



In Case of Emergency

6 Rules for Social Media
Crisis Management



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In Case of Emergency: 6 Rules for Social Media Crisis Management

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Why Companies Can't Survive Without Social Media Crisis Management

Social media allows people to spread word of a crisis like never before. People now carry smartphones at all times and witnesses to an emergency can post in real time across a multitude of social media platforms. The chances are good that your customers or your brand will be involved in a crisis sooner or later. Events all over the world ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters and major product malfunctions have made social crisis management a critical concern.

Unfortunately, sometimes an actual crisis crops up before companies put crisis management planning on their agenda. Arming your business with a social media crisis plan helps manage your company's reputation and can even save lives.

Consider this:

- Social is usually the first channel to pick up on a crisis. People start posting in real time as an emergency situation unfolds. If it is a product-related crisis, complaints and concerns usually start coming in through social even before email or the call center.
- Once a crisis is underway, social is often the best way to keep stakeholders informed. Traditional channels of communication may lag behind due to telephone network

outages or because call agents can only handle one call at a time. With social, you can broadcast updates to a larger audience all at once.

A DETAILED CRISIS PLAN SHOULD TELL YOU:

- Which potential crisis scenarios can hit your business
- Which next steps you need to take
- Which departments you should get involved
- The process to evaluate a crisis
- Major takeaways from previous crises

The following 6 rules will help you develop a plan that will get you through any type of crisis.

1. Involve Every Department in Crisis Planning



In crisis situations, you need all the help you can get, and you need to be able to call upon your resources fast. Without a plan, you can lose time while you gather your team.

Getting all heads together and involving all departments is essential. Braced with an action plan, everyone within the organization knows which steps to take—whether that means actions within their own departments, or helping out with social media requests.

Sadly, teams often work in silos. Breaking down these barriers is key, especially if you want to keep your head above water during (and after) a crisis.

Brussels Airlines organizes a few crisis exercises throughout the year. A crisis exercise doesn't just involve the company itself; it stretches beyond the business and includes relevant third parties such as the Brussels Airport and local emergency services. Repeated exercises help keep your crisis plan alive and well, to prevent it from landing on the shelf and catching dust.

Ways to break down silos:

- **Plan together.** A crisis plan should stretch beyond your social media team (or any other customer-facing team), and include your entire company from A to Z. Whether you're in the planning phase or you're reevaluating your crisis plan, involve every department.
- **Practice together.** It's hard to stay calm during a crisis if your company doesn't know what an actual crisis looks like. What seems good on paper doesn't necessarily work in reality. Organize regular crisis exercises in which you cover different crisis scenarios. Practice them one at a time, from end to end.

2. Set Up a Straightforward System to Activate Your Crisis Procedure



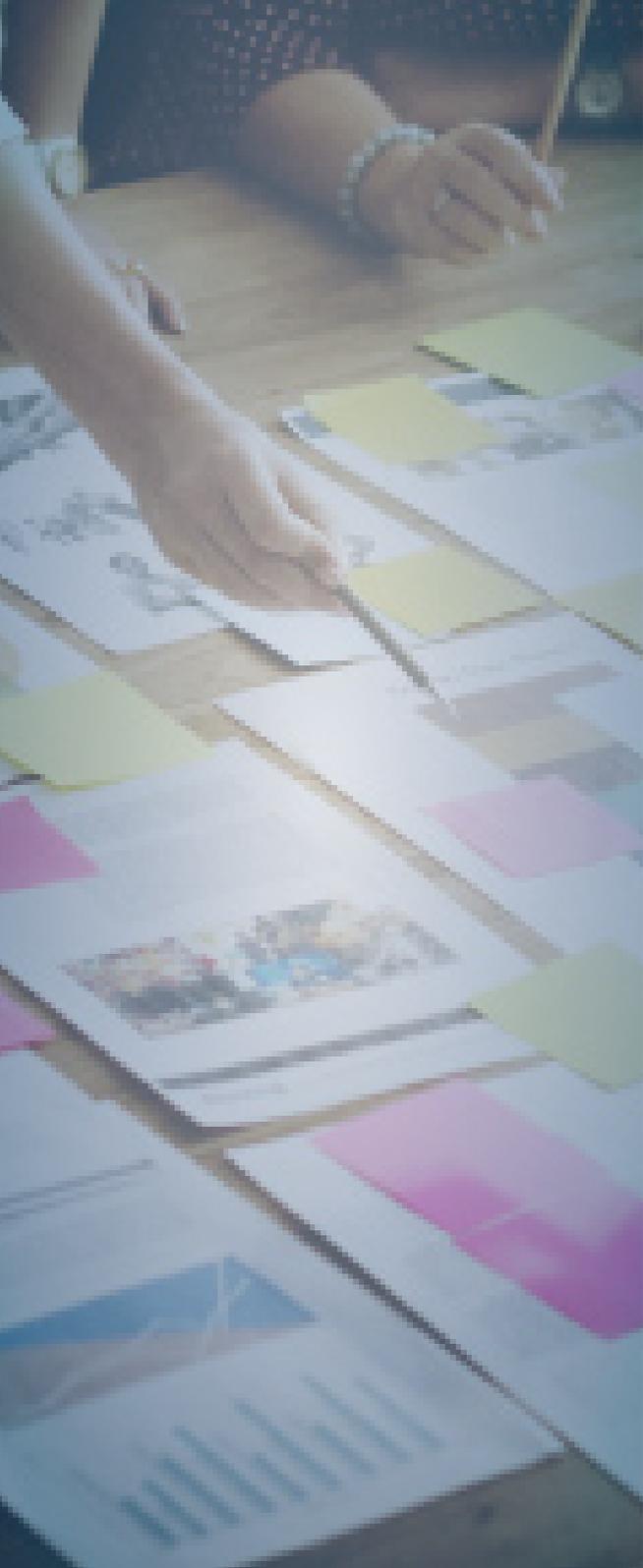
On social, a crisis could strike instantly. Your team needs to be able to act just as fast. Switching to crisis mode should be a matter of just minutes. Below are a few useful tips to change your mindset and have everything in place to act confidently in urgent, stressful times:

- Because social media is in the public eye, a slip-up is a big deal. Make sure you have a crisis checklist ready at all times that covers all the steps you need to take (e.g. cancel all your social media advertising and put all your scheduled posts on hold, etc.). Leave a print-out at everyone's desk so that you have all the major guidelines ready at your fingertips. For a full crisis checklist, see the Appendix.
- In some cases it's useful to broadcast information through an online crisis center—an online page that contains the most up-to-date information. During an emergency, information is often scattered, incorrect, or confusing. A crisis center helps to provide more context about the specific situation.

Typically managed by your Corporate Communications department, the goal of this page is to ensure that your company can control your external messaging during a crisis. In addition, it has a significant impact in lightening the load as you can easily direct your customers to the page with a link.

“Hi! We’re very sorry about this unfortunate issue. Please stay tuned for more up-to-date info via the following link: xxx.”

- In tough or stressful crisis situations it sometimes feels like you’re running on autopilot. Oftentimes, customer service agents reply to queries like robots. Try to stay away from bot-like responses as much as possible and stick to your usual **tone of voice guidelines**.



- Internal communication is key—use **chat apps** internally to quickly troubleshoot and discuss your strategy. Messaging apps are particularly useful when your social customer service, corporate communications, marketing, and PR teams aren't physically in the same room (which is often the case). In addition to using collaboration tools for cross-functional teams, make sure your social customer service team also has a separate chat room or space so they can quickly ask questions and voice concerns.
- Take a step back and put all heads together. There's only so much you can do to prepare for a crisis. You'll probably face plenty of unforeseen issues. It's important to take the time to collect the troops and quickly go over key details with every team to discuss your **plan of action**.

Transport For London, the public transport company that operates the capital's major transportation network (including the London Underground, buses, taxis, etc.) prioritizes on communicating one, transparent message to their customers. If there's a major breakdown in the London Underground, they quickly switch to crisis mode. Instead of delivering a one-on-one response, they switch to this broadcasting mode and redirect everyone to a single web page.

3. Prioritize Urgent Social Messages



If a crisis strikes, chances are high your volume of social mentions will quickly become unmanageable. In emergency situations, it becomes impossible to respond to every message within your SLAs. Imagine having to reply to a hundred messages in just 15 minutes with only 3 social customer service agents—that's just mission impossible!

In those cases, there's only one thing to do: **prioritize.**

Even though it might seem as if every message is urgent during a crisis, it's critical to respond to those customers that need your help before you deal with anything else. First and foremost, you

need to get a feel for the questions your customers are asking.

As a crisis is starting to unfold, either use software to automatically assign tasks or manually tag the most pressing messages so that you can **route the mentions to a specific 'crisis' team.** Ideally, use software that ensures all of the queries receive a follow-up.

Once things have calmed down, these tags and labels will give you a leg up on understanding what happened. You will be able to filter on the data so that you can easily pull reports and evaluate every aspect (i.e. the volume of messages you answered, how many questions you dealt with about a

Rank mentions based on those who have the most influence. Consider prioritizing mentions that impact your public image the most. Businesses often prioritize on responding first to messages from social influencers (i.e. people with 1,000 followers or more) or journalists. Moreover, consider looking for messages that have been retweeted. In addition, business often prioritize mentions from public entities or authorities (such as online news outlets) because they play a key role in shaping the public opinion.



specific topic, etc.) in the aftermath of a crisis. However, in some situations the volume will be overwhelming. A great way to guide your team through this surging volume is to ‘divide and conquer’:

- Use your skilled social customer service agents to answer more complex questions.
- Add on extra resources (e.g. employees from any department) who can offer first-line help. These extra hands will be responsible for acknowledging the issue and expressing apologies as needed. This means so much to your customers!

To help handle surging volumes, create short, educational, 2-5 minute videos that teach new team members how to respond to social media queries. This allows you to easily drum up staff internally, from anywhere in the company, and empower them to swiftly handle the volumes.

4. Anticipate External Hiccups



When customers complain about an urgent issue, that doesn't necessarily mean the issue is your fault. Even when your business isn't to blame for a crisis, however, that may not prevent your company from getting all the mess. Because **the customer is always right**, it's key to always own your mistakes and apologize (yes, even though you're not the guilty one!).

For example, a railway company in charge of operating trains and stations relies on plenty of third parties. If the company responsible for the infrastructure (i.e. managing the actual railroad) causes an accident, customers will automatically turn to the railway company instead. It's the

first company that springs to mind as people do business with the company selling the tickets, not with the one who takes care of the infrastructure.

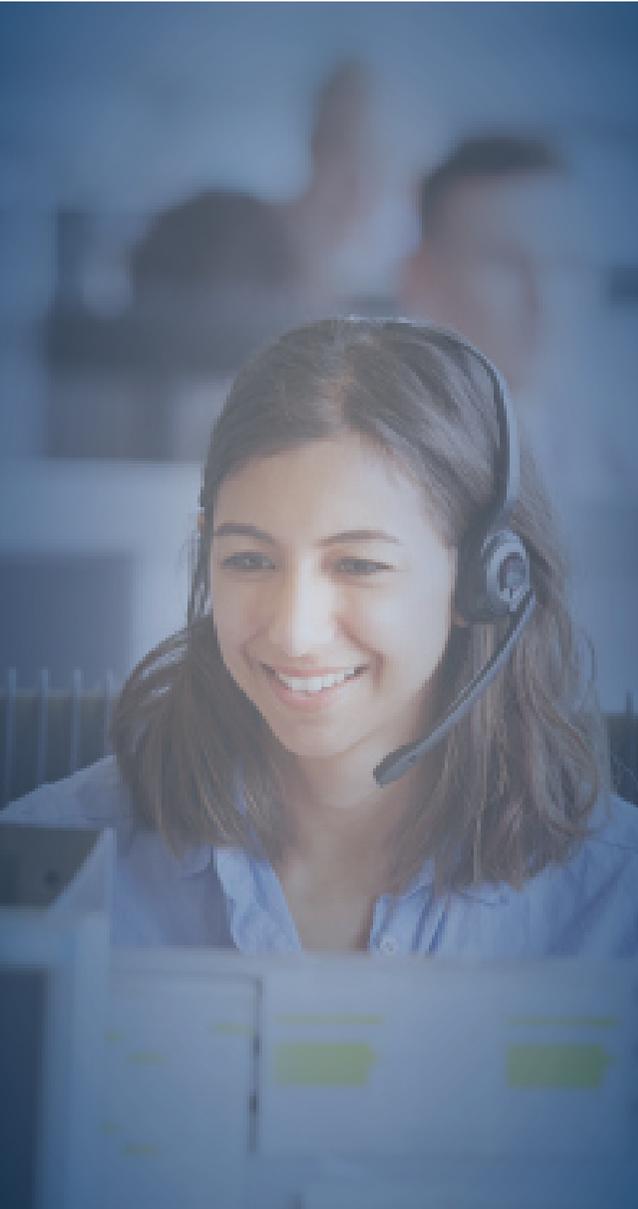
Customers don't really care who's actually accountable for a crisis; they care about getting an issue fixed as soon as possible.

To mitigate the risks of seriously damaging your reputation from a crisis caused from outside your company, make sure you map out these external factors. Some circumstances simply go beyond your control, but there are actions you can take to keep damage to a minimum.

During a natural disaster, your IT infrastructure and power network might lag. If you're a global company with multiple social media teams across the globe, make sure you can call upon extra resources abroad to carry on with responding to customers.

Many global businesses use an outsourced social customer service team to add skilled support staff at times of need. These extra resources not only help with the issue at hand, but they can sometimes provide advice and troubleshoot issues with an objective eye.

5. Prepare for the Aftermath of a Crisis



A crisis leaves a mark on your organization. To get through the transition between the initial crisis and any repercussions, your business should be prepared for what lies ahead. A lot of companies invest all of their efforts in the first day of a crisis, as volume peaks are expected to be a lot higher than usual. Contrary to popular belief, **the workload is usually higher in the aftermath of a crisis**, peaking sometime in the first week.

As emotions settle, customers start to have a lot more questions. It's important to get more resources on board as more information

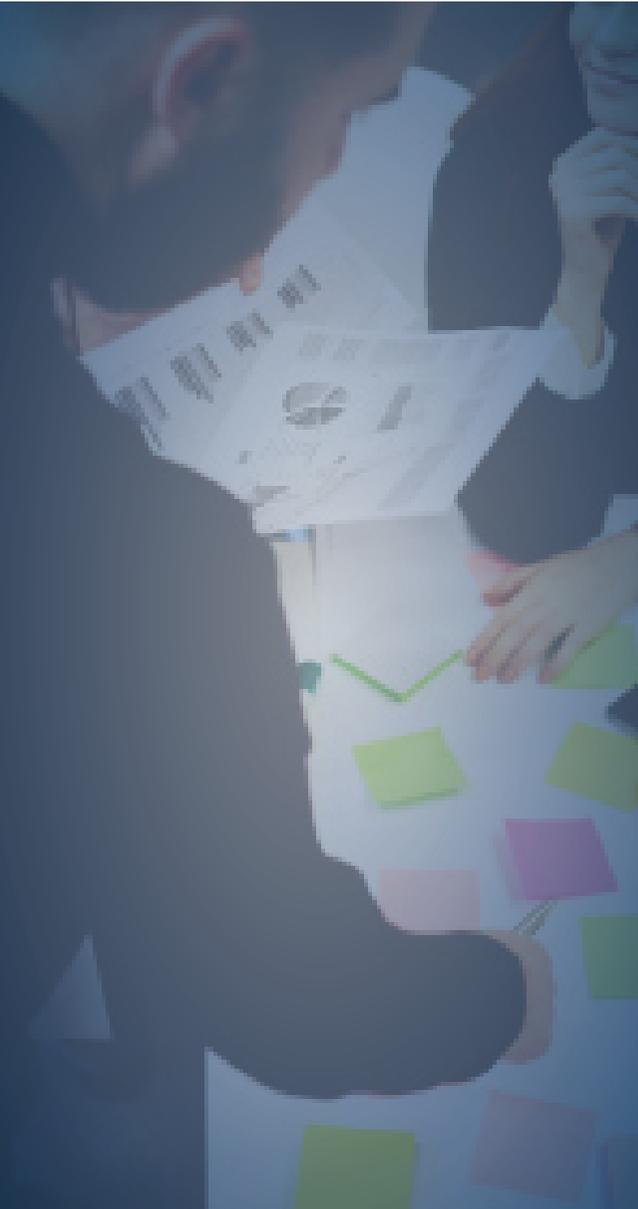
becomes public. Customers will start asking for important practical details such as refunds, damage compensations, updated schedules, cancellations, rebookings, etc. so you need to have customer service agents available that have expert knowledge of your CRM system to search for information.

To prepare for the aftermath of the crisis, you need to have the right number of people on board to handle the volume as well as people that have the right skills to answer questions via social.

Introduce an internal initiative to have people from outside of the customer care department volunteer in the social customer service team. Responding to messages gets employees in touch with customer needs, and helps them become familiar with social customer care in case you need their help in a future crisis.

After the Brussels Airport terrorist attacks in March 2016, Brussels Airlines introduced an internal jump seat program that allows anyone in the company to become a deputy team member in case of emergencies. Knowing you can count on extra resources internally gives you peace of mind for the future.

6. Reevaluate Your Crisis Plan



Coming out of a crisis, one of the biggest challenges businesses face is not knowing how to learn and improve from it. That's why companies need to take a serious step back to reflect on how a crisis played out.

Crises are tough, so give yourself and your team some time to recover from the event. However, don't wait too long to set up next steps. Evaluate the crisis while it is still "fresh".

The best way to evaluate a crisis is to set up meetings to gather all the observations. It's crucial to meet up with everyone together, face-to-face. Sending out a survey email won't do the trick.

We recommend hosting two different meetings: first, organize one with your social media team. Second, invite people from across the organization and discuss the findings from the individual teams.

If you haven't done so, inform and educate your staff that social is your main channel for external crisis communication. Even more, if you rely on quite a few third parties, get them on the same page too. Make sure all relevant social media channels are documented in your crisis plan.

Below are a few key agenda points to cover during both crisis evaluation meetings:

- **What worked and what didn't?** Even though you have put a lot of thought into your crisis plan, that doesn't mean everything will work itself out in reality.
- **If we had to do it over again, what would we do differently?** Identify what is currently missing and update your crisis plan right away.
- **What can we do now to be prepared for the next crisis?** Identify any immediate next steps and make sure you're better prepared for next time.

On another note, if you haven't dealt with a crisis yet, that doesn't mean you don't need to reevaluate your crisis plan from time to time. Don't let your crisis plan catch dust. Actively revisit it from time to time.

Conclusion

Social media plays a fundamental role in crisis management as a channel to disseminate information quickly. Now more than ever businesses need to make **crisis management a top priority**. It's time to create or rethink your crisis plan to ensure it's embedded in the entire organization.

Contrary to popular belief, crisis management is not just the responsibility of your PR, Marketing, or Customer Service department. In the age of social media, businesses need to act fast and with confidence to mitigate the risk of a crisis seriously damaging your reputation (or even taking lives!).

Once a crisis hits, don't be afraid to step back and **make sure you have all the resources in place**. Get your heads together and come up with key action items for the hours to come. What's more, make sure you have a plan for the next few days,

as volumes are expected to be even higher as more complex questions arise.

In addition to getting everyone on the same page, every stakeholder needs to know what your crisis plan entails - teamwork is critical. In a crisis situation, **every department needs to work together**. In addition, beyond your organization, you need to work with any other parties involved to make sure your efforts are streamlined and prevent misinformation from taking over.

A good crisis management plan comes down to this: Think ahead, create a plan, and ask for help. In case of emergency, you can use your social customer service team to truly put customers first.

Appendix: Crisis Checklist

Use this step-by-step guide to roll out your crisis procedure and switch to crisis mode.

- Disable all **social ads**. Promoting a trip to Brazil in the heat of a crisis would be a total #fail!
- Disable **scheduled social media posts** for the time being. A crisis is and should be your only priority.
- Take a look at **recently posted messages**. Remove posts that feel inappropriate from your social profiles.
- Replace your **social profile headers with** a gray Twitter or Facebook header or logo to express your sympathy (this is only necessary for crises such as a natural disaster, a human accident, etc.).
- Maintain your usual **tone of voice** (which is typically quite informal on social, and has a human touch) and continue to show empathy. Don't publish tweets that feel impersonal and cold.
- Communicate **proactively**; don't just react to queries. Make an **official company statement** within the next hour (or even within the first 30 minutes). Use your official accounts as the go-to place for accurate and up-to-date information.
- Use Twitter to proactively provide information within the first few minutes of a crisis.
- Use Facebook to communicate more detailed information and take your time to explain what happened.
- Use your online crisis center to help support and give more context. Make sure you have some FAQs.
- Use your CEO**. Don't underestimate the importance of your CEO as the face of your company (at any time, but especially during a crisis). Make sure your CEO has a social media presence and actively posts messages during the event.



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