IN THE EVENT OF A CRISIS:
CRISIS PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN FOR
MOUNT VERNON NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty at The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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August, 2010
IN THE EVENT OF A CRISIS:
CRISIS PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN FOR MOUNT
VERNON NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Crises happen indiscriminately and without warning to organizations of every type. Institutions of higher education are places where students can pursue education to brighten their futures, but even they face potential crises. In the same way that crisis mismanagement can perpetuate the escalation of a crisis, miscommunication at the time of a crisis can cause irreparable damage to an organization’s reputation and, ultimately, its future. Research indicates that preparation is essential to swift crisis resolution and prevention of crisis escalation. A crisis public relations plan enables an organization to be prepared to respond to key constituencies in the midst of a crisis by providing in depth guidelines of what to say and to whom. This thesis examines literature on crisis public relations for the purpose of creating a crisis public relations plan for Mount Vernon Nazarene University.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions, such as colleges and universities, are designed to be places of learning and scholarship, where students go to brighten their future and further their opportunities. However, sometimes the places designed to bring about better opportunities become the center of crises and tragedies. In situations where this is the case, the necessity arises to have a plan for exactly how to respond to students, families of students, other constituencies and the public; this is where a crisis public relations plan comes into play.

Crises often happen unexpectedly and with varying amounts of damage to an organization; therefore, it is essential to have a plan ready in order to minimize response time. According to Fearn-Banks, “A crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name.” In addition to the possibility of negatively impacting an organization, Fearn-Banks goes on to say that a crisis “can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization” (2007, p.8).

A crisis public relations plan enables the institution faced with a crisis to react in an effective and organized manner which helps prevent confusion and/or panic. Typically, an in-depth plan will encompass a significant number of guidelines to follow in order to ensure the adherence to proper protocol. In response to the significance of a crisis
communications plan, Marra said, “These plans, in many cases, help public relations practitioners successfully manage the immediate and enormous number of requests for information that accompany a crisis” (1998, p. 462). Because crises do not occur when it is convenient, an organization’s preparation can reduce the likelihood of poor communication escalating the crisis.
CHAPTER II
CRISIS RESOLUTION

Several different types of crisis plans exist to facilitate crisis resolution. While they are all different, they all serve to help to diminish the severity or consequences of a crisis. The following plans are quite different in nature but are often confused to be the same type of plan: crisis management plan, crisis communications plan and crisis PR plan. These plans are all designed to bring about crisis resolution but they generally do it in different ways.

A key distinction to be made between the three plans is to understand what objective the plan is designed to achieve. The three most prevalent themes in these plans will be managing the crisis and stopping it, communicating within the organization to ensure cohesiveness and addressing key constituencies to protect the organization’s reputation and future. However, many plans seem to fulfill multiple roles, so it is important to understand what the differences are between the plans.

Management

Although many plans may be labeled as a “crisis communications plan,” they are often really a crisis management plan. Crisis management is focused on the actual resolution of a crisis when it occurs. It can also place a great amount of significance on crisis avoidance (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis management contributes to the resolution
of the crisis by diminishing “some of the risk and uncertainty” that accompany a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9).

Crisis management is essential in resolving any crisis and preventing crisis escalation. According to the Lexicon Communications Corp. website, although “management” and “communications” are frequently used interchangeably in reference to crises, there are distinct differences between the roles that both perform. The Company differentiates the two by saying, “Crisis Management deals with the **reality** of the crisis. Crisis Communications deals with the **perception** of the reality” (2009). The reality is the crisis which is being managed whereas the perception is what the public interprets and understands from the information that is communicated to them.

Since crisis management can also entail crisis resolution as well as crisis avoidance, a crisis management plan will likely entail a vast amount of information. Crisis avoidance may be based on learning from prior mistakes, extensive preparation and attention to potential warning signs (Coombs, 2007). For example, after the Titanic sank and many people drowned needlessly, cruise lines are now required to put enough lifeboats on their ships to accommodate all of their passengers. Crisis resolution is based on addressing and handling the crisis in a quick efficient manner. An example of crisis resolution can be seen in the Tylenol incident where numerous people died from taking cyanide-laced capsules. Johnson & Johnson resolved the situation by issuing a national recall of all Tylenol products. This not only put an end to the deaths that were occurring, but it also won Johnson & Johnson favor in the public’s opinion (Fearn-Banks, 2007).
Communications

Crisis communications, however, is concerned with the aspect of communicating during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9). Crisis communications plans often provide information on what should be said and to whom in a crisis. One outstanding similarity that crisis communications and crisis management both have in common is the emphasis on prevention of crisis escalation. Crisis escalation can occur fairly easily if appropriate measures are not taken. If a crisis is not managed quickly and efficiently, it can become even more detrimental. However, if a crisis is poorly explained or inaccurate information is communicated, this can also cause the perpetuation of a crisis. In the same way, consistent internal communication can promote a better outcome by ensuring that all of the members of an organization have the same goals and objectives (Doorley & Garcia, 2007).

A crisis management plan could also encompass the realm of crisis communications, but rarely is this the case. Often a crisis management plan will have a small portion dedicated to communications but rarely is it extensive. A crisis communications plan should be an extensive guide on whom to contact in a crisis and how to contact them. This will expedite the resolution of a crisis and diminish the likelihood of miscommunications or wasted time. Likewise, crisis communications plans often have an element of crisis management, but it is usually minimal. However, crisis management’s ability to encompass crisis communications is not a mutually inclusive situation.

Crisis management’s responsibility is to resolve the crisis, crisis communications’ job is to promote a successful flow of communication within the organization. The
communications plan decreases the likelihood of crisis escalation due to faulty information or miscommunication. This plan also protects the company and its constituencies from further damage that could result in a tarnished reputation or worse. This damage can be caused by lack of knowledge, rumors, misinformation and misperceptions.

Public Relations

Many institutions have a crisis communications plan that is actually a crisis public relations (PR) plan. Distinct differences exist between crisis communications and crisis PR. Frequently organizations label their plan as one when it is more in line with the other. Little literature exists on the difference between crisis communications plans and crisis PR plans, but a big determinant is whether the plan is predominantly internally focused or externally focused. An internally focused plan would be more concerned with communication between departments, faculty, staff and students. However, an externally concentrated one would rely more on the communication between the organization and external publics such as the media, community and national audiences.

A crisis communications plan will often encompass instructions for what to do as soon as a crisis hits and whom to contact. This type of plan may even incorporate crisis management which is different from the communication aspect of resolving a crisis. This plan will often have an internal department sheet with contact information for key contacts. A crisis communications plan will often have a call tree with information as to which supervisors oversee certain departments and/or faculty and staff members in a crisis. A crisis PR plan will often have contact information of key university leaders as
well, but the contacts are not necessarily going to be ones who are responsible for correcting the crisis.

A crisis communications plan usually has a wealth of information as to what to do immediately when a crisis occurs, but not necessarily information on how to handle the situation with the public. This plan can have elements with a PR emphasis, but rarely is it in depth. If a plan were to include an extensive internal as well as external communication emphasis, it would be more of a compilation of both, but usually a plan focuses more on one or the other.

Just as a crisis communications plan has an emphasis on crisis management, a crisis PR plan, on the other hand, has a significant focus on reputation management. Poor communication can result in lasting, detrimental effects to any organization; the purpose of this plan is to ensure that this does not happen. Although a crisis PR plan will be more externally based, some information regarding internal communications should be included as well. An organization has to be consistent in its external messaging, and this necessitates appropriate internal communication.

Most crisis PR plans will have extensive information on managing communication with the media. The media have the ability to shape the public’s perception of an organization, so communication with the media is essential in promoting the institution favorably. This type of plan will often include sample messaging, media contacts, interview tips and more. No plan will be an all encompassing plan that can resolve any negative public perceptions or articulate exactly what to say in any given circumstance, but a crisis PR plan should at least lead the organization in the right direction.
Due to the fact that numerous significant differences exist between a crisis communications plan and a crisis PR plan, it is a good idea for an organization to consider having both. Both plans are quite extensive and combining them could cause delay and confusion when the crisis actually occurs. One plan aids in maintaining and solving the crisis through successful internal communication whereas the other is dedicated to protecting the reputation and good name of the organization; both plans are important.
CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM

In spite of their importance, many institutions such as Mount Vernon Nazarene University (MVNU) do not have crisis PR plan and face the risk of being caught unprepared. The purpose of this thesis is to make sure that this is not that case with MVNU by developing a crisis PR plan for the organization. Currently, MVNU has a short crisis communications plan which focuses significantly on the internal, but not the external. Much time spent discussing the “how” but not the “what.” For example, the plan includes suggestions for types of statements that should be prepared for the media and other publics, but does not give an example of what these statements should say or not say. Aside from being basic, the plan is outdated and in need of revision. Certain components of MVNU’s crisis communications plan will be incorporated into what will be MVNU’s public relations plan.

As part of the research for this thesis, ten private institutions, in various locations around the United States, were contacted with inquiry as to whether they had developed a crisis PR plan. Of the ten, none responded affirmatively to having a written plan in place. One respondent even went so far as to say that it is on the “to do” list of the institution. Unfortunately, the need for a crisis PR plan might not be readily evident until an actual crisis occurs. An attitude of “we simply haven’t gotten around to it” is only acceptable until a crisis happens and confusion arises about how to handle the situation. Putting
something of this significance on the back-burner is not going to help the institution or anyone else in the event that crisis actually occurs. Commenting on the significance of preparation in dealing with crises, Matt Goshko, the U.S. Embassy’s Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Officer in London, said, “The day the crisis hits is not the day to start thinking about how you’ll respond.”

The importance of preparation is even more significant now than it was in the past due to the various technologies that enable sights, sounds and words to travel quickly (Ashcroft, 1997). In reference to the immediacy of information being circulated, Ashcroft stated, “This means that it is unlikely that there will be a time delay between an incident or crisis erupting and the resulting media coverage. This emphasizes the need to react quickly at a time of crisis, and to let all parties know immediately about the action you have taken” (1997, p. 328). A way to ensure that an organization is prepared to act when a crisis occurs is for that organization to have a crisis PR plan. The more an organization delays in releasing information to concerned parties, the more of an opportunity there is for false information to be circulated.

By ignoring the potential of a crisis occurring, the institution could be jeopardizing its reputation and future. Many higher education institutions, such as MVNU, rely on the fact that major crises have not impacted them in the past. However, a false sense of security does not prevent a crisis from occurring. A crisis PR plan facilitates the institution’s ability to continue educating students after a crisis occurs and provides a clearly articulated message so that the public and parties involved will feel that it is safe to attend school there. Crisis PR is not just about informing the public of what has happened, but it is also about maintaining or repairing an image (Benoit, 1997). If
the image of an organization is too badly tarnished, the future of that institution could be in jeopardy.

The rationale for focusing on small private higher education institutions, specifically MVNU, is due to the numerous potential crises that these organizations have the possibility of facing as well as the consequences and potential impact a mishandled crisis might have on such institutions. Crises occur at institutions of varying sizes, locations and affiliations. Numerous examples can be listed of crises that occurred to institutions that have no common link.

Whether the crisis is a violent crime committed against students, an infectious disease pandemic, an unforeseen accident, or any number of different crises that can occur, crises do happen indiscriminately. An example of a violent crime is the Virginia Tech shooting in which Seung-Hui Cho, a student, killed thirty-two people on campus. Another example of an unexpected crisis was the Bluffton University baseball team bus accident that resulted in the death of seven passengers. Due to the small student body, many students knew the victims of the bus accident. Virginia Tech and Bluffton University have little in common except that they are both institutions of higher learning and both had terrible crises occur. Both of these crises had lasting impact on the institutions.

Small private universities in some ways are even more vulnerable to the potential fall-out from a mismanaged crisis due to their dependence on private funding which can be at the discretion of the contributor. These institutions usually lack significant government and state financial support or other resources that large state universities can tap. These universities rely on gifts and endowments from non-government sources.
Private institutions rely significantly on philanthropy for their funding (Bongila, 2001). A poorly managed crisis could have devastating effects on the funding that the institution receives. Preparation for these crises will not stop them from happening, but it can lessen the amount of pain and grief that those involved have to endure by diminishing the likelihood of miscommunication, which can have devastating results during a crisis.
CHAPTER IV
BACKGROUND

Mount Vernon Nazarene University, lovingly called “The Naz” or “MVNU” is a small, Christian, private university in Mount Vernon, Ohio, of about 1,500 on-campus students. MVNU has been fortunate to have avoided many problems, such as violent crimes and theft that larger schools have faced. The small town of about 16,000 residents also provides an atmosphere that is conducive to the feeling of safety on the university’s campus.

MVNU was founded in 1968 by the Church of the Nazarene in order to provide a place of higher learning for predominantly Nazarene students in Ohio and surrounding states. Today numerous denominations and faiths are represented at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. Dr. Stephen Nease, MVNU’s first president, coined the motto, “To seek to learn is to seek to serve.” This motto has continued to represent the University’s values through many years and countless changes. MVNU seeks to prove this motto true by providing numerous community service opportunities, mission trips, and various other volunteer opportunities. The University strives to provide programs in which students are able to serve others in a Christ-like manner.

The Church of the Nazarene is a denomination of the Christian faith that has an emphasis on holiness living. The belief in holiness living entails following the teachings of Jesus Christ, with a strong Biblical orientation (“Information About,” n.d., para. 4).
Although MVNU is a Nazarene university, not all of the students are Nazarene. Many different denominations are represented throughout the student body, faculty and staff members.

The strong Christian roots of MVNU are embodied in the fact that the University refers to itself as, “an academic community of faith” (“Academics,” n.d., para. 3). The University mission statement is also faith-oriented: “Mount Vernon Nazarene University exists to shape lives through educating the whole person and cultivating Christ-likeness for lifelong learning and service” (“Information About,” n.d., para. 2). MVNU’s service-oriented education is evident not only in the motto and mission statement, but also in the regular operations and programs of the University.

Students have the opportunity to join community service groups that cost them only time and commitment. Although the community service programs are usually optional to join, students are encouraged to consider the positive benefits of joining one of the groups. Many of the service groups require that the students take a few hours a week to volunteer and make a difference in the lives of community members. Some of the types of programs that MVNU students participate in are mentoring programs, companionship programs and physical assistance programs. These programs nurture a positive relationship between the University and the community, but also between the community and the faith that the University represents. All of the university’s activities expose the institution to potential risks and crises.

One potential problem that a mismanaged situation or crisis could cause is a negative perception of the Nazarene denomination and possibly the Christian faith as well. This places a great amount of significance on the way that MVNU conducts its operations,
not only in day-to-day activities, but also in times of trial. If the University administration makes a poor decision or mismanages a crisis, this problem could have significant detrimental consequences to the Church of the Nazarene.

MVNU is a beautiful campus with predominantly brick buildings and gorgeous trees scattered across the 402-acre campus. The rural setting of the campus makes the University seem quite isolated and safe. With regular chapel times, cozy dormitories, curfews and a community atmosphere, MVNU hardly seems to be a location for potential disaster. Although the University owns 402 acres, the 33 buildings are in close proximity and most students walk to classes and the dormitories.

The city of Mt. Vernon has around 16,000 permanent residents. However, the population of the city fluctuates depending on the time of year due to the transient nature of college students. MVNU is not the only institution that adds significantly to the population of Mt. Vernon. Kenyon College, located in close proximity to MVNU, also contributes to the character and size of the city. Mt. Vernon is a relatively safe community with the majority of crimes being minor. However, violent crimes have taken place in Mt. Vernon in the past, and a possibility exists that future crimes may occur. The danger of living and working in a relatively safe city is that it can provide a false sense of security.

Many students have a disinterested attitude regarding a potential crisis because they perceive it as unlikely. Many factors contribute to the safe-haven feel that is associated with MVNU. This atmosphere gives one the impression that there can be no dangers lurking on the campus. Although students are advised not to do so, they walk alone in the dark all over the residential areas of the campus; they give other people access to the
dormitories by using their identification cards and, in general, have a laissez-faire attitude toward any potential risks. Although MVNU and the surrounding community of Mt. Vernon are generally safe places, no guarantee exists that a violent crime, natural disaster, or any other type or crisis would never occur on the MVNU campus.

On-campus crises are not the only ones that may possibly occur, but rather, numerous off campus crises have the potential to arise. With all of the mission trips, work and witness groups, away sports games and other such activities that happen throughout Ohio, the U.S. and around the world, the potential of a crisis happening is not as unlikely as would be hoped. As seen in the case of the Bluffton University baseball team, a tragedy can strike at any time and anywhere. Preparation is the best way to ensure an institution’s ability to respond quickly and effectively in a crisis, because a crisis never happens when it is convenient.

Much like MVNU, Bluffton University is another small, private institution that has a population less than half the size of MVNU. It is unlikely that anyone ever anticipated the bus tragedy would happen in which several students lost their lives, but this is why preparation is important. Simply because an institution feels safe, does not mean that a crisis will never happen. Countless examples exist of organizations that did not manage crises well and prolonged the impact of the crisis more so than if it had been handled and communicated correctly (Jaques, 2007).

One example of an institution that does have a crisis communications plan, with an emphasis on PR, is Duke University. Although the plan specifies certain messages that will be relayed in any crisis situation, such as the safety of the students, the website does not give many examples of messages that could be used ("Duke University Crisis
Communications Plan," n.d., para.17). Duke’s plan is more of a description of how messages will be developed, and what parties will be responsible for this development. The crisis communication plan that Duke has in place specifies why a plan is in place, how the plan is to be carried out and who is responsible for communicating with whom ("Duke University Crisis Communications Plan," n.d.). Differences between a crisis PR plan and a crisis communications plan are dependent on many different variables, but Duke’s emphasis on the audience and the effect that a crisis can have on a university’s reputation and image are two reasons why Duke’s plan is consistent with crisis PR.

A statement, from the Duke University website, clarifies what purpose a crisis communications plan serves “Duke University’s crisis communications plan outlines the roles, responsibilities and protocols that will guide the university in promptly sharing information with all of Duke’s audiences during an emergency or crisis.” Duke further explains who constitutes the audience by specifying that, “The audiences for this plan include undergraduates, graduate and professional school students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, trustees, neighbors, city leaders, media, our Durham community, and state and federal officials” ("Duke University Crisis Communications Plan," n.d., para. 1).

One rationale that Duke University provides for why the plan was developed is that, “Honesty and speed are the most effective means to avoid lasting damage to the institution and widespread second-guessing by the public, which expects immediate access to accurate information” ("Duke University Crisis Communications Plan," n.d., para. 3). In essence, the university developed this plan to defend itself and therefore the students in the event of a crisis. Rarely is a crisis anticipated to happen, but its effects can be diminished by preparation.
Many different types of crisis PR plans or crisis communications plans are utilized, some that are more in depth than others, but it is better to have a basic plan than not have one at all. Louisiana State University is another school that has a crisis communications plan. Providing their rationale for developing a plan, LSU posted on its website the following, “Some crises can be predicted and prevented, and those that cannot be avoided can be minimized if handled properly. Aside from tangible damage, a crisis can also destroy an institution's reputation.” Referring to potential financial repercussions a university might face, LSU also posted on their website that, “The longer a crisis goes on, the more damage it can do to public support, employee and student morale, enrollment and fund raising. Therefore, it is necessary to handle crises in a swift and organized manner” (“Crisis Communication Plan,” 2009, para 2).

Numerous institutions have adopted a crisis PR plan to ensure protection of the school if a crisis should occur, but countless institutions have not put the time into developing one. Schools such as MVNU face the risk of being caught off guard and facing devastating consequences. The focus of this thesis is to develop such a plan for MVNU so that the university need not face the immeasurable penalties that the lack of preparation could cost in a crisis.

Numerous potential crises can arise as a result of the initial crisis if it is handled incorrectly. For example, when dealing with a higher education institution, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) has to be taken into consideration when releasing information. FERPA protects students from having their information distributed against their will. An institution is only permitted to release certain information regarding the students and releasing significant information about students could be a violation of
FERPA rules and even a potential lawsuit. Having a crisis PR plan will facilitate the leadership communication team in developing a concise, FERPA appropriate, message.

A crisis PR plan will be a useful resource for MVNU to use if a crisis situation ever arises. A thorough plan will not only provide information on what to do in a crisis, but also what not to do. The proposed plan will provide an extensive amount of information on how to manage the university’s relationship with the public and stakeholders in the event of a crisis. Since messaging is key, a crisis PR plan should include examples of appropriate responses to use in likely crisis situations.

Methods of communication should be given a great amount of consideration. A campus-wide text could be effective in some situations whereas an email could be better in others. One possible idea to consider could be a MVNU Facebook page that students are asked to join if they have a Facebook. Many students are not thorough about checking their email and would be more likely to check a Facebook message. A study by The Nielson Company found that social media websites are becoming a more prevalent method of communication than email (“The Global Online Media Landscape,” 2009, p. 9). However, there would need to be a backup message (text, email or call) for those students who do not have Facebook.

A massive increase in social media use has occurred over the past several years. Facebook has become an incredibly popular social networking website, especially on college campuses. With the ability to create special groups, send private messages, post public messages and essentially, make contact through myriad methods of Facebook communication, this has quickly become a tool for getting in touch with someone in a fast manner.
Part of the reason why Facebook has become such a popular method of communication is due to the personalized aspect of it. In email accounts, many students receive spam messages, university updates and forwarded emails. However, in Facebook, the messages that one receives are usually personalized and significant to that individual. In general, one can also control who they receive messages from, but in an email account, anyone can send an email to the person. These controlled aspects to Facebook are part of what make the website a very popular social networking media.

Facebook groups are good marketing and PR tools for organizations to utilize. When someone joins a group, they automatically get messages from that group. Many groups are designed to alert students to upcoming athletic games, music events, and myriad other activities. When a message is received, the person then sees who the message is from and has the choice as to whether they read the message. If a group were to be designed that only sent out emergency messages, this would be a useful tool in alerting students, faculty and staff of a crisis.

Based on the importance and significance that a crisis PR plan has, I propose the following plan for Mount Vernon Nazarene University. I think this will help MVNU in their endeavors to shape “Christ-like leaders for life-long service and global impact.” As the Duke crisis communication plan says, “A good offense is the best defense” ("Duke University Crisis Communications Plan," n.d., para. 3).
The proposed crisis PR plan would incorporate significant strategies to ensure that the proper constituencies are informed in a timely, accurate manner. A crisis PR plan such as this would include the following (Fearn-Banks, 2007):

1: Crisis Communication Team (and contact information)

2: Identification of key publics (concerned and interested parties and stakeholders)

3: Crisis Communication Plans (general guidelines for what will be addressed with variations for different crises)

4: Instructions for How to Handle a Crisis After Normal Hours

5: Discussion of Primary Methods of Communication with Constituencies and Stakeholders, such as the following possibilities:

- Web-based communication: Facebook, email and other social media websites
- Phone-based communication: Campus-wide text message
- Media-based communication: Press releases, interviews

6: Media Contact information

- Local news stations
- Local newspapers

7: Media “Do’s” and “Don’ts”
8: Trick questions

9: Sample messaging

10: Law Enforcement and Emergency Services Contact Information
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

MOUNT VERNON NAZARENE UNIVERSITY CRISIS PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

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MVNU Crisis Public Relations Plan: First Response

The following is a list of guidelines to follow as soon as a crisis strikes.

1. Assemble the A Team (Appendix C, p. 53) in a safe location at a specified time.
2. Prepare for press releases and interviews by referring to the section, “Going Public” (p. 32).
3. Determine which “Key Publics” need to be notified of the situation (p. 34).
4. Refer to “Strategies for Interviews” and “Target Messages” in order to decide what information should be shared (p. 39-40).
5. Understand what questions will likely be asked by referring to “Questions to Prepare for” (p. 42).
6. Be fully prepared for the initial release of information to key publics by referring to, “In Preparation for a Press Release or Interview” (p. 44).
7. Decide which media need to be contacted (p. 45).
8. Use the “Sample Messaging” guide to develop crucial messages to be released to key publics (p. 47).
9. Schedule a follow-up meeting.
### Acknowledgements

The following signatures verify that this plan has been read and approved by the Crisis Response Team and President of Mount Vernon Nazarene University.

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Necessity for a Plan

Why is this plan essential?

Numerous tragedies and crises have occurred in the past five years at higher-education institutions. A crisis often occurs suddenly and without warning, and has the potential to ruin an organization. Fearn-Banks states that, “A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization” (2007, p.8). The more expeditious an institution is in dealing with a crisis, the less damage a crisis is likely to cause. For this reason, preparation is essential in combating a crisis.

What are potential repercussions of not having this plan?

A private university such as MVNU is dependent on enrollment, endowments and other various types of funding. If a crisis is handled poorly, the university faces the possibility of losing countless students and significant financial support that the university needs to stay afloat. Monetary losses are not the only ones that MVNU could face, but rather the loss of reputation as a quality higher-education institution. Crises have the ability of escalating if not dealt with swiftly and efficiently, and MVNU can not afford to risk the numerous consequences that could result from being caught unprepared.
MVNU has always been a relatively safe university, why worry now?

Many other institutions that were just as likely to be crisis free had terrible, unforeseen events occur. One example is the Bluffton baseball team that was involved in a bus accident and suffered several casualties. Like MVNU, Bluffton is a small, private school that did not seem likely to experience a crisis, but that did not deter the crisis from occurring. A small school size and a lack of preparation are not guarantees for a crisis-free future. Many crisis PR professionals attribute a carefree attitude with potential escalation of a crisis. Just because it has not happened yet, does not mean that it will never happen. If an institution is prepared for the worst, it can easily scale its PR plan down.

Objective and Purpose of the Crisis PR Plan

Objective

The objective of this crisis PR plan is to aid in resolving the five stages of a crisis as discussed by Fearn-Banks (2007, p.10):

1. Detection of potential crises that MVNU would be more likely to encounter than others.
2. Prevention/Preparation to decrease the likeliness of a crisis happening by raising awareness but also ensure that the University is ready should one arise.
3. Containment of a crisis in order to decrease damage by conveying information accurately and swiftly to concerned parties and stakeholders.
4. Recovery in a swift manner due to expediency in resolving the crisis.
5. Learning how the crisis was handled and in what ways it could have been dealt with more effectively.

The development of this plan will facilitate the conveyance of accurate information to the appropriate channels which will decrease the likelihood of information being misrepresented or misunderstood.
Purpose

The key purpose of this crisis PR plan is to equip Mount Vernon Nazarene University to respond to a crisis in such a manner that will diminish damage that a crisis might cause to the university and promote the likelihood of a swift resolution of said crisis. The following are specific components of this purpose:

- Provide contact lists in order to follow the correct channels of communication.
- Decrease the amount of time in which MVNU takes to respond to a crisis.
- Increase the probability of delivering a unified message that promotes a favorable institutional reputation.
- Decrease the likelihood of MVNU suffering in a financial way by losing favor in the eyes of stakeholders.
- Promote a sense of awareness for crises that could be most likely to occur.

Going Public

Assess the situation and consider possible outcomes, escalation and repercussions.

Anticipate worst-case scenarios

1. Have there been any fatalities?
2. Are there any safety situations which need to be addressed immediately?
3. Have rules or policies been violated?
4. Is negligence assumed or suspected?
5. What will be the immediate response by faculty, staff and students?
6. Is the institution in some way responsible?
7. Are there likely to be legal ramifications?
8. Are local and national media interested?
9. Has the event tarnished the reputation of the organization?
10. Has anything like this ever occurred before?
11. Should there be conciliatory efforts made?

The Crisis Meeting Protocol: Before Going Public

- Notify the university president and other key university figures immediately including all members of the crisis response team and university leadership of what has happened and schedule to meet immediately with as many people as possible from the two groups.
- Assess the situation and discuss what steps should be taken next.
• Develop an appropriate response and agree on what information can be released and what information should not be shared.
• Differentiate between information that should be shared publicly and that which should be shared internally.
• Determine which publics should be notified immediately (students, families, media and/or community).
• Develop key messages for information shared internally and externally.
• If media is to be informed, decide whether a press conference, news release or other format should be utilized.
• Determine whether information should be updated via phone messages or a crisis response phone line and develop a consistent message.
• Decide which/if any social networking mediums should be used such as Facebook, and/or Twitter.
• Create a tentative timeline in which tasks should be completed such as: notification of key publics, media press release, follow-up meeting and call center activation.
• Consider doing a mock press release or a mock Q & A session.
• Schedule a follow-up meeting time and location to discuss changes/updates in the situation.
• Delegate tasks, when appropriate or necessary, to other staff members as needed and arrange for them to be debriefed.
• Distribute media information request log (Appendix A) to whoever is assigned to answer calls.
• Circulate contact information of important community contacts (law enforcement, hospital and media).
• Distribute contact information of internal contacts. If the phone line is down, decide on a different method of communication such as two-way radios, cell phones or other methods of communication. It is essential to have a functional communication system in place because if internal communication is impeded, it will likely have a significant impact on the flow and consistency of external communication.
• Have several key contact people that oversee different areas of duties that have been delegated. Note: these contacts are for improving the flow of internal communication, not for making public statements.
• Ask questions and try to think of any possible obstacles that might arise.
• Be calm and professional.

Follow-up Meeting After Going Public

• Have all updated information ready to present to the crisis response team and university leadership.
• Delegate any duties that need to be constantly performed in order to ensure that they are covered while the meeting is taking place. Do not just leave phone lines unattended.
• Arrive promptly.
• Discuss any changes that have taken place in the crisis situation.
• Determine if new information needs to be distributed.
• Decide what information should be shared externally and internally.
• Determine which publics should be notified of the updated information.
• Determine which mediums should be utilized in order to update these publics of the information.
• Develop key messages.
• Delegate tasks if need-be.
• Arrange for another follow-up meeting.
• Create another timeline.
• Repeat this process until the crisis is resolved.

Key Publics

Key publics are the essential group of individuals who should be notified in the event of a crisis. They can vary depending on the type and severity of the crisis, and should be determined as soon as a crisis occurs. The following are examples of key publics:

• Students: In some crises, the student body will not be aware of the crisis that has occurred. Speculation can be a dangerous thing to allow students to engage in. Sometimes it is impossible to share all, or any the facts with students, but speculation should not be allowed to circulate on campus.
• Faculty/Staff/MVNU Leadership: A crisis may arise in which the majority of faculty and staff members are unaware of what has transpired. However, it is a good idea to make sure that MVNU employees are not receiving information via hearsay from students or other employees.
• Community: Many institutions have a strong relationship with the community in which they are located. Often there is a substantial significance between the prosperity of an organization and their relationship with the community. Sometimes, the community is dependent on the organization as well. The downfall of a large organization could cause devastating consequences to the community. The community members should not be the last to hear what is happening in their own town.
• Families/Loved ones of involved parties: This group can be the most difficult to inform of a crisis on campus, because panic can spread quickly. Families and loved ones should not have to hear the information about a crisis that impacted someone that they love through the media. This group should not be the last to know.
• Safety/Emergency contacts: Many crises will require the involvement of safety or emergency personnel. There does not have to be a fire on campus in order for the fire department to be involved; a natural disaster might warrant their help. These groups should especially be informed if the crisis has a possibility of escalating or impacting the safety or wellness of anyone on or off campus.

• Media: The media can be a valuable ally when a crisis occurs, but cooperation is important on both ends. Many crises have been diminished by the help of the media, but some have been escalated. It is important to be discreet in what is shared with the media. However, willingness to share information can often end in a positive relationship between the organization and the media. Do not assume the media is an enemy.

Probable Crises

The PR strategies which are implemented in order to manage certain crises may also be utilized in handling others. However, it is a good idea to take an assessment of more probable crises in order to tailor certain messages to fit better with the type of crises which are most likely to arise. One way to gauge which crises are more likely to pose a threat to an organization is to rely on sources who know the organization best. It is true that crises are unforeseen and expected, but some are more likely to occur and can be better prepared for.

In recent interviews with staff and faculty members on the MVNU campus, the participants were asked to list five crises which seemed to be the most likely crises to affect the institution at some point in the future. The responses varied greatly, but had some consistency as well. Numerous, varied potential crises were listed by the faculty such as depression, substance abuse and students getting killed in an auto accident. But several crises that were mentioned that could be great threats the MVNU are the following:
Communicable Disease

- H1N1 (swine flu) has become a growing threat to higher education institutions. H1N1 has symptoms which are much like that of a normal flu and is contagious like a normal flu. However, H1N1 has become a pandemic which has spread from numerous countries and several continents in a short period of time. It has also been the culprit for numerous deaths in the past few months.
- Since places of education are often considered to be breeding grounds for illnesses, there is a particular concern for the speed at which this virus may be able to travel across a campus. Dorms and residence halls provide a virus, such as H1N1, a perfect environment for spreading. Dorms are usually fairly condensed and heavily populated. If one student carries the virus into the residence hall, it could be only a short time before the rest of the facility is contaminated.

Economic Crisis

- Even before the presidential campaigns were in full swing, the United States public knew that our economy was not as strong as it had once been. Unemployment has become a big problem across the Nation as many people are out of work. For this reason, stimulus packages and special deals are being offered right and left to help the suffering economy.
- With many people taking pay cuts, shorter shifts or just getting laid off, affording a college education, let alone a private one, is not as easy as it once was. Many families do not have the money to simply write a check for their child’s education and therefore have to take out a loan, which they may not even qualify for. Arguing for the value of a private education has become increasingly difficult over the past year. Institutions such as MVNU run the risk of losing students and support if the economic crisis is not handled correctly.

Natural Disaster

- MVNU is in a location that is at risk for numerous weather-related problems that could occur without warning. The university has had to cancel classes numerous times and handle other weather-related problems. For example, a situation arose in which the students had to sleep in the gymnasium due to power outages, which left the most of the university without power.
- Cancelled classes is not the most detrimental effect that a natural disaster could have on MVNU’s campus. Storms have wrought havoc on the campus of MVNU in the past and caused significant damage to buildings and landscape. Fortunately, students have not been killed by falling tree branches or from being stuck in a blizzard white-out; but this does not mean that it will not happen on the campus of MVNU.
Spokesperson

An important part of public relations is having a designated spokesperson to represent the organization in the time of a crisis. The spokesperson is the face and voice of the organization and therefore needs to be selected very carefully. What the spokesperson says can have a lasting impact on an organization and should possess certain qualities such as:

- The ability to articulate clearly and calmly in spite of the severity of the crisis.
- Knowledge of the inner working and intricacies of the organization and the ability to make decisions on behalf of said organization.
- The integrity needed to face any situation that may arise and answer in truth regardless of the difficulty in doing so.
- Sensitivity to the feelings of others in a difficult time.
- Dedication to the organization.

It is usually a good idea to have one or two back up spokespersons that are also trained as the primary spokesperson is. Many unforeseeable circumstances can occur in which another spokesperson would need to fill in or assume the role of the primary spokesperson. An example of a time when a back-up spokesperson might be needed is if the primary spokesperson were to be inaccessible on a vacation, or if the primary spokesperson were to die. No guarantee exists that an organization will ever need a spokesperson at all, but to be caught in a crisis without one could be detrimental.

Spokesperson Contact Information

1. Dr. Henry Spaulding
   - Office Phone: 740-392-6868 ex. 4201
   - Home Phone:
   - Cell Phone: 740-501-4183
   - Email: hspauldi@mvnu.edu
   - Additional Contact Information:
2. Backup Spokesperson
   - Office Phone:
   - Home Phone:
   - Cell Phone:
   - Email:
   - Additional Contact Information:

*University Leadership Contacts*

Appendix C is a detailed call tree with information as to who are the primary contacts in a crisis. The crisis response executive team member’s names are in bold. The senior leadership team member’s names are in the top boxes of the call tree. In addition to work extension numbers, there is additional contact information provided to reach members if they are off campus and/or if a crisis happens after normal office hours. Refer to this for immediate contact and meeting locations.

*Safety and Emergency Contacts*

Update emergency contacts annually.

1. Mount Vernon Police Department
   Emergency Number: 911
   Office Number: 740-397-2222
   5 North Gay
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

2. Mount Vernon Fire Department
   Emergency Number: 911
   Office Number: 740-397-4444
   200 W. Gambier
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

3. Knox Community Hospital
   Contact Number: 740-393-9000
   1330 Coshocton Rd.
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050
4. Emergency Management  
   Contact Number: 740-393-6772  
   After Hours Number: 740-397-2727  
   11540 Upper Gilchrist Rd.  
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

5. Health Department  
   Contact Number: 740-393-2200  
   11660 Upper Gilchrist Rd.  
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

6. Safety and Loss Control  
   Contact Number: 740-393-6719  
   117 East High St., Suite 223  
   Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

## Strategies for Interviews

People are often looking for someone to blame in the event of a crisis, so it is prudent to be prepared ahead of time for what challenges the spokesperson might face when being interviewed. The following are strategies that will help the spokesperson have a successful interview:

- **Have practice crisis situations.** A significant part of preparation is rehearsing by using a mock crisis situation. This provides the opportunity to anticipate possible pitfalls that might occur in a real crisis.
- **Tell the truth.** It is far more detrimental for an organization to be caught in a lie than to face a harsh truth.
- **Do not speculate.** If the spokesperson is uncertain about something, he/she should say they are.
- **Be prepared with details.** The “who, what, when, where, why and how” questions will likely be asked at some point throughout the interview.
- **Be empathetic and caring.** It is possible to be concerned about the crisis and the effect that is has without accepting responsibility.
- **Be sensitive to the audience.** Never assume that someone in the audience has not been personally affected by the crisis.
- **Do not say “No comment.”** This statement often carries with it implications of guilt. It is better to say, “I will look into that”, or something similar in nature.
- **Be apologetic.** Do not be defensive or argumentative.
• **Anticipate ambush questions.** Think of ways in which a reporter might try to elicit an admission of culpability. If a question is unclear, ask for clarification.

• **Be calm, collected and respectful.** Be prepared to put on a strong front in difficult times.

• **Dress professionally.** Do not appear disheveled and unruly.

• **Remember to be a good representative of MVNU.** The situation may be difficult, but the spokesperson should be conscientious of the fact that he/she represents the University and can drastically impact the way it is perceived. It is not just the spokesperson’s reputation that is at stake, but the University’s as well.

### Target Messages

Crises are unique in that no matter how much an organization prepares for a crisis, there is no guarantee that it will ever happen quite as expected. There are however, certain messages that are essential to deliver no matter what unforeseen turns a crisis takes. Some general key messages that will likely be useful in any crisis situation are the following:

- **Articulate MVNU’s sympathy and concern for all parties involved.**
  1. “Our hearts go out to those affected by this tragic situation.”
  2. “Our prayers and thoughts are with those impacted by this difficult event.”

- **Assure the audience that the situation is being managed as well as it can be.**
  1. “We are currently taking every possible measure to see to it that the situation is resolved quickly and effectively.”
  2. “We are working with … (law enforcement, health services, etc.) to ensure the safety of everyone involved.”
  3. “We have notified … (students, families, faculty, all concerned parties) of the situation at hand.”

- **Acknowledge the intention of keeping the public updated.**
  1. “We will make an announcement as soon as we have further information.”
  2. “We will have a phone line set up with updates for you to call” (give phone number).

### Sample News Release

A prepared statement is a critical part of a crisis PR effort because “no comment” is never an acceptable response. A prepared statement should be fairly generic and can be used in almost any crisis situation. This provides an opportunity to give very little
information without appearing to be hiding something. An example of a prepared statement could be:

- “At (time and date) an incident occurred at (location) involving (nature of crisis). We do not know the specifics of the incident but we are taking necessary measures to see that it is resolved. We will provide updates as soon as possible. Thank you for your concern.”

**Forms of Crisis Information Dissemination**

The following forms of crisis information dissemination can be utilized to provide risk communication and to information to the all concerned parties/publics. It can also instruct the media, community residents, and stakeholders about all variables and potential situations that could arise. The form of information dissemination will be dependant on the audience/s being addressed.

- **Telephone:** A call center can be established to make phone calls to concerned publics, or answer phone calls.
- **Campus wide text:** Students with text capability should register their number every year so that a campus wide text message can be sent out to them in the event of a crisis. This is a fast way to disseminate information.
- **E-mail:** A list serve of all faculty, staff and students should be utilized in crisis situations. However, there should be a distinct email address that is used in emergency situations only.
- **Fax:** A fax is more useful for sending updates rather than notifications that a crisis has occurred. A fax is not the way to “break the news” to any concerned party.
- **Newsletters, pamphlets and/or journals.**
- **Social media websites:** Facebook and Twitter are both very popular right now and many students (and faculty/staff) check these social networking websites more than their own email accounts.
- **MVNU website.** Information should be posted on the website as it becomes available. This is a useful resource to concerned constituencies to find out what is transpiring in the crisis situation.
- **Face-to-face.** Faculty and staff members should disseminate information when the opportunity is presented. Students may doubt what they hear from other students about classes being cancelled or a crisis taking place. Many pranks are pulled on college campuses, so the information should come from someone credible whom the students will trust.
- **Media, including radio, and television;**
• Printed materials, including bulletins, posters, and other such items that can be distributed fairly easily. However, there is also an issue of credibility that needs to be assured when using this form of information dissemination. Give details and facts about what has happened, where more information can be found, if there will be a meeting to discuss the crisis and when/where it would take place.

Questions to Prepare For

Specific Questions That Directly Impacted Parties Will Ask:
- (Including: Students, Faculty, Staff, and Loved Ones)

• Am I safe right now?
• Are my loved ones and friends safe?
• What impact is this going to have on the University?
• What impact is this going to have on me?
• How quickly will this be resolved?
• Who/what is the cause of this?
• Can it be fixed?

Questions the media will ask first:
- (Including reporters, journalists, etc.)

• What happened?
• Who is in charge?
• Has this been contained?
• Are their fatalities?
• How many people were hurt/impacted by this?
• Are victims being helped?
• What can we expect?
• What should we do?
• Why did this happen?
• Did you have forewarning?

Questions the public will ask first:
-(Community residents, Other’s with relationship to the campus, Interested outsiders)

• What happened?
• What impact does this have on me?
• Why did this happen?
• Who is responsible?
• What is being done to correct it?
**Trick Questions**

It is important for the spokesperson to be aware of possible tactics that might be used to trick them into making an incorrect statement. Trick questions can be used to make a person accidentally give an admission of guilt or culpability. If a spokesperson understands how trick questions work ahead of time, he/she is less likely to fall into the trap.

- “Off the record” questions. These types of questions are designed to make the interviewee feel comfortable enough to share their personal feelings. However, rarely are things truly “off the record.”
  1. “Off the record, how much of this is MVNU’s fault?”
  2. “So, what is your personal opinion of the situation… off the record?”

- “What if” questions. Speculation is rarely a good idea in any crisis situation. By speculating how things could have been handled differently, an interviewee might unintentionally be acknowledging an organization’s negligence.
  1. “What if MVNU had known about this sooner?”
  2. “What if the crisis had been dealt with immediately?”
  3. “What if you had it to do all over again?”

- Be wary of incriminating questions. These types of questions can lead an interviewee to accept blame by not knowing how to respond to the contrary of what is assumed.
  1. “What caused MVNU to be so negligent in this whole situation?”
  2. “Why did MVNU do nothing to prevent this crisis?”

- Avoid leading questions. This type of question can be used to elicit a desired response by setting the tone of the question.
  1. “So you think that MVNU could have done a better job of resolving this crisis right?”
  2. “You obviously know that this had been coming for a long time?”

- Be on guard for confusing questions. These questions are designed to mislead and confuse in order to get more information, whether accurate or not.
  1. “So you understand that the situation did not turn out to be one that MVNU would not have been able to prevent?”
  2. “You don’t think that you have no responsibility in this situation do you? And if so you wouldn’t be inclined to share what role you think MVNU did play would you?”

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In Preparation for a Press Release or Interview

- Gather all facts and know what issues need to be addressed. The public does not need to be informed of every detail in a crisis. Decide what needs to be disclosed and what does not.
- Have a good idea of what to say ahead of time. A “wing it” type of attitude is not a good way to make sure the organization’s reputation is kept in tact. Using notes can be acceptable at times, but reading directly from them never is.
- If time permits, have a practice run with someone in the department to make sure that the messages are clear and concise. Also, it is a good idea to know what questions are likely to be asked regarding the crisis.
- Decide ahead of time if questions will be allowed from the reporters/journalists. It can be risky to allow questions, because there are so many variables (see Trick questions).
- Be cognizant of how appearance and demeanor may be perceived. Dress and actions can convey completely different messages than what a person is actually saying. Be conscientious that professionalism and composure should be maintained at all times.
- Be punctual. Making a late arrival may give the impression that the university does not take the situation seriously. It may also irritate reporters, journalists, etc., who can ultimately decide to write a story that portrays MVNU in a favorable light or a negative one.
- If there are specific reporters or journalists that the university has a good relationship, it may be wise to invite them to participate in the press release/interview.
- Know the setting. Some locations for interviews can be selected to set a certain theme or tone for the interview. It is a good idea to have knowledge of the location ahead of time. If possible, choose the location.

Crisis Type and Response

Numerous effective types of crisis response can be appropriately used depending on the crisis. Some circumstances may call for a full apology and admission of culpability. However, other types of crises may focus more on justifying what happened rather than an apology. Which type of response should be utilized is really contingent upon the crisis situation (Coombs, 2007, p. 140). Be cognizant of what type of crisis response is appropriate for the crisis at hand. Also be aware of how the public will perceive a crisis response. For example, a “Denial” response is not appropriate in a situation where there
is a crisis and the organization is to blame. An incorrect use of a crisis response can perpetuate the crisis in the long run. Refer to these definitions to determine which type of crisis response is best for a specific crisis.

**Definitions of Crisis Responses**

1. **Attack the Accuser**: Confronting the individual or party that says that a crisis exists or by indicating that the real culprit is the party who is blaming the organization for the crisis.
2. **Denial**: Claiming that there is no crisis because the “alleged” crisis never really happened.
3. **Excuse**: Attempting to minimize organization culpability or involvement in a crisis. This can be done by blame shifting, denying knowledge of potential crisis, etc.
4. **Redefinition**: Reducing the severity of the crisis or perception of organizational culpability by changing how it is perceived. Describing the crisis or situation in such a way as to influence the public that the crisis is not what it seems. One way in which this can be done is by referring to the event as a “situation” rather than a crisis.
5. **Justification**: Attempting to diminish the perceived damage from the crisis by disclaiming the seriousness of the crisis and denying significant organizational responsibility.
6. **Ingratiation**: Seeking public acceptance and approval. Often requires the organization to appeal to the good favor of the public by reminding the public of good that the organization has done in the past.
7. **Corrective Action**: Repairing the damage caused by the crisis. This can be done in many ways, but many organizations will offer help to those who were directly affected by the crisis. Help can be provided by manpower, monetary means, counseling, etc.
8. **Full Apology**: Organizational admission of full responsibility and request for forgiveness.

**Media**

When major crises break, there is often a quick response time from the media. Sometimes reporters and journalists will be at the scene of a crisis within an hour’s time. Although national news mediums are likely to spread the news to a substantial amount of the population, the first media sources that an organization should communicate with
should be local media contacts. Many crises have been diminished by the fact that the media have a good relationship with the organization who’s crisis was being reported on. Local media are going to be the mediums that impact how and organization is viewed within a community. Numerous examples exist of cases in which the media reported favorably on a company just because that organization had been cooperative with the media in the past (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.60-70)

It is important to have media contacts accessible in the event of a crisis so that the institution can inform the media before they find out about the crisis through other sources. The following are local media contacts in Mt. Vernon, Ohio:

1. Mount Vernon News
   - Toll Free: 1-800-772-5333
   - Contact Number: 740-397-5333
   - Mailing Address: P.O. Box 791
     Mount Vernon, O.H. 43050
   - Street Address: 18 East Vine St.
     Mount Vernon, O.H. 43050
   - Managing Editor: Samantha Scoles ext. 253
   - Editor: Cheryl Splain ext. 248

2. Eagle 93.7
   - Contact Number: 740-397-1000
   - Fax Number: 740-392-9300
   - Address: 17421 Coschocton Rd.
     Mount Vernon, O.H. 43050

3. WNZR 90.9
   - Contact Number: 740-392-9090
   - Address: 800 Martinsburg Rd.
     Mount Vernon, O.H. 43050

4. 10 TV News
   - Switchboard: 614-460-3700
   - Newsroom: 614-460-3950
   - Address: 770 Twin Rivers Dr.
     Columbus, O.H. 43215
Sample Messaging

On every campus, certain crises are more likely to occur than others. However, it is a good idea to have an idea of how to respond in numerous possible crisis situations. Many crises will have different audiences, and target messages, but there are certain messages that should be expressed no matter what the crisis is. For example: “We are deeply saddened by this horrific event. Our thoughts and prayers go out to students and loved ones who have been impacted by this situation.” Empathy is a sentiment that should be clearly evident in almost any type of crisis. Empathy does not mean an admission of culpability, but rather a deep care of the university for its students and other constituencies.

The following outlines provide insight into how numerous possible crises can be managed effectively. They are broken down into three categories that essentially dictate how a crisis will be dealt with. The first category, “Type of Crisis,” is where to look as soon as a crisis occurs to decide what category it falls under. A possibility always exists that a specific type of crisis, audience or target message will need to be added to the list in the event of a crisis. There is no way to anticipate every type of crisis that could occur, therefore, having a plan that encompasses everything is almost impossible.

Although many items are listed within each main heading, this is not designed to be a perfect guide, but rather an outline for how to deal with crises when they arise. For example, the items listed below each heading may be missing an unforeseen crisis, a different audience or a necessary message. Not every crisis will require the exact same response. The purpose of the outline below is to be just that; and outline to guide during a crisis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Crisis</th>
<th>Key Audiences</th>
<th>Target Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Natural Disaster:** Earthquake, Flood, Tornado (Who to contact depends on the severity of the disaster.) | Current Students, Faculty and Staff, Safety and Emergency Officials, Family Members, Board Members, Community, Scheduled Visitors, Alumni, Media | • Calmly specify what has happened.  
  • Articulate empathy for those impacted.  
  • Discuss corrective measures being taken.  
  • Offer vision of campus return to normalcy. |
| **Communicable Disease:** Swine Flu, Chicken Pox | Current Students, Faculty and Staff, Health Services/Hospital, Family Members, Community, Scheduled Visitors, Media | • Calmly specify what has happened.  
  • Discuss the symptoms and the nature of the illness.  
  • Describe what preventative measures can be taken.  
  • Refer students to treatment facilities. |
| **Violent Crime:** Rape, Stabbing, Assault | Current Students, Faculty and Staff, Law Enforcement, Family Members, Community, Board Members, Scheduled Visitors (If applicable), Legal Counsel, Media | • Calmly specify what has happened.  
  • Express concern and sympathy for those involved.  
  • Discuss appropriate measures being taken to resolve the situation and punish the culprit(s).  
  • Reassure publics of the safety of the campus.  
  • Discuss what measures will be implemented to ensure this does not happen again.  
  • Discuss how the institution will return to normalcy. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Economic Crisis</strong></th>
<th>Current Students, Family Members, Faculty and Staff, Board Members, Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tragic Accident: Bus Crash, Death/Injury of Traveling Student(s)</strong></td>
<td>Students who have been or could be impacted by the event, Family Members, Faculty and Staff, Legal Counsel, Law Enforcement, Board Members, Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Address the issue in a calm and reassuring way.</td>
<td>- Do not release names of those involved until their families and loved ones have been notified of the incident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reassure the audience that the university is doing all within its power to make education affordable.</td>
<td>- Briefly explain what has happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reassure audiences of the availability of financial aid.</td>
<td>- Express deep concern and empathy for those involved and loved ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Add more information about financial aid to university websites, advertising, and informational brochures.</td>
<td>- Discuss, in detail, how the university is attending to the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Articulate the value of the education a student can receive at the specific university.</td>
<td>- If appropriate, explain what measures are going to be taken in the future to assure that this will not happen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Faculty or Staff Death** | Students, Family Members, Faculty and Staff, Community, Board Members, Media | - Express the sorrow of the university campus at the loss experienced. Also express concern for the family.  
- Commemorate the life of the person by reflecting on all of the lives that they touched and all the good that they did. |
| **Student Death** | Students, Family Members, Faculty and Staff, Community, Board Members, Media | - Do not release information until the student’s family and loved ones have been notified.  
- Communicate empathy and concern for those impacted by the loss.  
- Commemorate the student in celebrating their life. |
| **Faculty or Staff Misconduct and Termination** | Students, Family Members, Faculty and Staff, Board Members, Community, Media, Legal Counsel | - Express the university’s disappointment in the individual.  
- Offer reassurance that the person’s poor judgment/misconduct is not a reflection on MVNU.  
- If appropriate, explain what measures the institution is taking to ensure this will not happen again. |
Appendix A

Media Request Log

A media request log can facilitate the institution’s ability to return priority phone calls more quickly by knowing ahead of time who is calling and what they are calling about. A basic media request log would look like the following:

Mount Vernon Nazarene University Media Request Log

Name of Reporter: ________________________________________________________

Contact Information:

- Primary Phone Number: _____________________________________________
- Secondary Phone Number: ___________________________________________
- Other Contact Information: ___________________________________________

Affiliation:

Newspaper/Journal/Magazine: ___________________________ Date: ______________
Radio Station: ________________________________________ Date: ______________
Television Station:_____________________________________ Date: ______________

Purpose of the Call:

Response to Reporter:

Call Answered by: ________________________________________________________
Response Managed by: __________________________________________________
Appendix B

Crisis PR Plan Maintenance

Review the crisis public relations plan annually or bi-annually. Include practice crisis scenarios, press releases, internal communication efforts, media training, etc. Preparation is key to successfully managing a crisis. Check off items only when they have been completed in entirety.

Plan Reviewed By: __________________________________________
Date Reviewed: ______________________________________________

__ Meet with all of the key crisis communication staff members and the university spokesperson(s).
__ Proof-read (and update if necessary) all sample news releases and messaging.
__ Evaluate and update what crises are most likely to happen.
__ Update all contacts/contact information including both internal and external.
__ Organize and hold a mock crisis meeting and practice delegation of duties.
__ Discuss new media, methods of communication, and other items that might change frequently.
__ Stage a mock press release/news conference.
__ Come together with crisis team to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the plan and alter accordingly.
Appendix C

Crisis Phone Tree

CRISIS RESPONSE PHONE TREE
(7/20/2010)

FIRST RESPONDERS TO CALL 911 AS APPROPRIATE

When you are called, please call the person(s) immediately connected to your name. If you reach a voice mail/answering machine, leave a message requesting a call back and continue to call down the list until you reach a live person. Repeat the process until everyone has been notified.

----- Denotes optional calls as needed

A Team-Bold

Knox Community Hospital 393-9000
Mount Vernon Police Dept. 397-2222
Mount Vernon Fire Dept. 397-4444
Knox County Emergency Management Agency 393-6772
After 4:00 p.m. 397-2727

The Crisis Response Executive Team will meet in the Facilities Services Conference Room. The Bailey Conference Room (HCC 207) will serve as the back-up location.

The Senior Leadership Team will meet in the Cougar Room (PSU) and the Religion Conference Room (HCC) will be the back-up location.