



Crisis Communications Planning Guide (CCPG)



STUDENT & YOUTH TRAVEL ASSOCIATION'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Introduction

Having a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) in place will ensure your organization is fully prepared to communicate with media, families, and the community in the event of a crisis occurring. The CCP is to be used in conjunction with the Crisis Response Plan. Together, they build the processes need to respond appropriately and effectively to a crisis.

Learning Objectives

The Crisis Communication Plan is a reference to support student travel organizations in building effective Crisis Communication Plans.

After reading this guide, learners will be able to:

- assemble either a single spokesperson or a team of spokespersons (depending on needs of organization) that are qualified for the position.
- demonstrate the processes to be exercised when a crisis occurs.
- assess the procedures post-crisis and revise as needed.

Outline:

- Online and Social Media Guidelines
- Holding Statements
- Choosing Your Spokesperson/people
- Communication Tips
- When the Crisis Occurs: Immediate Action Steps
- When the Crisis is over
- Crisis Scenario Examples

Online and Social Media Guidelines

One of the very first areas for attention in a crisis is online communications and social media. The Media Liaison person/team (established in the Crisis Response Plan) should take immediate control of all communications and messaging. The rest of your organization should know to send all communications to this team.

Prior to a crisis occurring:

- Determine best practice for monitoring all news outlets and social media channels. Social media channels include the company's own such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. and foreign channels if the crisis occurs internationally.
- Be able to close down social media outlets if necessary.
- Determine how to implement emergency 800 numbers and the dark site on your website.

When communicating with outside parties, having key messages are fundamental in describing the organization along with its mission and values. These messages should be agreed upon before any crisis and can be stand alone "sound bites" woven into the holding statements that will be prepared during a crisis. Key messages can be incorporated into any piece of communication, written or verbal, and should be reviewed annually to ensure accuracy and relevance.

Holding statements

Holding statements are prepared, fill-in-the-blank, media statements that serve as a starting point for communications in a crisis. These prepared statements can save time during a crisis and ensure all the correct elements are included in a press statement.

The following information should be included when used during an actual crisis:

- What happened – including a description of injuries or fatalities, harm to physical structures, involvement of employees or students
- Where the incident occurred
- Cause of the incident, if known. If not known, do not speculate
- Status and location of employees, tour guides and student travelers
- Next steps

Choosing Your Spokesperson/people

No matter the nature of a crisis, the characteristics of the spokesperson are vital to ensuring the appropriate person is in this position. The spokesperson should:

- hold a senior title.
- have extensive knowledge of the company and the situation.
- have the self-discipline to stay on message.
- be continuously updated on the situation.
- have high-energy and be able to sustain that energy under pressure and throughout multiple interviews.
- be able to remain clam especially when injuries or fatalities have occurred or when national or international media are covering the specific crisis as major news.

Communication Tips for Spokespeople

- Develop two to three key messages relating to the crisis. This maximizes the chances that the audience will grasp your message. These are NOT marketing messages.
- Know your objective and personalize the message for the audience. Make the communication objectives as clear and simple as they can be.
 - What is the purpose of the interview?
 - Who is the audience?
 - What has already been reported? Is there misinformation that needs correction?
 - What do the readers, listeners, and viewers need to take away?
- Be honest, open, and frank. When communicating sensitive information, trust and credibility are of the utmost importance.
- Speak clearly and with compassion. Technical language and industry jargon are useful as professional shorthand but are barriers to successful public communication and may give the impression that you are trying to hide something.
- Be succinct. Keep each answer to a few lines. This is especially important for T.V. and radio which deal with sound bites. Newspaper and magazine quotes are often brief as well, a few sentences at most.
- Anticipate the tough questions. Practice answers with communication staff if possible.
- Know your agenda. Know what you want to say and want you don't want to say. Don't be afraid to repeat your key messages. When possible, state your conclusion first, then reinforce it with supporting statements.
- There is no such thing as "off the record". If you do not want to be quoted, do not say it!
- Do not speculate. Beware of hypothetical statements and stick to your agenda.
- Make eye contact. Talk to reporters, not cameras.
- Speak with "one voice". Ensure you and other communication team members are delivering consistent messages.
- If you do not know, do not guess. If a reporter asks questions you cannot answer, it is OK to say, "I do not know". If possible, make sure someone can answer the question and gets back to reporter prior to his/her deadline.

- Never respond to the reporter's speculation. If they claim to have new information that you are not aware of, tell them you will review the information and get back to them.
- Do not argue, appear hostile or become defensive. The reporter may challenge your credibility or make negative accusations that you may be tempted to defend. Maintain your composure, correct any inaccuracies, and repeat key messages.
- Be aware of your backdrop and be prepared to change if needed. Avoid having company names, injured people, or scenes of destruction behind you.

When the Crisis Occurs: Immediate Action Steps

Mobilize the team

Upon notification of a crisis, immediately notify key team members and inform them of the crisis and necessary details. Additional people that may need to be notified may be:

- Director in charge of communications
- Chief Operations Officer
- Office systems manager
- Chief safety officer
- Legal counsel
- Insurance carrier
- Communications and public relations agency
- Social media manager
- Website manager

Initial Monitoring of Media

Initiate media and web monitoring. Assign one person or a small team to monitor all print, broadcast, and social media for updates, news, comments. Alert lead communications spokesperson to any potentially damaging news or comments that must be responded to in real time.

Prepare a Briefing

The lead communications spokesperson along with the communications team should prepare a briefing and communicate to all crisis team members as soon as possible. Essential information to include:

- Nature of the crisis
- Report of injuries or fatalities
- Place of the crisis
- Who is currently in contact with persons on scene
- Initial media coverage (social and traditional)
- Expectations of escalation
- Employees involved on scene

Once the initial briefing is prepared, send it to the crisis team members and any involved parties via email, text or conference call. Be sure to have clear, concise direction for everyone on the call.

Issue a statement externally

Within an hour of the crisis occurring, issue a holding statement to traditional and social media. Direct all employees to refrain from communicating with outside people about the crisis in ANY way.

Monitor and Respond

Continue to monitor the situation and assign a member of the crisis team to keep everyone informed on an hourly basis, even if there is no change. Continue to monitor all media and respond to posts/requests in a timely manner.

Tips for Communicating in a Crisis

The media wants to know what happened, why did it happen, what is being done about it, and what is the company going to do to make sure it never happens again.

- Be honest and clear.
- Respect the public's concerns and intelligence. Recognize the public is savvy and will reject, and be angered by, any communication that is superficial or patronizing.
- Tell the facts and admit the unknown. Commit to a continuous flow of information as it becomes available.
- Acknowledge the crisis at the earliest stages. Even when facts are not known, it is comforting to know that leadership is aware of the event and is in action.
- Quote credible sources such as senior officials at law enforcement or government agencies.
- Show empathy and compassion to those affected by the crisis.

AVOID

- false or overly optimistic statements of assurance.
- presumptuous statements such as "I know how you feel"
- unreasonable comparisons or extreme statistics (IE: one in a million)

Controlling Rumors

Rumors may become a substitute for facts during a crisis. The sooner rumors are dismissed and corrected, the sooner panic can be calmed, and the more likely stakeholders can be reassured and protected. Rumors can be effectively controlled by:

- assigning a member of the Crisis Team to monitor media and other sources for rumors and rapidly refute them through the appropriate media. In most cases, it would be the same media the rumors were circulated.
- using facts and statements, including "we do not know", when appropriate.
- quoting recognized and reputable authorities or sources.
- avoiding lengthy repetition of negative statements or the rumor itself.

When the Crisis is Over

Post-Crisis Debrief

This phase can vary in length in time and includes the aspects of reviewing all the actions taken during the crisis. Restoring normalcy to operations, as well as the reputation of the organization and any affected members should be addressed as well.

Each crisis scenario should be evaluated and the crisis team leader should conduct a review of actions that took place. The role and performance of each crisis support team (and its members), the efficacy of the operations and protocols, and a review of the types of media coverage received should all be reviewed.

Evaluation questions to consider:

- Were employees able to access important information quickly and easily?
- Were there enough effective back-up plans in place in case of any communication breakdowns?
- Was the crisis team leader able to access his/her team immediately?
- Did the designated spokesperson perform effectively?
- Did the media coverage reflect an honest, sincere, and accurate account of the events?
- Was the resource list complete and relevant?
- Were the holding statements helpful and relevant?
- Was the emergency 800 number and/or the dark site employed and effective?
- Were there enough appropriate responses to handle social media responses? Were there enough personnel to quickly respond?
- What were the breakdowns and what are the procedures that need to be put in place before the next crisis?

This debrief, and the resulting improvements, should be circulated to the entire crisis team as soon as possible after the crisis so that appropriate actions are taken immediately and not forgotten about. It is recommended that the lead communications spokesperson be assigned this task.

Any updates in information, changes in policies as a result of the crisis, new statistics, positive developments that result from the crisis, etc. should be shared with the media following the crisis period.

Crisis Scenario Examples

#1 Crisis Scenario – Transportation Accident

In this example, a motorcoach has crashed and has caused serious injuries/deaths. Questions the crisis team need to consider are:

- What are the facts that we already know?
- What do we need to learn?
- What is the condition of our group, the driver, and their vehicle?
- Has law enforcement been alerted?
- What calls need to be made?
- Have alternate travel plans been made?
- Does the media know what happened? Any inquiries already received?
- What is the safety record of the tour operator, bus company and its driver?
- Were cameras onboard?
- Where was the bus headed? Where was it coming from?
- What was the weather when the accident took place?

Key messages:

- “We are saddened one of our tours was involved in this tragic accident.”
- “Our primary concern is for the well-being and safety of our travelers.”
- “We stand ready to assist the families of those whom were injured.”
- “We are thankful for the rapid, professional, and caring responses of the first responders and medial personnel who continue to assist affected passengers.”
- “We offer our condolences, thoughts, and prayers to everyone affected by this event.”
- “We are fully cooperating with local authorities to learn what happened and are aiding their investigation.”
- “We are a member of good standing with SYTA and have been in business for XX years, during which time we have had an exemplary safety record.”

Draft Media Holding Statements:

We, *(insert company name)*, have just been informed of a recent accident involving students *(insert appropriate term)* on a trip planned through *(insert name of tour operator)* in *(insert location here)*.

According to the latest information we have received, *(briefly describe, without embellishment, where incident happened, number of people involved, and any injuries)*. Our attention and full assistance are with the victims and their families.

We are currently working with local authorities and relevant personnel in the area to ascertain all the facts and to assist in any way we can. We are *(or have)* contacting the parents, relatives, and

school administrators associated with the group to keep them fully informed of any developments and to provide them with our assistance.

Meanwhile, we have established a devoted 800 hotline for relatives or school officials to call with any questions. The number is 1-800-XXX-XXXX. You can also visit our emergency website at *(insert webpage)* or communicate with us via Facebook at *(insert name)* or Twitter at *(insert name)*.

Safety of our travelers is our number one priority. For over *(insert #)* years, we have been a member of good standing with Student and Youth Travel Association which promotes a culture of safety in all of its members.

We will continue to provide more details as we receive them,

Modification for fatalities

“A tragic accident has taken the life of *(insert #)* passengers and injured *(insert #)* on a trip to *(insert location)*. We offer our sincerest condolences and all possible assistance to the families affected by this event. We are grateful to the local authorities for acting quickly to care for the passengers and we are doing everything we can to assist the families involved.”

Modification for injuries but no fatalities

“An accident has injured *(insert #)* passengers on a trip to *(insert location)*. We are providing all possible assistance to the families affected and are grateful to the local authorities for their quick and caring actions to help the injured.

We are deeply saddened one of our tours was involved. Safety has always been our number one priority. We are working closely with authorities to understand the cause of this accident and are cooperating with law enforcement in the investigation.”

(Depending on circumstances, your company may also draft a statement to school leaders and to the parents of students on the tour.)

#2 Crisis Scenario – Natural or Weather Disaster

In this example, a natural disaster has happened in the location of the group. Immediate questions to consider are:

- What do we know?
- What do we need to learn?
- Where are the students and are they safe?
- Were they ever in danger?
- Will the tour continue? If so, will it be modified?
- Have parents been notified?
- What immediate calls must be made?
- Does the media know what happened? Has the company received inquiries?
- What are the next steps?

Key Messages:

- “Our highest priority is our tour participants’ safety and well-being”
- “We are cooperating with local authorities to determine the situations’ severity and are assessing how to proceed.”
- “We are in constant contact with the group’s leaders and are keeping parents/families and the school informed as we learn more.”
- “We are a member of good standing with SYTA and have been in business for XX years, during which time we have had an exemplary safety record.”

Draft Media Holding Statement:

“We have learned that a group of students from (*insert name of school or location*) were in (*insert location*) when it was affected by extreme weather conditions (*insert specific details such as hurricane, flood, etc.*). All our students are safe and we are in constant contact with them. The group will remain at its hotel until conditions improve. We are monitoring the situation constantly and will implement alternative arrangements, if needed, to ensure everyone’s safety. Their safety is, and always will be, our priority. We are taking every measure possible to protect their well-being and we will provide updates as we learn more.”

#3 Crisis Scenario – Disease Outbreak

In this example, a disease outbreak has happened in the region of the group. Immediate questions to consider are:

- What are the facts?
- What do we need to learn?
- How many students have been affected?
- Is this a contagious illness?
- How serious is this illness? (Only use verifiable information from the Center for Disease Control, do not speculate.)
- What calls must be made now?
- Does the media know what happened? Has the company received inquiries?
- What are the next steps?

Key Messages:

- “Our priority is the well-being of our tour participants.”
- “We are fully cooperating with local authorities to gauge the severity of the situation and to decide how to proceed.”
- “We are in constant contact with the group’s leaders and are keeping parents/families and the school informed as we learn more.”
- “We are in contact with all appropriate health officials and have been assured that this disease (*is contained, not contagious, etc.*).”

Draft Media Holding Statement:

“We have learned of an outbreak of (*insert name of disease*) in (*insert location*), where our group from (*school or city*) is traveling. Our tour leaders on the trip are working with local health officials to determine how serious the situation is and to make contingency plans if necessary. Our foremost concern is the health and safety of our students and tour participants. We are keeping parents, families, and school officials fully informed of new developments.”

#4 Crisis Scenario – Sexual Assault

In this example, an allegation of sexual assault taking place on the tour has been made. Immediate questions to consider are:

- What are the facts and what do we know?
- What do we need to learn?
- Where is the student(s) now who were involved?
- Have the students' parents been notified?
- What calls must be made immediately?
- Does the media know what happened? Has the company received inquiries?
- Have the students/victims or their friends posted anything on social media? If so, determine an appropriate response.

Key Messages:

- “Our highest priority is the safety and well-being of all of our tour participants.”
- “We are working with local authorities to determine the severity of the situation and assess how to move forward.”
- “We are in contact with the victim(s) and have sought the appropriate assistance.”
- “We are in constant contact with the group’s leaders and are keeping parents/families and the school informed, as needed, as we learn more.”

Draft Media Holding Statement:

“We have been advised of an allegation of sexual assault that may have taken place during one of our tours involving a school from (*insert city name*). In the interest of privacy, we are not providing any further details at this time.

We take all such reports very seriously. Our company adheres to our own very strong code of ethics, as well as that of Student and Youth Travel Association, which has earned all its members a reputation in the industry as the premier association representing the student and youth travel industry.

We are currently speaking with authorities onsite to ascertain the facts in this situation and will take every step necessary to ensure the situation is resolved satisfactorily for all parties concerned.

We appreciate your patience as we review the details of this incident. We will provide more information as we are informed.”

#5 Crisis Scenario – Act of Terrorism

In this example, an act of terrorism has happened in the same location as your tour. Immediate questions to consider are:

- Are the students safe?
- Where are they? Who is with them?
- Are we in contact with the tour leader and/or students?
- What are the facts?
- What do we need to learn?
- Where did the incident occur?
- What calls need to be made immediately?
- What actions must we take now?

Key Messages:

- “Our highest priority is the safety and well-being of our tour participants. We are doing everything we can to swiftly return them safely home.”
- “We are working with government authorities to determine the severity of the situation and assess how to move forward.”
- “We are in constant contact with the group’s leaders and are informing parents/families and the school immediately as we learn more about the situation.”
- “We condemn this despicable act of terror, but our immediate concern is for the safety and speedy return of our travelers.”

Draft Media Holding Statement:

“We have learned (*insert name of location/city/country, etc.*) was apparently struck by terrorists who (*insert type of catastrophe*), which shut down all (*identify types of disruption and radius of approximate miles*). Currently, there is no official information on injuries or fatalities.

Our firm is operating a scheduled student tour in that area and are in contact with the tour leaders and our travelers. We understand all are safe and accounted for. Currently they are all safe in a local hotel (*or other location*) and we are working as quickly as possible to arrange for their travel home or to a designated safe place in the interim. We are working with (*the State Department, local police, TSA, etc.*) to ensure their safety while on location and their swift and safe passage home.

Meanwhile, we have established a toll-free number for family and school officials to call for updates. The number is 1-800-XXX-XXXX.

We will continue to provide you with any new information as it becomes available to us.

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