implementation, and ongoing relevance.

Excerpt taken from SUMS Remix 92-1, released May 2018

*This is part of a weekly series posting excerpts from one of the most innovative content sources in the church world: **SUMS Remix** book excerpts for church leaders.*

*Each issue SUMS Remix takes a practical problem in the church and looks at it with **three solutions**; each solution is taken from a different book. Additionally, a practical action step is included with each solution.*

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