

Mastering Crisis Management in Construction

Written by: Megan Beam, Editor, CBO Magazine & Digital Media

In a landscape where some degree of crisis is an inevitability, the construction industry stands at the forefront: The stakes are high and the margin for error is slim. From equipment collapses to onsite accidents, the potential for crises looms large. Heather Ripley, CEO of Ripley PR and expert in crisis management, sheds light on the significance of preparing a plan for business leaders. Drawing from extensive experience navigating the complexities of crisis communications, Ripley provides insights into the paramount risks and challenges confronting construction business owners, along with the short- and long-term strategies essential for their mitigation.

[Could you broadly explain the importance of having a crisis management plan specifically tailored for the construction industry? What are the key risks and challenges that construction business owners should consider when developing such a plan?](#)

Most business owners, no matter what their industry is, know that they will face a crisis at some point. It's not a matter of if, but when. This is especially true of the construction industry, which can face crises where people are physically harmed due to equipment collapses or falls.

That is why it is imperative that construction companies create a crisis management plan that includes activating their public relations (PR) partner's help in mitigating bad news. Your crisis communications strategy should build the framework that allows your construction company to continue operations during a disaster. An effective crisis communications



plan governs how you address employees, the media, and the general public, and the steps you should take publicly in responding to the crisis.

Construction companies run the risk of losing the public's trust, which will result in the loss of business if they don't have an effective plan in place. Being able to respond promptly, accurately, and confidently during an emergency can mean the difference between remaining solvent and going out of business.

[What are the essential components of a robust crisis management plan for construction companies? Are there any specific strategies or tactics that are particularly effective in this industry?](#)

An effective crisis plan should include:

- » The purpose of the plan and the steps necessary to carry out the plan.
- » Naming a crisis communications team. This team is responsible for collecting information, talking with the media, creating social media responses, and informing other stakeholders. This team may also be involved in contacting regulatory agencies and governmental officials who need to be informed of an accident or incident involving regulated material.
- » How to develop key messages and who should provide this content. This should include steps for both external and internal communications.

Because many types of construction disasters can become very noticeable to the general public, your company needs to proactively protect its reputation. Building up a positive reputation before a crisis emerges can help highly visible companies retain that good will when a disaster happens. If the public has high regard for your company before a disaster strikes, this positive opinion helps mitigate negative news.

[How can construction business owners effectively identify potential crises before they escalate? What proactive measures can be taken to minimize the impact of a crisis on both the project and the company as a whole?](#)

Construction companies should periodically take an inventory of the potential disasters their industry faces and constantly update their crisis communications plans to include how they should respond. With an updated plan, the crisis communication team can react without hesitation.

We advise our clients to “tell it all, tell the truth, and tell it fast.” We believe that owning up to a mistake quickly and working to immediately reestablish your company’s credibility builds confidence with that company’s stakeholders, with the media, and with the public.

Construction company owners need to remember that you can’t ignore mistakes. Letting them fester makes them worse, so addressing a crisis immediately is your best reparative option.

[In the event of a crisis, what communication protocols and channels should construction companies have in place to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of information to](#)

[stakeholders, including employees, clients, subcontractors, and the public?](#)

A construction company’s crisis communications plan should address the best avenues available for disseminating the company’s message both internally and externally. Your PR partner should have already identified the audiences that could be impacted by a crisis and know how to reach them.

Your team should already have a way to contact employees and media outlets, and you need a plan to distribute your message on your social media channels and on your blog or website.

Your crisis plan should have already identified the person or people associated with your company who will be designated as the spokesperson during the crisis. Having only one or two people tasked with disseminating your response will keep your message sharp and reduce the chance that misinformation gets out.

[How important is it for construction companies to establish strong relationships with local authorities, regulatory agencies, and emergency responders as part of their crisis management strategy?](#)

Because of the nature of construction work, these companies should already have strong relationships with the regulatory authorities and government agencies that govern their actions. But these relationships become even more important when an emergency happens.

Your crisis communications plan should include the proper regulatory authority and governmental officials to notify in the event of a disaster. Having a good working relationship with these officials means that you’re more likely to reach them quickly during an emergency.

Of course, if the crisis involves harm to a human being, the first call should be to 911 so that help can arrive as soon as possible. But after that call is made, the manager onsite should know who to inform at your company so that the communications plan is activated.

[What role does employee training and preparedness play in effectively managing a crisis in the construction industry? How can companies ensure that their workforce is adequately trained to respond to various emergency scenarios?](#)

Construction employees should regularly be required to attend safety training seminars to ensure that everyone knows how to stay safe and what to do when there is an emergency. This should be part of a construction crew's duties regardless of any further public relations protocols.

But, once the immediate danger is over, the company's crisis communications team should also be trained in how to deal with the media and the public for the days or weeks that attention will be paid to your team's actions.

We recommend that company spokespeople receive media training so that they know how to prepare for reporter interviews. Media training helps your spokespeople learn to stay on message, how to convey the right message, and how to make your company look good in the face of a crisis.

[Given the dynamic nature of construction projects and the potential for unforeseen circumstances, how often should crisis management plans be reviewed and updated? What factors should construction business owners consider when evaluating the effectiveness of their plan?](#)

In general, most companies should review their crisis communications plan once a year. In the construction business, you may need to update your plans more frequently if regulations change or there are significant changes within your organization.

A crisis communication plan should be treated as a living document that can be regularly reviewed and updated as protocols and compliance rules are updated. These documents aren't "one-and-done" tomes that are set in stone.

One of the best ways to test your crisis communications plan is to work with your PR partner to conduct simulations that help you assess the readiness, responsiveness, and resilience of your team's training and abilities.

[Can you share a real-life example or case study where a company successfully implemented their crisis management plan? What were the key takeaways or lessons learned from that experience that other companies can apply to their own crisis preparedness efforts?](#)

Ripley PR once assisted a contractor who was the target of a campaign to discredit his company's safety practices. The antagonists created online social media groups and in-person protests to challenge the company and portray it in a bad light to potential clients.

Our media relations team monitored this group's messages and protests, and our content team worked with the media to provide statements and fact sheets about the company's preparedness. We also penned letters to the company's clients to assure them that this company was in compliance. The organization was short-lived and only continued the campaign for a few months.

Construction teams faced with a backlash for perceived safety issues or noncompliance should immediately address the issue and provide the media with factual information. Whether that information is about what the company is actually doing to meet safety or compliance standards or what the company is doing to address complaints, the takeaway is to get out in front of the issue immediately.

[Is there anything else business owners should know about crisis management that you want to highlight further?](#)

Treat all crises like the serious issues they are. It may not seem serious to you or your staff, but it could mean the world to a complainant or injured individual. Here are some things you should never do when dealing with a crisis:

- » Don't point fingers. Repair your tarnished reputation by demonstrating professionalism.
- » Don't feign fake concern. You should be authentic in your responses and show that you want to correct your mistake.
- » Do not bury your mea culpa in a flurry of other responses. Get your apology and response about the particular situation out to every platform you have available quickly.
- » Do not respond with a knee-jerk reaction. People know when you're not being sincere, and they'll remember if you're flippant about someone else's misery. 🦋



About the Author

Megan Beam is editor of Construction Business Owner Magazine & Digital Media.

Interviewed was Heather Ripley, who is founder and CEO of Ripley PR, an elite global public relations agency specializing in franchising, the skilled trades, and B2B tech. Ripley PR is recognized as the top PR agency for the home service industry.

About the Article

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