



# A Resilient Partnership:

*Crisis Communications and Public Relations*

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# A Resilient Partnership:

## Crisis Communication and Public Relations

It's a normal Wednesday morning in the Bursar's office. Your co-workers grab coffee and discuss the commute as you boot your computer. While accessing student tuition records, you notice the university's billing portal is malfunctioning. A prompt appears:  
**"Pay us \$5,000 in the next 24 hours or we'll release social security numbers."**

As the fall semester winds down, health services begins receiving an uptick in visits from students showing symptoms of meningitis. The university soon discovers **a meningitis outbreak has occurred in one of its dormitories**. Your administration faces angry parents and an inquisitive media as it deals with absent students, cancelled classes and a quarantined campus building.

**A controversial speaker is hosting a rally on campus grounds**. Student groups begin openly protesting the speaker's visit while outside interests, unaffiliated with the college, organize their own counter-protest. Pressure mounts as social media targets administration and **crowds of angry people start arriving on-site**. Campus police prepare for conflict.

What do these scenarios all have in common? And how do you successfully address them? The answer to both questions lies in the need for crisis communications strategies.

Communications strategies are a major part of crisis response, and stakeholders come from within and without: students, staff, their families, vendors, the authorities, the public, the media and so on. Navigating the questions and concerns—including the worry, anger or fear associated with a given event—can quickly escalate to the point of chaos.

The advent of social media has tangled the communications knot further, creating a digital platform of immediacy into which everyone can insert themselves as a crisis unfolds.

Organizations have varying levels of communications resources, expertise and time. Most are focused on everyday or anticipated communications needs, but readiness for the unexpected—and more specifically traumatic events—is often limited.

Preparing an organization for successful crisis response means investing in and understanding the power of communication. Partnering with external crisis consultants that specialize in public relations, crisis communications and the human impact of crisis enhances your internal crisis response team's ability to confidently and effectively address situations before, during and after a critical incident.

*"Partnering with external crisis consultants enhances your ability to address critical incidents."*

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### The Crisis Trifecta

Effective crisis communications need public relations, and for good reason. Organizations want people versed in handling media and public response to address events that will have people looking for answers or can damage brand identity.

However, communicating throughout a critical incident goes far beyond pacifying the public. While public relations does play a central role in responding to a crisis, it also supports an organizational crisis response team that is ideally reinforced by the additional resource of an external crisis management vendor.

Let's examine each of these three components:

**Crisis response teams** are an organization's internal resource for responding to a crisis event. Teams are made up of predetermined staff who are regularly trained in responsibilities related to potential crisis situations. Crisis response teams have relationships with local authorities and lead operations during a crisis. Their primary role is to respond and appropriately confront and resolve the crisis, but the focus on resolving the immediate threat can lead to communications challenges both internally and externally.

An external **public relations (PR) firm** serves the central role of working alongside the organization's crisis response team and internal PR department to address the concerns of external stakeholders. While crisis management service vendors sometimes fill this role, it's beneficial to retain a dedicated PR firm with the skills, experience and capabilities to help communicate with the media and other key audiences should internal capacity be strained or too closely connected with the ongoing crisis. By managing the flow of information and addressing questions or concerns on behalf of the organization in tandem with internal PR teams, external PR representatives allow the crisis response team and their support staff to focus on addressing and resolving the crisis while assisting employees, their families and/or clients and customers. This type of PR assistance isn't meant to supplant the organization's own internal PR staff, but provides the extra resources essential to managing critical situations.



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**Crisis management services** are provided by an external vendor to support organizational crisis response teams. Internal teams can range from large-scale operations with multiple employees to only one or two staff. Whatever the size, crisis management service providers supplement an organization's preparedness, response and recovery throughout an emergency by alleviating pressure, providing on- and off-site response and support capabilities, and coordinating information management. For example, a thorough crisis management services provider might establish a family information center as a resource for inbound and outbound calls during an event while offering debriefing and counseling services post-incident .

The durability and strength of an internal crisis response team is bolstered by the capabilities of its providers. Organizations need to be aware of what they're looking for when seeking crisis partners, as these relationships will make or break an organization during an actual crisis event.

### Two Sides of the Same Coin: *Public Relations*

Engaging the services of a dedicated PR firm to assist with crisis response is smart planning. PR representatives are skilled at handling media inquiries and managing the various communications platforms available to the public.

During a crisis, a strong PR partner can assist with the rapidly changing ebb and flow of information, maintain messaging and provide guidance throughout the entire crisis response process.

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#### **Before a Crisis**

Prior to a crisis, meet with a PR firm to discuss best practices regarding crisis communications. Review plans you've already developed with your internal PR department and, if applicable, crisis management services provider. A PR partner can assist in drafting messaging for general interactions with the public, ensuring organizational communications share one consistent voice. PR firms are also an excellent resource for spokesperson or media training.

#### **During a Crisis**

As a crisis unfolds, PR representatives provide communications support to protect the organization's reputation and status as the best source of information during the event. With the speed at which a crisis situation can "go viral," a skilled PR team can rein in misinformation and potentially damaging tangents while continuing to communicate the facts.

Additionally, the partner can support the complexities of external scrutiny from stakeholders such as local news agencies, industry regulators and unfamiliar or national media outlets.

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### **After a Crisis**

Once the immediate crisis has been contained, PR representatives continue to be an important resource as they work alongside the organization's internal PR department in the days, weeks and months that follow. Making information readily available and easily obtainable after a crisis will go a long way to repair any brand damage while solidifying the organization's reputation as a resilient, responsible employer that puts its people first.

As with the crisis response plan, the crisis communications plan should be evaluated with the PR partner to determine what worked, what didn't and how the process can be improved upon for the next crisis.

### **Two Sides of the Same Coin: *Crisis Management Services***

Organizations can sometimes underestimate the power of partnership, and nowhere is this clearer than during a crisis. If an organization has a crisis response team already, what need is there for an external vendor?

A crisis management services provider offers opportunities to enhance and improve response practices and policies, regardless of when a crisis takes place.

### **Before a Crisis**

Preparing before a crisis event is the most important step in crisis response planning. An experienced crisis management partner will help crisis response teams, as well as stakeholders in human resources or executive staff, understand the complexities of a crisis. The right partner will also provide expertise related to the human trauma connected to many crisis events, and crisis plans will be customized with the organization's strengths and weaknesses in mind.

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Regular training on the crisis plan is integral to a successful response. A crisis management partner will help ensure the organization conducts drills and exercises at least once every year. Regular review and auditing too is essential, as circumstances—organizational restructuring, staff attrition and turnover, even changes in weather—can affect the plan.

Review and auditing is put in context via targeted audiences—for universities, this likely consists of faculty, students, parents and other stakeholders including community leaders, prospective students and alumni—and can involve risk assessments, employee needs and customer expectations, internal and external communication planning and response, evaluation of policies and procedures, and benchmarking against best practices.

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### **During a Crisis**

Well-trained and knowledgeable of responsibilities, an up-to-speed crisis response team reacts appropriately when a crisis erupts. As time goes on, however, a team can become overburdened by the numerous variables present in a crisis situation.

With the assistance of a crisis management partner, response teams are able to focus on the tasks at hand as the external vendor manages call centers and other point-of-contact coordination between the organization and internal and external stakeholders. By fielding communications from students, employees, family members, vendors and the community, the crisis management partner can deal with unforeseen complications while the organization's crisis response team does its job.

*By fielding communications from employees, family members, clients and customers, the crisis management partner can deal with unforeseen complications while the crisis response team does its job.*

Crisis management partners can offer an array of additional services ranging from accounting for people and emergency notifications to data management. In addition, family information center staff are specifically trained to deal with trauma and its impact, uniquely qualifying them to handle communications during a crisis.

### **After a Crisis**

Crises are rarely over once the inciting incident is contained. The effects of a crisis can reverberate for days, weeks—even months, depending on the scale.

Retaining a crisis management partner provides the organization with resources and other support services, such as debriefings or counseling, to maintain business continuity and organizational resiliency, especially for students, employees and their dependents. Family information centers and other call-based operations can continue beyond the initial incident for ongoing assistance.

The organization and its crisis partner should also take the critical step of auditing the crisis response plan post-incident to identify areas in need of improvement before the next crisis takes place.

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### Campus Protests: A Real-World Crisis Scenario

Let's focus on the introductory scenario where a controversial speaker is scheduled to appear on campus, invoking the ire of student groups who disagree with the speaker's positions. How would your university handle the unfolding crisis of protests, counter-protests and resultant media coverage?

We'll start from the beginning:

*A divisive, well-known individual has been invited by one of the university's sanctioned student groups to hold a rally supporting a particular viewpoint. Once word spreads of the event, students with different points of view begin organizing action in protest of the speaker's visit. While the administration supports free expression and has approved the event, the growing unrest has the university on edge.*

*Tensions rise when, via social media, outside groups either supporting or opposing the speaker begin organizing their own presence on campus. The university is in real danger of losing control of the situation. As campus police prepare for conflict between students and non-students, concerned parents overwhelm the university with calls.*

Do you cancel the speaker's event, or allow the event to take place and risk unrest or potential violence?

*Either choice results in a brief conflict on campus where protesters and counter-protesters clash and campus police intervene. Fallout is much the same. Students and parents seek information while the university contains the crisis and endures criticism from the public over its handling of the situation.*

*The university's crisis response team communicates with campus police and local authorities to defuse further volatility among the protesting crowds. The internal PR department issues statements through email and SMS messaging to students, guiding them to established safety zones and encouraging those who are potentially injured to seek assistance with authorities.*

*The crisis management provider activates its family information center call capabilities to field communications from faculty, students and their loved ones. At the same time, the PR partner firm makes sure the university's website and social media feeds offer regular updates on the situation and refers individuals with critical inquiries to the family information center. Additional assistance with the onslaught of media contacts is provided while the internal PR department and university crisis response team deal with the immediate needs of those involved in the protest.*

*Once the crisis is effectively over—protesters on either side have dispersed and those directly connected to the university are accounted for—the PR partner continues to craft messaging and assist the university's internal PR department with questions from the media and public. The crisis management services provider, meanwhile, continues offering debriefing and counseling assistance to those affected by the protest.*

Imagine if this scenario played out at your school. Would you be prepared?

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### The FEI Difference

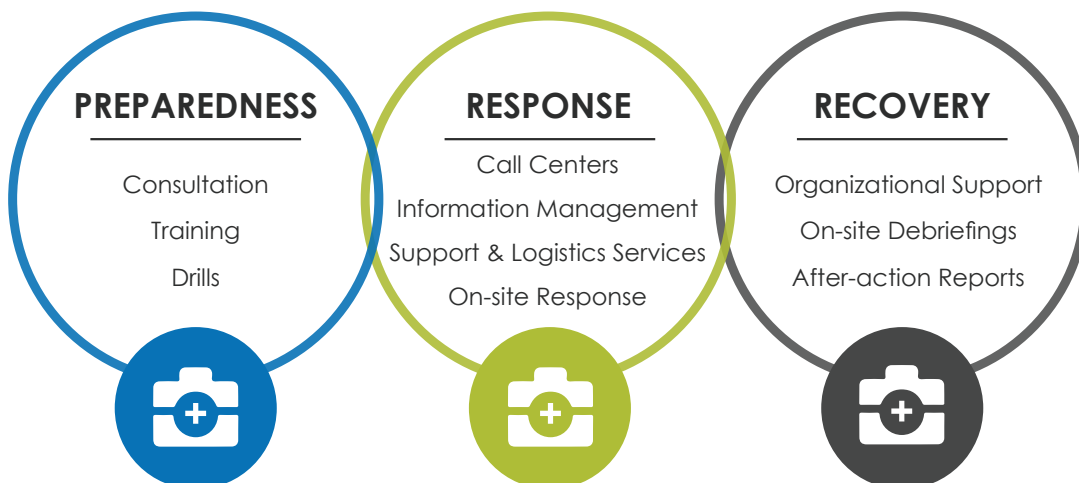
The dynamics of media coverage during crisis events continue to evolve, and the nature of information gathering and consumption presents unprecedented challenges for managing communications during such events.

Despite this evolution, the challenges at the core of a crisis communicator's responsibilities remain the same: to protect the image, brand and reputation of the organization while operating within the spirit and letter of laws and regulations.

FEI is committed to helping people in moments of crisis. Our crisis management division assists organizations in preparing for and managing incidents that threaten not only the well-being of individuals, but the continuity of business operations.

We have a long and distinguished history of providing crisis management consultation and support services. Our clients have included organizations within the higher education, government, hospitality, aviation, financial, manufacturing, insurance, sports and entertainment industries. We integrate the crisis management, behavioral health and technological expertise critical to supporting an emergency response.

When it comes to providing crisis communications and assistance services in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters, FEI's experience is unparalleled. From planning and **preparedness** services to **response** assistance to **post-incident** capabilities, FEI ensures an organization's crisis management response team is prepared for all contingencies. Our extensive crisis response network of providers is specifically trained in responding to mass disasters and experienced with crises of any size.



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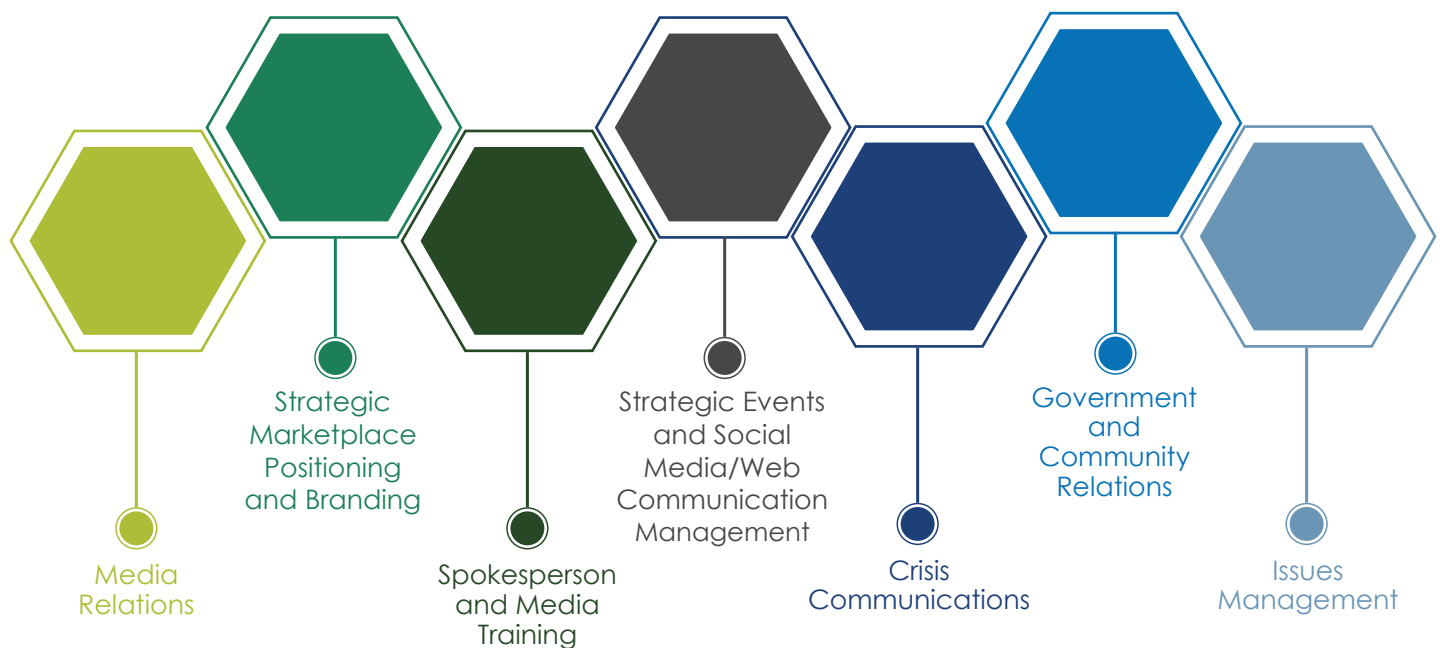


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We've gone a step beyond other crisis providers. FEI has partnered with Bottom Line Marketing and Public Relations, a multi-specialty marketing PR firm, to develop robust crisis communications plans and execute such plans on the frontlines of a crisis event. Together, we've integrated our collective resources and knowledge in support of our clients' greatest needs.

### Bottom Line's vast array of services include:



By combining the core competencies from these individual specialties, Bottom Line offers organizations the skills necessary to successfully develop, implement and evaluate crisis communications plans and strategies.

We recognize that crisis events occur across a broad spectrum of scales and severities. Most importantly, these events do not occur in isolation; rather, they resonate within the context of the communities in which organizations and their employees live.

The impact of crisis on so many groups of people makes the PR perspective an essential part of managing critical events. Join FEI and Bottom Line as we build your organization into a crisis communications powerhouse capable of addressing whatever happens, whenever it is happening, and enabling you to deal with the crisis in ways that reinforce and build on your brand and reputation.

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# fei workforce resilience



*FEI has a 35-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI was created by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of healthy and equitable society.*



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