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CRISIS & ISSUES  
MANAGEMENT

## **Harnessing the Power of Social Media During a Crisis For Non-Profit Organizations**

**BY KATIE ROBERTSON**



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## About the Author



Katie Robertson, Founder and CEO of GC, found an outlet for her passion of connecting people when she discovered the public relations industry, and this creative agency is the conduit for her vision of helping others succeed. As a graduate of the first cohort in the public relations program at Guelph-Humber in 2008, and subsequent communications through Athabasca University, Katie was able to turn her vision into tangible results for others.

Katie started her career working for a Member of Parliament and quickly grew her client base and connections by creating strategies for all levels of government both politically and administratively. Since then, she has helped hundreds of people in government, non-profit, and public sector industries.

Since starting her career she has helped a wide range of non-profit and public sector organizations prevent and manage a wide range of issues and crises. She is also the organizer of an annual crisis communications conference providing participants with tools and insights on how to prepare for, and manage, crisis and emergency situations.

Carrying the drive to help people over to her personal life, Katie is an active volunteer and contributor in her community. Serving others is a key value for Katie and she demonstrates that through her work with non-profits as well as her own that she started in order to help empower women in their personal and professional lives.



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## Harnessing the Power of Social Media During a Crisis For Non-Profit Organizations

The speed and magnitude of which social media can amplify, and sometimes create, a crisis situation means that it plays an important role and requires an additional skillset in communications to ensure the organizations are harnessing the power of social media to minimize reputation damage.

Your ability to use social media to your advantage will make the difference between facing a PR nightmare like OXFAM has and an org like The Red Cross that is able to put fires out before they even begin. How do you successfully demonstrate the same skills as the latter and maintain your reputation with finesse?

**Adapt.** Ensure your crisis plan addresses the realities of online and social media in our world today.

Within this white paper, I'll highlight the steps and strategies non-profit organizations need in order to update their crisis communications planning to include social media.

### FACING AN ISSUE OR CRISIS RIGHT NOW? HERE ARE SOME IMMEDIATE STEPS YOU SHOULD TAKE

#### Turn the Lights On

First and foremost, it's important you are clear and honest with your stakeholders throughout the entire process. If the issue is because of a major change in the organization, it's sometimes difficult for people to handle, so it's important you provide clear explanations and remain calm while addressing any issues publicly.

Hosting a news conference, issuing a news release, and updating your social media and website is an effective way of combining traditional and social media in order to ensure you're reaching all of your audiences.

Your donors and supporters will want to know and fully understand the reasons behind what is happening so they can continue supporting your cause.





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### Keep Calm, Carry On

It is important you provide as much information as possible so there is little room for misinterpretation and for an emotional response to take over a logical one. If emotions start fuelling a campaign or issue, it might take on an uncontrollable momentum and go viral.

When you're explaining the situation to people, include links to current and past data, papers, etc. This allows supporters, donors, media relations and bloggers to conduct their own in-depth research if they choose. Make any resources highly visible and easy to access to avoid looking as though you are concealing anything.

Throughout the entire process, it's of utmost importance that you also remain calm and keep your emotional reaction out of your interactions with your stakeholders. If the issue becomes emotional from the stakeholder side of things, it will be difficult to get your messaging through so it'll be particularly important that you stick with your key messaging and the reasoning behind your decisions.

### Maintain Your Stance

Wavering on a decision you've made will reduce your credibility and retract from the importance of the decision, especially if it's a decision that has been made in alignment with your vision and is in the best interest of your supporters. It's easy to panic when you have naysayers or those who have a difficult time with change, but it's important to stand your ground if it's something you believe is right.

### Through Good Times and Bad - Keep the Lights On

If you are facing backlash or the intensity is starting to increase, it's important to remember that hiding facts or covering up mistakes will only make things worse and invite further attacks and potential humiliation.

Making mistakes is human, but it's important to realize that you've made a mistake and then take action to correct it. First, take responsibility for the mistake and DO NOT attempt to cover any of it up.



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Trying to cover anything up will most certainly lead to additional backlash.  
This includes:

- ✗ Deleting Tweets or posts
- ✗ Erasing comments
- ✗ Taking down pages or posts from your website

Honesty is the number one expectation and you will maintain respect if you maintain honesty. Sometimes, the best solution is to provide an apology.

When responding to an online issue or crisis, respond ASAP.

Dont:

- ✗ Allow for the issue to escalate beyond your control
- ✗ Give people a reason to attack you further
- ✗ Make it seem as though you don't care about the situation or the feelings of your audiences
- ✗ Make it seem as though you are hiding away in the hopes that the crisis will just blow over

The best way to deal with a situation is head on. You don't want to have to try and deal with added vitality because you tried to ignore that was happening.



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## STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

### Define What a Crisis Means to You

Just like everyone's pain tolerance threshold is different, so do is an organization's type and level of exposure when an issue arises. The first thing you need to do is define what an issue is and what a crisis is to your organization.

The best way to do this is to conduct a vulnerability audit and to clearly define where your organization's are and what is to be done about it when a situation arises.

### What Would Your Mother Say?

The title is slightly tongue in cheek but it's a major component of a vulnerability audit. When you define the scenarios that would be considered an issue or a crisis scenario, you also need to anticipate what the reaction of your various audiences will be. This is also another reason why it's so important to have clearly defined audiences for your day-to-day operations, knowing who you have relationships with will also help you maintain them when something happens.

### Key Message Standardization

Every organization begins with a purpose, a vision for success, and with that come a clear foundation of values for which the building blocks of operations are laid.

When you are faced with a situation, whether it's an issue or full-blown crisis, you must remember to stick by these values no matter how heated or emotional things may get. Use these values to create a standard set of key messages that you can look to and remind yourself and others of when things seem to be moving off track.



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## Identify the Right Spokespeople

Typically, the automatic response for any organization when asked who their spokesperson should be is the President, General Manager, or other leads of the organization. Nine times out of ten, you can likely get by with this but it's not recommended. For each of the scenarios you identify, you'll also want to identify a suitable spokesperson - typically the subject matter expert.

The other important aspect to this is ensuring the people you identify as spokespeople are trained and know what they're doing. All too often, it's assumed that people, especially in leadership roles, are made for public speaking and more often than not, you're surprised to learn they aren't, especially under pressure or when their job is at risk.

## Develop a Response Roadmap

The easiest way for most people to understand information is visually. Once you have determined what situations are possible, identified what actions to take for each, and who will be responsible for which task, now it's time to develop a response roadmap.

This roadmap should be available to all staff in your organization, and potentially some partners and volunteers.

## Set Clear Expectations for Everyone in the Organization

This means EVERYONE. The easiest way to do this is by developing a policy that clearly outlines what the expectations for everyone are. You will want to include, at a minimum, the following:

- ✓ The roles and responsibilities of each person during a crisis
- ✓ All the necessary details about a situation, or where they can access it
- ✓ What they are permitted to respond to should they be contacted directly (include messaging) and where they should direct all other inquiries
- ✓ Where they and others can access various pieces of additional information including policies, FAQs, news releases, etc.

You will also want to include additional language around what the ramifications may be should anyone not meet the expectations of the organization or do something outside of the organization's values.



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## Calling in Reinforcements

At times a full-blown crisis can prove too much for the current resources you have on hand. Make sure you have a list of professionals you can call upon when in need.

## Don't Be Afraid of the Dark

Dark pages or a dark website is set up and ready to go in case you need to quickly flip the switch and turn the spotlight on. For more information, read "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark - Turning a Bright Light on the Best Tool During a Crisis" by Katie Robertson.

## Build Relationships Before a Crisis

If your organization is using social media, you'll want to focus on building real relationships with your followers, they may be your best allies when a crisis hits, and go to bat for you against 'outsiders'.

## Listen. Analyze. Learn.

During an issue or crisis, you'll want to track, document and report on all aspects of the event to ensure you're able to analyze and learn from what has happened. Evaluation of campaigns is vital during normal operations, think of an issue or crisis as a reputation management campaign and look for opportunities.

## Plan. Prepare. Practice.

Like anything else in life, learning takes time, and making an action second nature, takes dedication. After you have a Crisis Communication Plan in place, make all necessary preparations (i.e. develop a dark site), it's time to practice. It's recommended you practice a scenario at least once a year. Doing so, not only helps you learn, it also allows you to tweak things before you're in a situation and won't have time to.

As humans, we have a tendency to have the, "it won't happen to me" mentality - until it does. If you can put the policies and practices in place to prevent an issue from becoming a full blown crisis or the possible demise of your organization, then you will save time, heartache, money, and even lives, depending on the situation.



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### WHAT'S NEXT?

Now that we've scratched the surface of being crisis ready, it's time to put some of these recommendations into action and build upon it with a robust crisis ready strategy.

Grapevine Communications provides companies and organizations with the insight and expertise they need to prevent, manage, and bounce back from any issue or crisis. Our brand and reputation management strategies provide you with the information and tools you need to manage the realities of issues and crises in a digital world head on.

For more information about Grapevine Communications and the customized services we provide, click on the links below, or contact Katie Robertson directly.

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