

Best practice - How to Manage a Social Media Crisis:

Background.

On social media, things can move fast and could become a PR crisis that seems to come out of nowhere.

The best chance to make it through a social media crisis is to prepare ahead of time. Have a solid plan, a list of key stakeholders and responsibilities, and a clear chain of command. Of course, it's even better if you can prevent a crisis before it begins.

1. Have a social media policy

Some of the worst social media situations start with an employee posting something inappropriate. Fortunately, these are also some of the easiest crises to avoid.

2. Secure your accounts

Weak passwords and other social media security risks can quickly expose the Town Council to a social media crisis. In fact, employees are more likely to cause a cyber security crisis than hackers are.

The more people who know your social media account passwords, the more chances there are for a security breach. Don't share passwords among the various members of your team who need access to your social accounts

It's critical to have control of your social channels. Managers to know how to limit or revoke access in a social media crisis management situation.

3. Define what counts as a crisis

People are going to say rude things about you online. That's a fact, not a crisis.

But if enough people are saying the same negative things about you on social, all at the same time, that might be a crisis—or a potential crisis waiting to explode. What really identifies a social media crisis is a major negative change in the online conversation. To identify a change from the norm, of course, you must know what the norm is.

For negative comments to count as a crisis, there also needs to be potential long-term damage to the Town Council.

4. Craft a crisis communication plan

A social media crisis communication plan allows you to respond quickly to any potential issue. Instead of debating how to handle things, or waiting, you can act and prevent things from getting out of control.

Your plan should describe the exact steps everyone will take on social media during a crisis. Include a list of who needs to be alerted at each stage of a potential social media crisis.

5. Pause all scheduled posts

During a social media crisis, scheduled posts will at best make you look goofy.

6. Engage—but don't argue

Once you've posted that initial response, it's time to get key staff working on more in-depth messaging. That might mean a press release, an official statement, or a letter from the Chair.

But since we're talking about social media, simply issuing statements won't cut it. You're going to have to engage with people who may be saying very negative things about you online.

Keep it short. Avoid getting pulled into a long discussion of what went wrong. Instead, try to move the conversation to a more personal channel, like private messaging. You could also offer a phone number, email address, or other means of communicating outside of social media.

Of course, some people will simply keep arguing with you until you stop responding. When it's clear you're not making progress, acknowledge the concerns and frustrations, but stop taking the bait. Getting pulled into a fight online will not improve the situation. During a social media crisis, people are watching, so you've simply got to take the high road.

7. Communicate internally

Communicating internally is a crucial part of your crisis management response. This keeps everyone on the same page and helps to prevent misinformation and the spread of rumours.

8. Learn from the experience

Once you make it through your first social media crisis, take the time to debrief and examine what happened. Keep a detailed record of everything you did, and how well it worked.