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# Crisis Communications in a Chaotic World

*Why the old playbook is making things worse*

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: High-Stakes Communications Practice. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

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## In Brief

The standard crisis playbook was written for a world with slower information and a reservoir of public trust to draw on. Neither can be assumed now. This article explains what changed, where the playbook still holds, five ways crisis responses fail in the current environment, and what effective crisis communications looks like when the work has to start long before the crisis does.

The crisis communications playbook was written for a different world.

Not a better world, necessarily: crises have always been complex, institutions have always been fallible, and the public has always been capable of anger. But a more legible world. A world in which information moved at a pace that allowed for deliberation before response. In which the channels through which a crisis narrative traveled were finite, identifiable, and at least partially controllable. In which the relationship between an institution and its publics, however strained, retained enough baseline credibility that a well-executed response (acknowledge, explain, remediate, demonstrate) had a reasonable chance of working.

That world is gone. And the playbook written for it is not just obsolete. In the conditions that define crisis communications today, following it faithfully can make a crisis significantly worse.

This is not an argument for abandoning what works. Some of what the traditional crisis playbook prescribes (speed, honesty, accountability, consistency) remains essential. But the framework underneath those prescriptions was built for an information environment and a trust landscape that no longer exist. Applying it without that recognition is like using a map of a city that has been rebuilt around you. The streets look familiar. The destinations are wrong.

## What Changed, and Why It Matters for Crisis Response

Three structural shifts have fundamentally altered the crisis communications environment. Understanding them is prerequisite to designing responses that work.

**The velocity shift.** The traditional crisis communications model assumed that an institution had time (hours, at minimum, sometimes days) to assess a situation, develop a response, clear it through legal and leadership, and deliver it through controlled channels. That assumption no longer holds. In a social media environment, a crisis narrative can reach millions of people, generate thousands of responses, and crystallize into a dominant public interpretation within minutes of the precipitating event. The institution's first communication (whatever it is, including silence) arrives after the narrative has already begun forming without it.

This changes the calculation for crisis response in ways the traditional playbook does not adequately address. Speed matters enormously, but the traditional playbook's emphasis on getting the response right before releasing it often conflicts with the speed the environment now demands. Institutions that wait for a perfect statement while the narrative forms around them pay a higher price for the delay than they would have paid for an imperfect but honest early response. The choice is no longer between a good response and a bad response. It is between controlling the first frame and ceding it.

**The trust shift.** The traditional crisis playbook assumes a baseline of institutional credibility: a reservoir of public trust that a well-executed response can draw on. When an institution with intact trust acknowledges an error, explains what happened, and commits to remediation, the acknowledgment is received as evidence of institutional accountability. It works because the prior expectation of the audience is one of general good faith.

In chronically damaged trust environments (and these environments now constitute a significant and growing proportion of the contexts in which crisis communications is practiced) the same response lands differently. An acknowledgment of error is received as confirmation of what the audience already suspected. An explanation is received as spin. A commitment to remediation is received as a promise the institution has no credibility to make. The form of the response is technically appropriate. The trust conditions make it ineffective or counterproductive.

This is the crisis communications equivalent of the Anderson County pattern described in the Links Global Case Study Library, Volume 1, where a county kept asking voters to fund the same roads with better campaigns each time, and the no vote kept growing: applying a better version of the standard approach to an environment where the standard approach's foundational assumption no longer holds.

**The misinformation shift.** The traditional crisis playbook was designed for environments in which false information was an occasional problem, correctable through authoritative institutional response. In the current environment, misinformation is a structural feature, not an anomaly to be corrected but a permanent condition to be navigated. Algorithmic ecosystems built on engagement incentives actively

amplify emotionally charged, outrage-triggering content, regardless of its accuracy. On Twitter, false news has been shown to spread farther and faster than true news, and corrections from a distrusted institution have little reason to travel better. A landmark study of Twitter, covering about 126,000 rumor cascades shared by 3 million people over eleven years, found that falsehoods consistently traveled farther and faster than the truth, and that the top 1 percent of false cascades reached between 1,000 and 100,000 people while true stories rarely reached more than 1,000.

This means that crisis communications in the current environment is not primarily a correction problem. It is a narrative architecture problem: the challenge of structuring the institution's response in ways that make accurate interpretation more accessible and emotionally satisfying than inaccurate interpretation, before the inaccurate interpretation has time to calcify into the dominant frame.

## What the Playbook Gets Right, and Where It Fails

The traditional crisis playbook's core prescriptions are not wrong. They are insufficient. Even the field's most widely tested model, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, matches the response to the crisis type and the organization's prior reputation, which is a tacit admission that the response can only ever be as effective as the relationship that precedes it. And that relationship is in poor shape: the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer finds 61 percent of people worldwide carrying a moderate or high sense of grievance toward government and business.

**What it gets right:** Speed. Honesty. Accountability. Consistency. A single designated spokesperson. Factual accuracy. Specific commitments rather than vague reassurances. Proactive outreach to affected parties before the media calls. These principles remain sound. They are the baseline, not the strategy.

**Where it fails:** The playbook is fundamentally reactive. It is designed to respond to a crisis that has already happened, using channels to correct a narrative that is already forming. It has almost nothing to say about the pre-crisis conditions (the institutional behaviors, the disclosure practices, the relationship quality with key constituencies) that determine how a crisis will be received and how much room the institution has to maneuver when one occurs.

This is the gap that costs institutions the most: the assumption that crisis communications begins when the crisis does, rather than years before it. The institution whose pre-crisis relationship with its constituencies is characterized by reliable disclosure, honest acknowledgment of misses, and demonstrated follow-through on commitments enters a crisis with a trust reservoir that gives its response traction. The institution whose pre-crisis relationship is characterized by managed information, strategic disclosure timing, and broken commitments enters the same crisis with a depleted reservoir, and finds that every element of the standard playbook performs at a fraction of its designed effectiveness.

Pre-crisis trust architecture is not a communications strategy. It is a communications precondition. And it is the element the traditional crisis playbook most systematically neglects, because the playbook was written for the moment of crisis rather than for the years preceding it.

## The Five Failures of Crisis Response in the Current Environment

Even well-resourced, professionally managed crisis responses fail regularly in the current environment. The failures cluster around five patterns.

**The legalistic response.** Driven by legal counsel's understandable instinct to minimize liability exposure, many institutional crisis responses are characterized by careful qualification, passive voice, and the studied avoidance of anything that could be construed as an admission. These responses are legally defensible. They are communicatively devastating. In an environment where audiences are already primed to interpret institutional communications as managed, a response that reads as drafted by lawyers is received as confirmation that the institution is protecting itself rather than the people it serves.

The tension between legal caution and communicative honesty is real and does not have an easy resolution. But institutions that consistently let legal caution dominate their crisis response (producing statements that are accurate in a narrow technical sense while being misleading in a human sense) pay a compounding trust cost that eventually exceeds whatever liability the honest response might have created.

**The spokesperson mismatch.** The traditional playbook specifies designated spokespeople: communications officers, PR professionals, trained media liaisons. These are the right people for managing media relationships. They are often the wrong people for managing trust relationships with the communities most affected by a crisis. In high-stakes, high-distrust environments, the credibility of the messenger is as consequential as the content of the message. A communications professional speaking for a distrusted institution is a distrusted institutional voice with better media training. An independent community voice, a respected clinical professional, a trusted local organization leader (speaking from their own credibility, not borrowed from the institution) can carry claims the institution cannot carry itself.

**The correction trap.** When misinformation circulates during a crisis, the instinctive response is correction: identifying the false information and replacing it with accurate information, through institutional channels, at scale. In intact trust environments, this works. In damaged trust environments, corrections from the institution are received through the prior expectation of institutional management, and the correction itself becomes evidence that the institution is controlling the narrative.

The escape from the correction trap is not to ignore misinformation; that cedes the narrative entirely. It is to build an independent evidence base, pre-crisis, that third parties can draw on to correct misinformation without borrowing the institution's credibility. When the correction comes from a trusted independent voice citing publicly available, independently verifiable evidence, it carries a different quality of signal than when it comes from the institution's communications department.

**The statement-without-action problem.** In the current environment, constituencies have become highly sophisticated at distinguishing between institutions that respond to crises with genuine accountability and institutions that respond with accountability-performance. A statement that acknowledges wrongdoing but is not followed by visible, specific, verifiable action is not a crisis response. It is a liability management document. And audiences, including media, read it as such.

This is why crisis responses that seem technically appropriate (acknowledgment, apology, commitment to investigation) frequently fail to arrest reputational damage. The statement was right. The behavioral follow-through was absent, delayed, or insufficient. And the gap between the statement and the behavior deepens exactly the prior expectation, that institutional communication is disconnected from institutional conduct, that the crisis response was designed to address.

**The channel anachronism.** Traditional crisis communications was designed around a media-centric model: manage the press, and you manage the narrative. The press was the primary channel through which crises reached the public. This model has not disappeared, but it has been fundamentally altered. Social media has created multiple parallel crisis narratives (on Twitter/X, on Facebook, on TikTok, on Reddit, on messaging platforms) each moving at different speeds, reaching different constituencies, and subject to different dynamics of amplification and correction. A crisis response designed around managing press relationships while these parallel narratives develop unchecked will win the press briefing and lose the information environment.

## What Effective Crisis Communications Looks Like Now

Effective crisis communications in the current environment is built on three foundations that the traditional playbook either underemphasizes or omits entirely.

**Pre-crisis trust architecture.** The most consequential crisis communications work happens before any crisis occurs. Institutions that invest in disclosure reliability (proactively sharing operational information, maintaining a visible record of commitments made and kept, acknowledging misses before being discovered) build a trust reservoir that changes how their crisis response is received. This is not a communications program. It is a governance practice with communications implications. But its effect on crisis response effectiveness is more powerful than any message testing or spokesperson training the traditional playbook prescribes.

**Independent verification infrastructure.** In the current misinformation environment, the institution cannot be the sole voucher for its own claims during a crisis. An independent oversight structure (a genuinely independent body with authority to inspect records and publish dissent, established before the crisis) changes the evidentiary ground on which a crisis response stands. When the institution's crisis statement can be independently verified through a pre-existing, credibly independent source, it carries a fundamentally different quality of claim than when the institution is asking constituencies to take its word for it.

**Narrative architecture, not just messaging.** Effective crisis response in the current environment requires understanding that the goal is not to produce the correct statement but to structure the information environment so that accurate interpretation is more accessible and more emotionally satisfying than inaccurate interpretation. This means knowing which narratives are forming and where, which constituencies are most vulnerable to misinformation, which independent voices have the credibility to carry correction in specific communities, and how to phase the institution's own communications in sequence with these independent voices rather than in parallel or in competition with them.

## The Honest Assessment

Crisis communications in the current environment is harder than the traditional playbook suggests, and harder than most institutions want to acknowledge. The conditions that made the standard approach functional (an intact trust reservoir, a manageable information velocity, a correction-responsive audience) are not reliably present.

The honest assessment is this: in the current environment, the most important crisis communications work is the work done in the years before the crisis. Institutions that have built pre-crisis trust architecture (reliable disclosure, demonstrated follow-through, independent verification structures, genuine relationships with the credibility hubs in their key communities) enter crises with assets that no campaign can quickly replicate. Institutions that have not built this architecture enter crises with a communications problem that no playbook, however sophisticated, is fully equipped to solve.

The playbook is not the problem. The assumption that the playbook is sufficient, that crisis communications begins when the crisis does, is.

## Where This Fits

Pre-crisis trust architecture is the subject of the NSI™ white paper, and the correction trap described here is explained in depth in the ERA™ white paper. The Links Global Trust Audit™ tells you which reservoir you are actually entering a crisis with.

**Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org**

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