THIRD EDITION

Ongoing Crisis Communication

PLANNING, MANAGING, AND RESPONDING

W. Timothy Coombs

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Crisis communication is the lifeblood of crisis management: When communication is ineffective, so is the crisis management effort. Emphasizing the role of communication, W. Timothy Coombs uses a three-stage approach to crisis management—precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis. He reviews the latest research, explains how crisis communication can prevent or reduce the threats of a crisis, and provides guidelines for how best to act and react in an emergency situation.

NEW TO THE THIRD EDITION

- **Provides a new Chapter 2 on the Internet and social media**, showing how social media has become both a tool for recognizing warning signs as well as a key channel for communicating with stakeholders during a crisis.

- **Updates discussions throughout to reflect the importance of the online world** by exploring the concept of paracrisis, covering online preparations organizations should make, considering the effects of social media on crisis response, and exploring the emergence of online memorials.

- **Integrates crisis management with three other proactive management functions**—issues management, risk management, and reputation management—demonstrating that the best way to manage a crisis is to prevent one.

- **Offers a new Epilogue** summarizing key lessons for managers from the vast crisis communication research literature.

KEY FEATURES

- **"What Would You Do?"** cases with information from real crisis events are included throughout the book. Series of questions allow students to apply concepts in the chapter to the case.

- **Discussion questions** are provided at the end of chapters, helping readers extend their understanding of the material.

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To all those who have managed or will manage crises

Brief Contents

Preface

■ PURPOSE OF THE TEXT

Crisis management is a challenge any organization can face, and many fail. When crisis management fails, stakeholders and organizations suffer. All organizations must become prepared for crises. Merck, Cadbury, and Bausch & Lomb are prominent and respected companies, but each one mishandled a very public product harm crisis that affected millions of consumers. Crisis communication is the lifeblood of crisis management. When crisis communication is ineffective, so is the crisis management effort.

There is a lot of research and many cases about crisis communication and management. These vast writings remain a blessing and a curse. It is great to have so much information, but it is hard to find and organize it all. The writings about crisis communication and management are fragmented, as people write about crises from very different perspectives. This situation can leave managers struggling to organize bits of information or missing critical resources entirely. Writers often focus on their specialties and fail to make connections to ideas and concepts developed in other specialties. In turn, this fragmentation precludes a fuller understanding of crisis communication and management that is gained by integrating the various perspectives. Add to this the fact that a number of related communication concepts have applications to crisis management but have yet to be integrated into the literature, and the situation becomes even more complicated. Practitioners, researchers, and educators are limited by this fractured approach. The primary purpose of this book is to provide a resource that integrates and organizes a wide array of practitioner and research writings about crisis management.

Management in general must recognize the value of strategic crisis communication and the value of crisis management. This book emphasizes the role of communication throughout the crisis management process and is designed to be a body of knowledge that aids managers,

researchers, and educators. *Process* is an important word here. Too many people think that crisis management means having a crisis management plan or responding when a crisis hits. This is a very reactive and rather limited approach to crisis management. A richer, more proactive approach to crisis management explores the entire process. Managers should think of crisis management as akin to SWOT analysis. *SWOT* stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Through crisis management, an organization can identify its weaknesses, what it is failing to do to address threats and prepare for crises. Strengths are the elements of crisis management that the organization does well. Opportunities are the resources the organization can access before, during, and after a crisis. Threats are those factors that can evolve into crises. A quick crisis SWOT analysis will awaken management to the need to take crisis management and crisis communication very seriously.

■ AUDIENCE FOR THE TEXT

This book is written for both students and practitioners. Students, primarily undergraduate, are given an applied approach to crisis communication that is rooted in theory. Ideally, theory should inform practice, and I have selected the best of the crisis communication and management research for gaining insight into the process. Practitioners can use the book to enhance their understanding and execution of crisis communication. This book is designed to be used to help those who are or may become crisis managers. Any individuals with a background in corporate communication, organizational communication, public relations, or management may find themselves on a crisis team. The information in this book should help to make them more effective crisis team members.

■ ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

Throughout this preface I have noted the crisis management process. Crisis management can be viewed as having three stages: precrisis, crisis event, and postcrisis. The book follows this three-part structure. Chapter 1 provides a discussion of the three-stage approach to crisis management. Chapter 2 highlights the increased importance of social media to crisis management. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the prevention

aspect of precrisis, while Chapters 5 and 6 develop the preparation aspect of precrisis. Chapters 7 and 8 concentrate on the crisis event stage, and Chapter 9 explains the postcrisis stage. The Epilogue provides a summary of the lessons crisis managers can learn from the various research and writings on crisis communication.

Pedagogical Features

Throughout the book are **"What Would You Do?"** cases. Each case fits the key points found in a particular chapter. Information from a real crisis event is presented along with a series of questions designed to enable readers to apply text concepts to the case.

Each chapter ends with a **Conclusion** that sums up the main points of the chapter, as well as **Discussion Questions** that help readers extend their understanding of the material.

■ NEW TO THE THIRD EDITION

Writing a third edition of this book was in many ways a necessity. Crisis communication and management is so dynamic that the field has changed significantly in the few years since the second edition. Research continues to yield additional insights into the crisis management process. The Internet, especially social media, has added to the complexity of crises. Researchers are systematically examining the effects of crisis response strategies on stakeholders, and we are moving away from speculation to real knowledge about these strategies. Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Contingency Theory are two examples of the systematic and social scientific study of crisis communication. The Internet, including social media, has become an indispensable tool for collecting information about warning signs and crisis as well as an option for communicating with stakeholders during a crisis. Oddly, the Internet has also increased the crisis risks that organizations face through computer hacking, denial of service, and amplifying challenges from stakeholders that management might be operating an organization in an inappropriate manner.

The main changes to the third edition are outlined here:

- It includes a new **Chapter 2** exploring the effect that the Internet, especially social media, has on crisis communication and management.

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- **Chapter 3** is a refined integration of crisis management with three other proactive management functions: issues management, reputation management, and risk management. The interrelationships are explored in more depth in this edition.

- **Chapters 4, 6, 8, and 9** include extensive updates related to the Internet. **Chapter 4** introduces the concept of the paracrisis, a threat that is managed publicly much like a crisis but is itself not a crisis. The Internet plays a key role in the emergence of paracrises. **Chapter 6** considers what Internet-related preparation is needed prior to a crisis. **Chapter 8** discusses the effects of social media on the crisis response, while **Chapter 9** explores the emergence of online memorials.

- Finally, the **Epilogue** is designed to summarize the key lessons the vast crisis communication research literature provides for crisis managers.

Acknowledgments

Detailed Contents

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A Need for More Crisis Management Knowledge

Merck, BP, Enron, Bausch & Lomb, Hurricane Katrina, and the 9/11 attacks are all reminders that no organization is immune to crises. If no organization is immune, then all organizations should be prepared. Pick any day of the week and you will find stories about train derailments, plane crashes, funds used inappropriately at nonprofit organizations, explosions in manufacturing facilities, workers shot or injured on the job, or *E. coli*–tainted beef, turkey, chicken, or even bean sprouts. The bottom line is that all organizations should learn as much as they can about crisis management.

Developing a comprehensive crisis management program (CCMP) that captures the ongoing nature of crisis management is not an easy task. The crisis management process is varied and requires the integration of knowledge from such diverse areas as small-group decision making, media relations, environmental scanning, risk assessment, crisis communication, crisis plan development, evaluation methods, and reputation management. A diverse set of crisis management writings must be navigated in order to develop a complete CCMP that covers every stage and substage of the crisis management process. It is a daunting but necessary task to sort through the plethora of crisis management information. How else can a CCMP be developed?

The primary goal of this book is to offer an integrative framework that simplifies the task of organizing crisis management knowledge. An ongoing approach based upon a three-stage model of crisis management provides the foundation. The three stages are precrisis, crisis event, and postcrisis, each of which is composed of three substages.

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