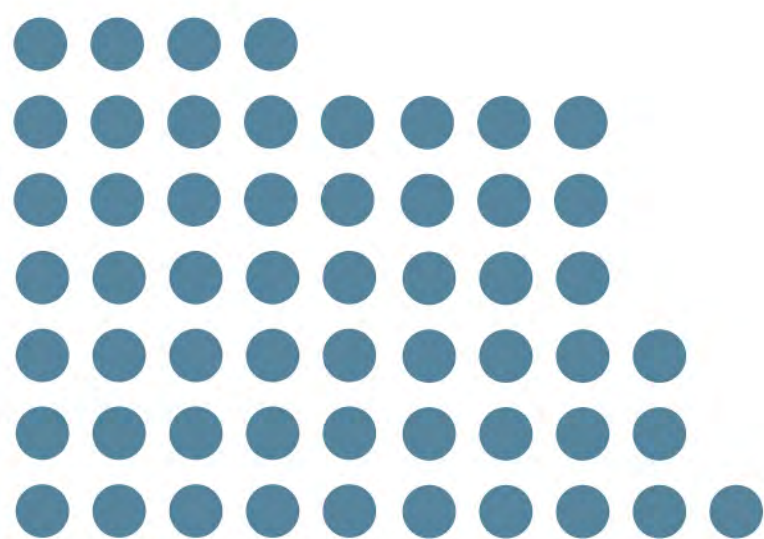


# Crisis Communications Guide



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## **A MESSAGE FROM ASTHO CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MICHAEL R. FRASER, PHD, MS, CAE, FCPP**

Dear State and Territorial Health Officials,

The health, safety, and well-being of our country is critical to ASTHO's members, staff and stakeholders. As public health professionals, our goal is to help you prepare to communicate in an emergency.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines "crisis communication" as the process of providing facts to the public about an unexpected emergency, beyond an organization's control, that involves the organization and requires an immediate response. Creating and executing a crisis communications plan in the event of an unexpected crisis is no small task. It requires assets that can be customized and branded to fit your jurisdiction's needs. We want to guide you through your COVID-19 pandemic response efforts and share our insight to help you make more informed decisions.

This guide includes robust information on everything from creating a crisis communication plan and crafting statements to managing the media in a crisis and communicating using social media. We have also included crisis communications tips and ideas, best practices, and a planning checklist. This guide is meant to inform and support you in developing and implementing relevant, effective crisis communications tools and resources.

We hope you find this guide to be useful. It is not designed to be a complete crisis framework—as situations change rapidly and often. However, for this guide to be used effectively, it is recommended that you adapt your crisis communications strategy to your intended goals, processes, and organizational standards and protocols. Space has been allotted along the right margin for personalized notes and takeaways. We plan to update this guide as necessary.

Thank you for doing your part to protect the health of our nation.



**Michael Fraser, PhD, MS, CAE, FCPP**

Chief Executive Officer

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)

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# SECTION 1:

## OVERVIEW

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It is impossible to predict the next public health crisis or to fully plan for one. But it is possible to anticipate and prepare for the future following the experience of past events. Every event, no matter how recent, can inform the response to the next communications challenge.

Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided communicators with many examples of effective or poor communications approaches. Rarely are we reflecting on the successes or failures of a significant communications crisis while that crisis continues to spawn reputation storms across the nation. Yet that is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has lasted long enough to provide many lessons for communicators who want to plan for what might come next, as the virus has given no indication that it will fade anytime soon.

Most crisis situations overwhelm communications teams because they are not prepared, they or their leadership believe ignoring it will make it go away, or their internal bureaucracy cannot move fast enough to avoid being run over by a swell of swift-moving opposition messaging. These are daunting challenges that plague every communications effort. But they must be addressed and overcome to prevent damaging consequences.

This guide is focused on three themes:

- **Anticipate** the next crisis through increased organizational awareness.
- **Prepare** for upcoming developments.
- **Respond** with bold approaches designed to change the story.

Ultimately, you should not wait for the communications crisis to come to you. Rather you should expect it. Plan for it. And when it approaches, go out to meet it, on your terms, with confidence and a plan to at least manage it, or better yet, eliminate it.

## SECTION 2:

# PREPARING FOR A COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS

The first few hours of a crisis are critical, and your actions can lead to success or failure. Simple steps can help you when time, information, and resources are severely limited. Below are crisis communication steps from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help you manage a crisis.

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### **Step 1:** Verify the Situation

Situational awareness is the first step in an informed response. Although information will be scarce, get the facts and try to verify them with more than one credible source.

### **Step 2:** Conduct Notifications

Notify all necessary response points of contact, and keep a record of who was notified, when, how, and if they were reached or require follow-up.

### **Step 3:** Conduct Crisis Assessment (Activate Crisis Plan)

Continually assess new information, the severity of the situation, the target audience, and what information should be communicated.

### **Step 4:** Organize Assignments Quickly

Assign responders specific responsibilities, dividing these assignments based on immediate and ongoing issues. Coordinate with appropriate response partners to address all communication needs.

### **Step 5:** Prepare Information and Obtain Approvals

Coordinate development of activities and messages, rapidly sharing and clearing information within your organization for timely release.

### **Step 6:** Release Information through Prearranged Channels

Identify audiences and communication channels prior to a crisis, so information can be disseminated rapidly during an emergency.

### Step 7: Obtain Feedback and Conduct Crisis Evaluation

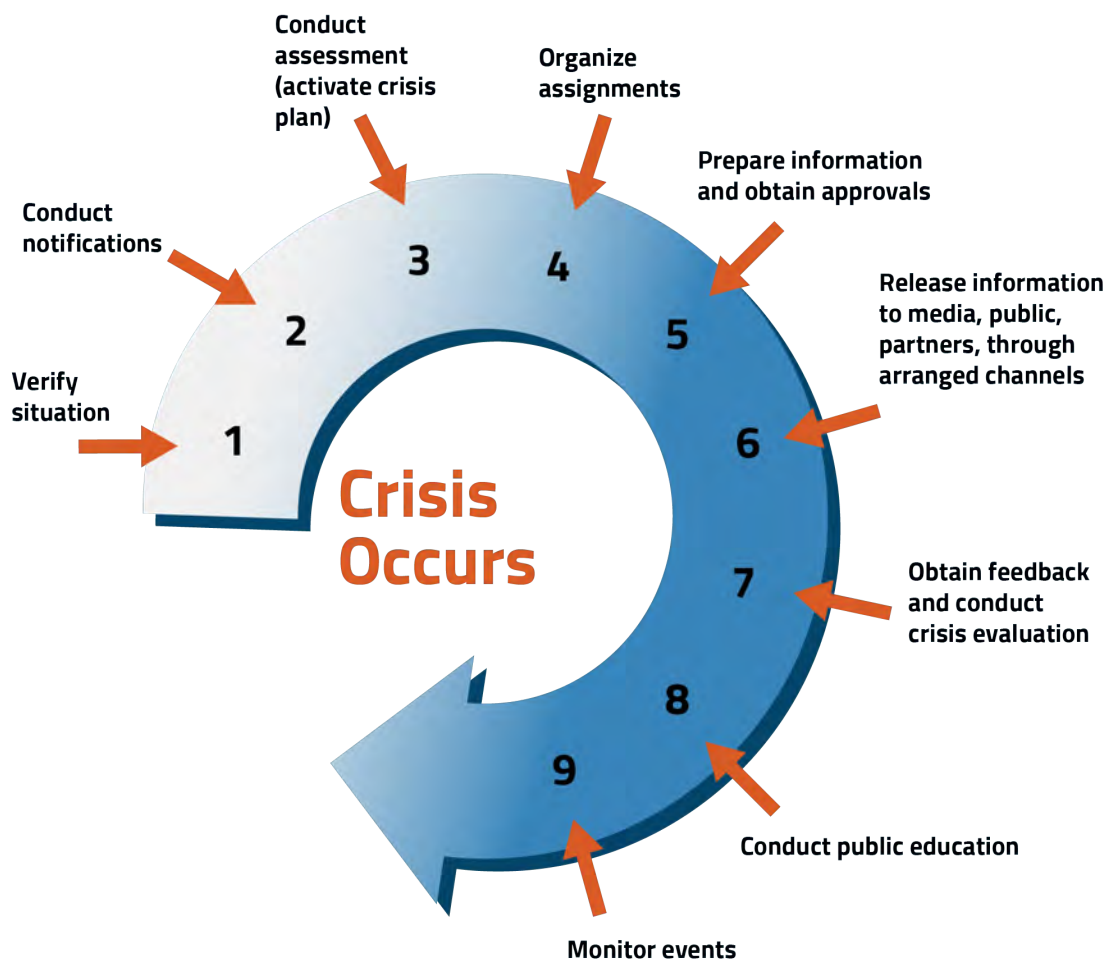
As soon as possible after a crisis starts, conduct an evaluation of your organization’s response. Feedback from key audiences and coverage from media can inform messages and allow problems to be addressed.

### Step 8: Conduct Public Education

Offer educational opportunities to improve public understanding, support, and preparation for future emergencies.

### Step 9: Monitor Events

Monitor communication activities on an ongoing basis—including media, social media, and responder interactions—to determine how to improve messages and the general communication strategy.



Content Source: Center for Preparedness & Response

# SECTION 3: CREATING A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

## How to get the most out of this Crisis Communications Plan Template

Use this template to develop your crisis communications strategy. Simply fill in the boxes below each section's guideline text. Whether you communicate to external or internal audiences—or both—this template will help ensure that all key elements of a communications strategy are captured.

### 1. Current Situation/Background/Problem Statement

Before you map out where you want your communications strategy to take you, you need to determine where you are now. What has been accomplished so far from a communications point of view? How effective have previous communications been?

### 2. Overall Project Objectives

This communications strategy must support your specific project objectives. Use this section to list your key project targets.

### 3. Communications Objectives

Use this section to list your external and/or internal communications objectives. What do you hope to achieve because of your communications activities? How can communications activities help you achieve the project targets you've listed above (section 2)?

Clear, specific, and measurable objectives are key to the success of any communications strategy. When setting these objectives, whether your communications will be external or internal, or both, you should (1) be realistic within the timeframe, budget, and resources and (2) ensure the objectives are measurable.

The following are examples of communications objectives:

- | Build awareness of a project among a wide but defined group of audiences and user groups.
- | Secure the commitment of a defined group of stakeholders to the project aims.
- | Influence specific policies or policymakers around key aspects.
- | Encourage participation among researchers or partner bodies.



## 4. Target Audience

Who do you want to receive your message if you're targeting an external audience? Be as specific as possible:

- | Who will best help you achieve your goals?
- | What demographic groups are you trying to reach?
- | What do you know about the best ways to reach them?

Target audiences should be described in terms of (1) current behavior, (2) level of awareness, (3) level of knowledge, (4) preferred methods for receiving information, and (5) motivations/barriers to hearing and believing/accepting the information, if any.

The more refined the target audience description, the more precise and effective your communication will be. Broad descriptions such as the "general public" are less likely to lead to a successful communications campaign than a tightly defined target. The more thoroughly you understand your target audience(s), the higher the probability of communications success.

**Primary Target Audience** - These are the key persons/groups you communicate to directly. You can have more than one primary target audience. For example: Parents, particularly mothers of children aged 0-6 years.

**Secondary Target Audience** - People for whom it's less critical to receive the communications campaign messages, people who also will benefit from hearing the messages, or people who influence your target audience now or in the future.

If you're targeting an internal audience, which individuals, teams, or departments do you need to reach within the organization?

## 5. Key Message per Target Audience

Fill out the following for each target audience.

### Is your target audience external or internal?

What do you want to change?

What do you want the target audience to know?

What do you want them to feel? What perception do you want to create?

What do you want them to do? What action do you want as a result?

### To determine a result, ask the following:

Do you want to change their attitude towards your project?

Do you want them to support your project?

Do you want to change the assumptions about the purpose of your project?

Do you want them to be motivated to take action or make a decision?

Do you want them to be involved?

## 6. Communications Mix

How do you want to get the message across? Whether you're preparing a 12, 24, or 36 hour or month-long communications plan, what tools will you need to use during this timeframe? Your choices will depend on what you want to achieve, the level and type of message you want to communicate, and the profile of your audience.

### External Communications Mix

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#### News Media

- Press release
- Broadcast news
- Opinion editorial
- Features
- Features advisories

#### Online

- Other related websites
- Multimedia: audio and video content
- Email newsletter

#### Advertising

- Print
- Radio
- Television
- Outdoor

#### Print

- Brochures
- Posters
- Letters
- Leaflets
- Scientific reports

#### Public Relations

- Event/Stunt
- Endorsements
- Telephone calls
- Conferences

#### Social Media/ Digital Content

- Posts
- Video
- Audio
- Infographics
- Blogs

### Internal Communications Mix

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- Conference calls
- Face-to-face meetings

## 7. Promotion

Once you've decided what your communications mix will be, you need to determine how you will promote the various components. In other words, how will you promote your "product?" Promotion may need to be done on two levels, internally and externally. For example, if you need to develop a website to meet your communications objectives, how do you intend on promoting the site throughout your networks? What is your plan to drive external traffic to the site if that is important?

## 8. Budget

Where possible, list the following:

The amount of money available now [money = people resources].

The amount of money available in the future [money = people resources].

## 9. Timeline

When will you need to communicate over the next 12, 24, or 36 hours? List the key dates—what do you need and when. Describe each key event or activity that will need communications (including launch of a report, forum, conference, etc.).

What:

Why:

Where:

When:

Who:

How:

Target Audience:

Objective:

Key Message(s):

Media Strategy:

Tools and Materials:

Under this section, you also can attempt to identify, or at least anticipate, any communications opportunities that may emerge from the actions of others working in your area. Describe those opportunities here.

## 10. Being on Message

How will you ensure that your communications (external and internal) will be on message?

Presenting your organization correctly is crucial. This means being consistent with our logo, typefaces, slogan, colors, and “on-message” with key messages and the way you use words and images on all applications. All this will combine to communicate the sort of organization you are—active, passionate, solutions-oriented.

When communicating with your audience, follow this simple checklist and ask yourself:

- Is my message **passionate**? Does it show my enthusiasm?
- Is it **optimistic**? Is it positive and forward-looking?
- Is it **inspirational**? Will it move someone to act?
- Does it **challenge**? Does it confront the issues?
- Is it **credible**? Will people believe me?
- Is it **accountable**? Does it demonstrate our honesty and trustworthiness?
- Is it **persevering**? Does it prove our commitment?
- Is it **delivering results**? Does it show what we have achieved?

Keep in mind that your message does not need to include all of the above. In other words, you don’t need to reflect every single brand value in your message.

## 11. Evaluating Success

How will you know if you have succeeded and met your objectives? How are you going to evaluate your success? What performance indicators and evaluating measures will you use?

It's important to assess your strategy/project so that any changes, if necessary, can be made when engaging in a similar strategy/project in the future.

### External:

- Have you achieved your objectives (i.e., raise funds, create awareness, etc.)?
- Did you reach the right audience?
- Did you use the right tools?
- Were decisions made as a result?
- Did you come in on budget? If you didn't, why not?

### Internal:

- Did you reach the right people within the organization?
- Did they understand the message? Did they do what had to be done?
- Did you use the right tools?

# Crisis Communications Challenges and Recommendations

Every crisis communication event is unique. The following guidance can help inform any response, but it may be necessary to adjust any or all recommendations to meet the specific communication challenges facing your agency. Use these recommendations as appropriate when guiding your organization through difficult events.

## Announcing Mandates

There are many examples of public outrage against mask and vaccine mandates. Public health departments must be prepared for the impact of both decisions in their states. The following are steps states should take to alleviate the impact of public outcry over public health decision making. Preparation and anticipation of all possible public reactions will help communicators guide their organizations through the chaos with the goal of magnifying less vocal but strong support for the measures and preventing a backlash.

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“We have seen how confidence and trust can make or break the situation. Just the concept of masking has been a huge deal. And the lack of trust or confidence in the power of masking has resulted in untold numbers of additional infections and unfortunately, deaths that followed.”



**Ngozi Ezike, MD, Director, Illinois Department of Health,**  
on the Public Health Review podcast, Feb. 18, 2021

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make sure you are in the room when decisions about key policies and the selection of spokespersons are discussed and made. Communicators can only help their organizations when they are engaged from the beginning of the process. If a journalist is telling you what’s happening inside your agency, you are not in the loop. Check out this [video](#) for information on the role and best practices for a spokesperson.
- Engage your community early and often! Consider all possible public reactions to any decision and propose strategies to mitigate those possible outcomes. Share these options with policymakers. Encourage leadership to fine-tune their plans to avoid the worst potential outcomes. Often, slight changes to plans can help lessen negative reactions. Check out this [video](#) for tips from the CDC about how to engage your community.



- Contact and brief supportive stakeholders and audiences in advance. Ask them to issue their own media statements supporting your action. Provide your talking points to help them develop their media messages. Coordinate timing and journalist referrals. Check out this [video](#) from the CDC for guidance on how to understand your audiences in an emergency, adapt messaging to reach and promote action in different audience segments, and how to use facts to build credibility and trust.
- If the media is likely to misinterpret or criticize the decision, brief journalists individually a few hours before the announcement, or immediately afterward. Don't assume the news release will get the job done. Check out this [video](#) from the CDC for guidance on how to select the appropriate channels for communication during an emergency.

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“Public health has probably been attributed with some problems that weren't necessarily their fault. There have been choices made to mitigate the spread of the virus that have been, in the minds of many people, draconian.”

**David Sundwall, MD, Executive Director, Utah Department of Health from 2005-2011 and ASTHO President, 2007-2008**, on the Public Health Review podcast, Feb. 18, 2021

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## SECTION 4:

# CHECKLIST FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

### Preparing for the Interview

Understand that reporters are usually working on a deadline. Call back right away. When a reporter calls you, always ask about their deadline.

Ask for the reporter's name and their media organization. However, it's best not to play favorites when deciding whether to grant an interview to a specific reporter. It may seem like a good idea in the short run, but it will damage your relationships with reporters and may come back to haunt you in the long run.

When a reporter calls to request an interview, you have a right to ask the subject of the interview and some sample questions. If you need time to collect your thoughts and the reporter's deadline allows, offer to call back later at a specific time and follow through.

Don't let yourself be ambushed by the media. If a reporter shows up in your office or calls when you are unprepared, reschedule the interview for a time when you feel comfortable.

Think of two to three main points you would like to make about your subject. Gather facts, figures, and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready.

Have printed materials to support your information whenever possible to help the reporter minimize errors. If time allows, offer to send the reporter printed information in advance of the interview.

Be aware that reporters' schedules are determined by the "breaking" news of the day. Do not be offended if an interview gets canceled or rescheduled because a more urgent story arises.

## The Message: This is the most important information you want your audience to hear.

- Having three key points supported by examples will help you communicate your message most effectively.

- Everything you say should restate or reinforce your message.

- Stick to your message. Don't offer the other side a platform by bringing up their position.

- Don't be afraid to repeat your message. Reporters will only use a small fraction of the total interview, so be sure that whatever is used includes your message.

- The message framework includes:

- | Problem
- | Solution
- | Call to action

## Rules of the Road: Take control of the interview.

- Determine the ground rules at the outset of the interview.

- | **On the record:** Anything you say can be attributed to you.

- | **Background:** Information you provide may be included in the story, but you will not be quoted.

- | **Off the record:** There is no such thing as off the record.

- Know your message and be dogged in delivering it to your audience.

- Bring talking points and refer to them during your interview.

- Don't allow the reporter to set the tone of the interview. You can help set a comfortable pace by pausing to gather your thoughts before answering questions.

- NEVER lie to a reporter. If you don't know, say so, or tell the reporter that you will get back to them later with more information.

## **Audience:** Never lose sight of who you are really trying to reach.

The audience is not the reporter. The audience is the viewer, listener, or reader who will consume the reporter's story.

Speak in layperson's terms. If you must use jargon or technical language, explain it. Avoid acronyms.

Technical language may be appropriate if you're speaking to policymakers or professionals.

## **Preparation:** You only get one chance at an interview, so be prepared.

Determine your primary objective in conducting the interview.

Review your key messages and talking points.

Role play the interview and rehearse hard questions.

Visualize members of your audience and speak to them as though they were in the room.

Make sure you are briefed on any relevant information about the reporter, the interview format, and what questions might be asked.

Be sure to read the latest headlines so that you aren't surprised by anything in the interview.

## Technique: Make your FIRST words count.

Lead with a positive conclusion and then state supporting facts.

| All other remarks should support your lead statement.  
 | Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.  
 | Be brief. Responses to questions should be short—18-30 second bites.

Block and bridge. If you get a question you don't want to answer, change the question by using a transitional phrase such as:

| "What's more important..."  
 | "Another thing to remember..."  
 | "That's not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is..."

Flagging helps you emphasize what's most important.

| "I've talked about many issues, but it really boils down to these three things..."  
 | "The most important thing to remember..."

You will increase the likelihood of being quoted if you use interesting language, including metaphors or analogies, to help make your point.

Use anecdotes from your work to support your points.

**Roles:** Sometimes your interests converge, and sometimes they diverge.

The reporter’s objective is to tell a story, provide timely and interesting information, and attract an audience.

What’s news?

- | Change
- | Proximity
- | Controversy
- | Conflict
- | Impact
- | Novelty
- | Prominence
- | Human interest

Your objective is to deliver your key messages to your audience.

Building a positive rapport with reporters will help you meet your objectives.

- | Be responsive. Return calls promptly.
- | Be helpful. Provide referrals and background information.
- | Be responsible. Show up for scheduled appointments.
- | Be informed. Follow how key reporters are covering the issue.

## Television: Image is everything.

Typically, TV news programs can cover a topic only superficially. Be prepared to make only one main point.

Practice delivering your message briefly and simply.

Your appearance and delivery will be part of your message. Don't do anything that will detract from your remarks (e.g., control nervous habits, dress conservatively, and keep gestures small).

Be personable. People are watching you in their living rooms.

Try to relax, make eye contact with the reporter, and talk with them rather than at them.

Overemphasize positive facial expressions (SMILE). Neutral expressions appear angry and uninterested.

General tips include:

- Vocal patterns
  - | Be expressive.
  - | Speak a little more slowly than normal.
  - | Use a relaxed, informal tone.
- Posture
  - | Sit as far back in your chair as possible.
  - | Lean slightly forward.
  - | Cross your legs at the knee or ankle.
- Clothes
  - | Wear professional clothes such as a suit or blazer to add credibility.
  - | Solid colors are best. Avoid busy patterns.
  - | Avoid big jewelry.

## Radio: You are how you sound.

- Most often, radio interviews are conducted over the phone. On occasion, you may be invited into the studio.
- Keep your answers short. A typical radio news story is 30-60 seconds long, and a reporter will generally use only one or two 10-second sound bites.
- Be expressive and animated, as if you were talking with people in the room.
- Prepare by reading statements and practice answering questions out loud.
- Enunciate clearly and speak at a moderate pace.

## Print: Time to explain.

- Print reporters often want to learn as much as possible about a topic and then distill the information to write the story.
- Don't allow a reporter to take you on a tangent. Stick to your message and repeat and reinforce it throughout the interview.
- Flag your key messages by saying things like, "The most important point..." or "What people should really know is..."
- Don't let your guard down. Remember, everything you say can be included in the story.
- Hard questions do not mean the reporter has taken a side on the issue. Don't become defensive.
- Take your time to think through your responses to hard questions.
- If you are unsure of your answer, tell the reporter you'll get back to them with the information. Then be sure to get back.



## During the Interview

If you are being interviewed by phone, the reporter is required by law to tell you when you are being recorded. If you're not certain, you should ask.

Begin at a basic level. Avoid medical, academic, or technical jargon. Explain special terms if you must use them.

Be brief! We live in the age of the sound bite. Television and radio stories may use only a 10-30 second cut. The shorter your comments, the less likely they are to be edited. Even print reporters are looking for short, snappy quotes.

There are five Cs to success:

Speak with **conviction** in a **conversational** manner while retaining your **composure**.

Be **confident**—you are the expert.

Be **colorful**—tell stories and anecdotes that illustrate your point. Give examples.

Stick to your main points and do not allow yourself to get drawn too far off topic. Most people make the mistake of talking too much. Repeat your points if necessary to get back on track.

Speak in complete thoughts. The reporter's question may be edited out, and your response should stand on its own.

Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information where necessary.

If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification rather than talking around it. If you do not have the answer, say so. Tell the reporter where to find the information, if possible.

Never say, "No comment." Instead, if you cannot or do not choose to answer, explain briefly. For example, "It is our policy not to discuss lawsuits currently in litigation" or "I can't answer that because I haven't seen the research paper you are referring to."

Avoid saying things "off the record." Reporters may or may not honor this, and it annoys them. If you don't want to hear it on the evening news, you had better not say it.

Be honest. Don't try to conceal negative information. Rather, let your interviewer know what you are doing to solve a problem.

## Tips on Broadcast Media

For television interviews, plan to wear solid color clothing. Stripes, plaids, or other designs can cause problems. Avoid large, jangling, or reflective jewelry.

Look in a mirror, if possible, just before going on camera. The reporter may not tell you that your collar is folded over or your hair is out of place.

Choose a location where you can screen out extraneous noises. Hold your calls and turn off your computer, if possible. Avoid rooms with loud background hums from air conditioning or heating units.

Find out in advance whether the interview is edited or “live.” If you agree to a live interview, be sure you are comfortable thinking on your feet and responding.

In edited interviews, do not answer questions too quickly. Pause briefly before answering. This helps the reporter get a “clean” sound bite and has the added benefit of allowing you time to think out your answer.

In a TV interview, look at the reporter and not the camera. The only exception is in a satellite interview when the reporter or anchor may not be on location. If you’re uncertain where to look, ask.

Stay stationary in front of radio or TV microphones and avoid sitting in a chair that rocks or spins. Wandering around or rocking in your chair can cause the recorded volume to rise and fall.

Be aware of and avoid nervous habits such as pen tapping that can interfere with the interview.

## After the Interview

Ask the reporter to identify you as being affiliated with your health department.

In most instances, you will not have the opportunity to check over the reporter's story before it appears. However, you can ask questions at the end of an interview to test for comprehension. For example, you might inquire, "What do you think is the main story angle here?"

You may want to ask when a story will appear.

After reflecting on an interview, if you feel that you misspoke or gave incorrect information, call the reporter as soon as possible. Similarly, you could call with additional information if you forgot to make an important point.

Give positive feedback to reporters, if merited, after a story appears. Like the rest of us, they usually hear only complaints and rarely get a call or note to say they've done a good job.

If an error appears, let the reporter know right away. Sometimes a correction can be printed or aired. You also want to prevent the incorrect information from being used as background for future stories.

If you are unhappy with a story, share your concerns with the reporter first. Contacting his or her editor is the last resort.

For radio and TV stories, obtain a tape of the final broadcast if possible and critique your own performance, looking for ways you might improve in the future.

## Examples of Messages

### Holding Statements

One of your primary goals when a crisis occurs is to manage the narrative. One step is to get a statement out to the media as quickly as possible. A holding statement is a clearly written, brief statement of what you know thus far and the actions you are taking to manage the situation and restore order. Regardless of the type of crisis you are facing, you should prepare a holding statement that attempts to address the following: Who? What? When? Why? Where? How? What are the next steps? If you are unable to address these questions, acknowledge what you know, what you don't know, and how you will proceed with the information you currently have. Do not be pressured to over promise, hypothesize, or exaggerate.

Draft a few general statements to address the phases of a crisis and write them so they can work no matter the issue. These are called "holding" statements because they hold the media off until you have more information to share. They also allow you to respond immediately. Below are elements your statement should include:

- Your headline should be factual.
- Express empathy (when necessary).
- Include the What, When, and Where.
- Share basic details that you can confirm. Do not include speculation, rumors or names of the deceased (if applicable).
- Identify very clearly the actions your organization will take in response to the crisis. Only share information that you want the public to know. Do not share classified information until you are authorized and it becomes necessary.
- Provide details on when the next public update will be made.

## Holding Statement Example

The following statement is attributable to \_\_\_\_\_:

\_\_(state)\_\_ Health Department Issues Statement on \_\_(topic)\_\_\_

Date: DD/MM/YYYY

Time: HH:MM

\_\_\_\_\_ Health Department is aware of \_\_\_\_\_ (describe the nature of the incident e.g. A student reported smelling gas/A resident reported seeing a tornado/Hospitals reported a spike in ER visits from an unknown illness).

We are in the process of (explain the actions you will take next, e.g., we are expanding our testing capabilities for asymptomatic individuals/We are offering emergency free walk-in pop-up clinics for—).

As the state health official, I am committed to the health and safety of the residents of our great state. Additional actions are being developed. We will share another update with the community as soon as we know more.

## Talking Points

Write three or four talking points for a handful of possible crisis scenarios. Make the points impactful. Mix facts with quotable lines that drive home your message.

### Example:

#### **COVID-19 TALKING POINTS**

**Feb. 23, 2021**

General Message Points Related to the National Forum on COVID-19 Vaccine:

- As public health officials, we remain focused on the common good of all Americans and that means continuing to encourage everyone to social distance, wear masks, and get vaccinated.
- We must continue to work collectively and collaboratively to make the COVID-19 response efforts work for states. The more we do together, the more we can protect the health of Americans.
- The enormity of the pandemic requires us to ensure that public health is a leading consideration in federal, state, and local policy so that we can remain vigilant in reaching underserved populations and addressing health disparities and the impact on our public health systems.
- Our collective effort will help the nation slow the spread of COVID-19, manage the distribution and administration of vaccines to the public in a data-informed, rational, and efficient manner, prevent the development of new variants, and help guarantee health equity in vaccinations.
- We commend our healthcare workers and public health professionals who have worked tirelessly and unselfishly throughout the country to provide care for others under very difficult conditions.

## Contact Information

**Spokespeople.** Include information for all people authorized to speak about any event impacting your organization. Include as many spokespersons as you have in the organization since some might be on vacation or unreachable during a crisis. Don't be left without an approved and trained spokesperson.

**Complete Listings.** Make sure you have contact information for your leadership team, spokespersons, and anyone else you might need to reach during a crisis. Include mobile and home telephone numbers, home addresses, spouse or partner contact information, and any other data that will help you reach people day or night.

## Third-Party Supporters

**Validators.** Often, you will want others to speak on your behalf. But don't wait until the crisis breaks out to try to think of, or contact, a supportive third-party individual or organization. Do this work in advance and include willing people in your contact database. Organize supporters by topic, skillset, or any other criteria. Make sure you get complete contact information for those who will respond on your behalf.

## External Resources

Have conversations in advance with groups or teams that might be helpful to you in a crisis. These might include:

### ASTHO Resources

The [ASTHO communications team](#) is available to help you during a crisis. Do not hesitate to contact us if you need help managing media inquiries, research, or a second opinion. ASTHO also has a variety of [communications training resources](#).

### Agency Communications Staff

Discuss staff support with other agencies in your jurisdiction. Many departments have qualified communicators who could be pressed into crisis duty to support your efforts.

### PR Firm Support

Consider the services of an outside public relations firm. Find an agency team that can mobilize on short notice to support you with behind-the-scenes communications services, such as statement and news release writing, media outreach, and strategic counsel.

## Media Response Tips

Don't wait until a crisis to issue broad media contact policies to members of your organization. Consider these steps before there's a problem. They will help you manage your response when problems arise.

### **Establish Response Parameters**

Establish and communicate a clear policy for public response during a crisis. Don't assume everyone in your organization will refer media inquiries to you. Often, people working a crisis will feel they are the best to respond, and if a journalist calls them, they might say something that contradicts your approved messaging. Settle these issues before your next disaster with a policy amendment or some other communication to the employee base. If you have time, reach out to teams to make them aware of the need to coordinate media calls, and to answer their questions about this policy.

### **Provide Your Contact Information**

If you expect people in your organization to send media calls to you during a crisis, make sure they know how to contact you. Provide complete contact information for you and your team members. Email it to everyone. Make sure it is posted on your intranet or organization directory. Don't give anyone the opportunity to say they spoke to the reporter because they didn't know how to contact you.



## Managing the Media During a Crisis

### **Manage Media Inquiries**

When a crisis happens, make it clear to the media who will respond on behalf of your organization by telling them immediately how to reach you for information, access to leadership, or other needs. With your first holding statement, tell journalists who will be their only media contact for this event. Do not leave this to the media's discretion.

### **Stay In Touch**

Remain in close contact with all interested media outlets during the crisis. Do not assume they have moved on simply because you've not heard from them. Check in regularly until they tell you they're no longer interested. Issue updated statements, offer spokespeople, or provide video and photo opportunities to ensure that you are leading the coverage of your crisis, not someone else. Designate a second contact as well, in the event you are unavailable or need a break.

### **Maintain Control**

Monitor media coverage of the crisis and address any concerns with the reporting. Do not worry about offending a journalist or their editor. Misstatements are a disservice to the public. Address them as soon as you can. Engage ill-informed opinions by offering written responses or interviews. Balance every contradictory opinion with your point of view.

### **Choose Spokespeople Wisely**

Be careful not to offer your top leaders to the media too early, otherwise they'll be less able to direct the response. That's because the media will expect them to provide every update until the crisis is over. Start with spokespeople, and graduate to higher-ranking leaders if the situation warrants. Use your secretary, president, or executive director when it's time to say something important about the crisis, but not to dole out regular situation updates.

## Contact & Information Centers

Communications before, during, and following an emergency is bi-directional. Stakeholders or audiences will ask questions and request information. The agency will answer questions and provide information. This flow of information should be managed through a communications hub.



[Crisis Communications Hub & Spoke Diagram - Text Version](#)

Contact and Information Centers form the “hub” of the crisis communications plan. The centers receive requests for information from each audience and disseminate information to each audience. Employees from multiple departments may be assigned to communicate with a specific audience.

The “**contact center**” fields inquiries from customers, suppliers, the news media, and others. The contact center should be properly equipped and staffed by personnel to answer requests for information. The staff working within the contact center should be provided with scripts and a “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) document to answer questions consistently and accurately.

The “**information center**” consists of existing staff and technologies (e.g., website, call center, bulletin boards, etc.) that field requests for information from customers, employees, and others during normal business hours. The information center and its technologies can be used to push information out to audiences and post information for online reading.

The **crisis communications team**, consisting of members of the management team, should operate in an office environment to support the contact and information centers. The offices may be clustered near the [emergency operations center](#) or at an alternate site if the primary site cannot be occupied. The goal of the crisis communications team is to gather information about the incident. This should include monitoring the types of questions posed to call center operators or staff in the office; emails received by customer service; social media chatter or stories broadcast by the news media. Using this input, the crisis communications team can inform management about the issues that are being raised by stakeholders. In turn, management should provide input into the messages generated by the crisis communications team. The team can then create appropriate messages and disseminate information approved for release.

**Source:** [Crisis Communications Plan | Ready.gov](#)

## Social Media

Managing social media during a crisis can be among the most challenging of communications tasks. Here are a few tips for engaging inaccurate or misleading information during these events.

### Social Listening

Use social listening tools (e.g., Twitter alerts) to help you monitor accounts commenting on the issue. You also can set up a Google alert for relevant keywords or names related to the crisis at hand. If you use Hootsuite, Meltwater, or Sprout Social, remember to adjust settings to track the crisis. Whether free or paid, these tools will keep you updated on relevant articles and stories that contain your keywords.

### Avoid Direct Responses

Be careful not to engage specific posts. This can encourage piling on from spectators watching from the sidelines. An individual who won't stop posting on your channels is looking for you to respond, thereby allowing them to keep the criticisms going.

### Respond Indirectly

Respond broadly to misleading or inaccurate information in original posts created to share facts meant to correct the record. Generally, it is OK to acknowledge frustrations or misunderstandings, but do it with a plan to educate and inform audiences, rather than confront them.

### Draft Posts Offline

When creating a post about a controversial topic, draft it first in Word on your computer or the Notes app on your mobile device. Never write your response in the social media platform. This gives you time to think about your response without the fear that you could mistakenly post an inaccurate or incomplete statement before it is ready.

## **Get a Second Opinion**

Once your post is written, ask someone on the team to quickly review it for tone, accuracy, and grammar. It is better to take your time creating an effective response than to send an ill-crafted message that creates new headaches.

## **Suspend Pre-Planned Content**

Put a hold on any pre-planned social content that may be scheduled to go online in the next several days or weeks. The last thing you want on your organization's social media feeds are happy, breezy, or off-topic posts that could make you appear less focused on the crisis at hand.

## SECTION 5:

# HOW TO ADDRESS MISINFORMATION

Inaccurate or misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines is everywhere. Vaccine opponents continue to post messages that create doubt and fear. Unfortunately, there is too much bad information online to respond to everything posted. Instead, the approach should be to create a competing stream of competitive, authoritative yet approachable, more interesting, better informed, and credible information.

## COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation

The spread of misinformation on social media and through other channels can affect COVID-19 vaccine confidence. Misinformation often arises when there are information gaps or unsettled science, as human nature seeks to reason, better understand, and fill in the gaps.

On this page, CDC shares strategies for **communicating accurate information** about COVID-19 vaccines, **responding to gaps in information**, and **confronting misinformation** with evidence-based messaging from credible sources.

### Defining Misinformation and Disinformation

**Misinformation** is false information shared by people who do not intend to mislead others.

**Disinformation** is false information deliberately created and disseminated with malicious intent.

**Both types can affect vaccine confidence** and vaccination rates. Most misinformation and disinformation that has circulated about COVID-19 vaccines has focused on vaccine development, safety, and effectiveness, as well as COVID-19 denialism.

## Addressing Misinformation About COVID-19 Vaccines

The first step to addressing misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines in your community is learning more about it, **including where it starts and when, why, and how** it is spreading and evolving.

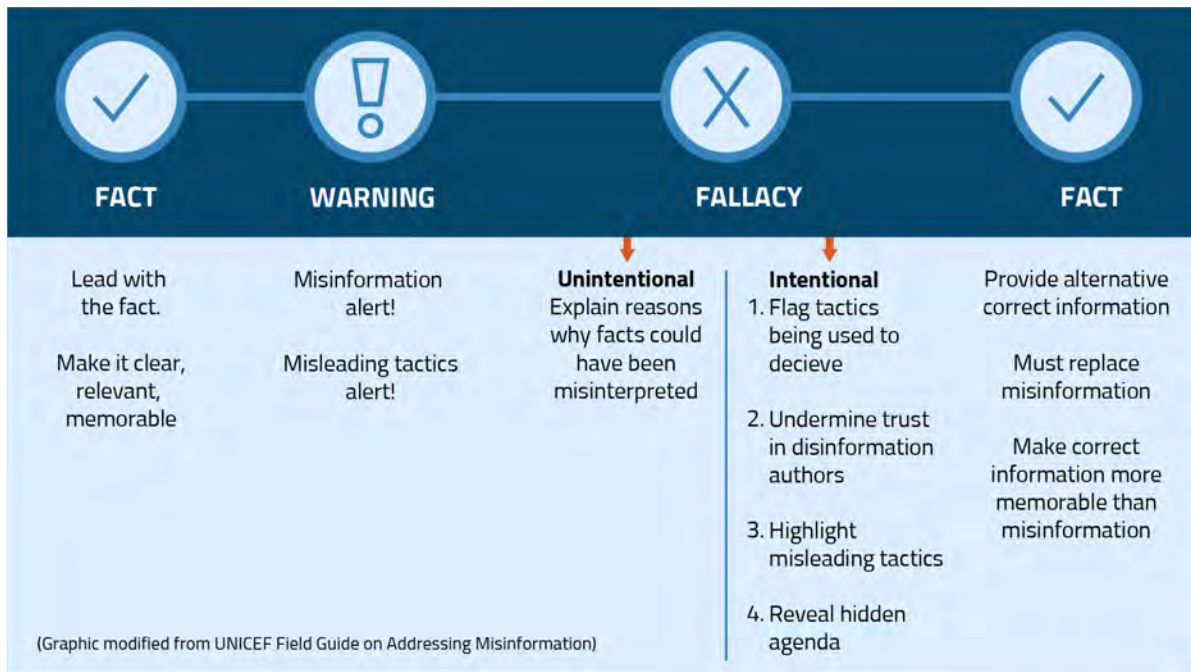
Download CDC's [Rapid Community Assessment Guide](#) for steps and adaptable tools to quickly gather information and better understand your community of focus.

**Monitor and analyze misinformation** circulating in your community through social and traditional media. This can include monitoring social media channels and traditional media outlets for misinformation and creating a log of that misinformation to identify trends in your area. This can help you understand where, when, why, and how misinformation is spreading in your community.

**Engage with and listen to your community** to identify and analyze perceptions, content gaps, information voids, and misinformation.

**Share accurate, clear, and easy-to-find information** that addresses common questions. This can be done through your website, social media, and other places your audience looks for health information. Also, use methods to reach those with limited or no internet access, such as radio or community events. Share details, including addresses and hours, about local vaccination sites and events with community-based organizations and local media. See [How to Tailor COVID-19 Information to Your Specific Audience](#).

**Use trusted messengers** to boost credibility and the likelihood of being seen and believed over misinformation. Some people may not trust public health professionals or visit the health department website, so it's more effective to reach them through the channels and sources they look to and trust for health information, such as religious leaders or community organizations.



**FACT**

The COVID-19 vaccine will **not** make you sick with COVID-19.

**WARNING**

Misinformation alert!

**FALLACY**

Some people are saying that the COVID-19 vaccine will give you COVID-19. That is not true. While you may feel sick after getting the COVID-19 vaccine, that is a sign your body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19.

**FACT**

The COVID-19 vaccine **cannot** make you sick with COVID-19. COVID-19 vaccines teach your immune system to recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19. Sometimes this process can cause symptoms, such as fever and chills. These symptoms are normal and are signs that the body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19.

**FACT**

It typically takes a few weeks for the body to build immunity (protection against the virus that causes COVID-19) after vaccination. That means it's possible you could be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 just before or just after vaccination and still get sick. This is because the vaccine has not had enough time to provide protection.



## Monitoring Misinformation Through Social Media Listening

Monitoring misinformation through social listening is a key strategy to identify and address misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines quickly. This includes identifying inaccurate trending information, which, if not addressed, can lead to the spread of misinformation.

Catching misinformation early can help you develop and get out accurate information to address concerns and questions ahead of time and close information gaps before they are filled with inaccurate information.

**Identify your jurisdiction's existing information sources** that will inform listening, such as analysis of social media comments, call center logs, and media inquiry logs. Check tools regularly to gather social listening data.

**Create and maintain a social media influencer list** to monitor for perceptions, content gaps, and misinformation.

**Create and maintain a rumor log** to track circulating misinformation, its volume, how it is spreading, and how it evolves over time.

**Set up a social and traditional media monitoring system** to access key channels, communities, and conversations, including free monitoring and analytical tools.

**Analyze and develop insights** by considering the following questions:

- What questions are people asking about COVID-19 vaccination?
- What are people's attitudes and emotions that may be linked to vaccination behavior?
- What rumors or misinformation are circulating?
- What overarching themes and narratives—beyond individual pieces of content—emerge from widely circulated rumors and misinformation?
- How are people responding to and interpreting vaccine-related communication from public health authorities?

## Helpful Resources

### [Social Listening and Monitoring Tools](#)

Tools to support social listening and monitoring implementation.

### [UNICEF Field Guide on Addressing Misinformation](#)

A field guide that includes strategies to address misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines in global contexts.

### [How to Detect Misinformation](#)

A quick guide on detecting misinformation, disinformation, lies, and conspiracy theories about vaccines.

### [COVID-19 State of Vaccine Confidence Insights Report](#)

A biweekly report highlighting emerging issues of misinformation, disinformation, places where intervention efforts can positively impact vaccine confidence across the United States, and major themes influencing COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and uptake. To receive this report, please email [eocevent515@cdc.gov](mailto:eocevent515@cdc.gov).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any time an issue is left unattended, voices will step in to fill the void. This can start with an innocent question or a damaging statement. Unfortunately, either of these can spark a fury of commentary that could begin to have a negative impact on public opinion. Regain the information high ground by launching and maintaining a campaign of your own to engage social media with a competing narrative.
- This does not involve responding to every negative or critical post. Tips for managing social media commentary during a crisis are covered later in this guide. Rather, this is about choosing critical topics to address in an organized campaign to share facts and informed viewpoints with audiences.
- For example, if your topics are the effectiveness of masks, vaccine safety, and vaccine impacts on pregnant women, create campaigns for each, ensuring a steady stream of posts sharing facts, links, video soundbites with trusted messengers, and other content. Remember to build a website landing page where information about each topic can exist beyond the social media effort.

- Maintain an aggressive flow of information. The plan should be to dominate impacted social media channels with accurate, interesting, and actionable information addressing these topics. Click here to view a [video](#) from the CDC on how to identify which social media outlets would best serve an organization's audiences.

TIP



Social media critics are online bullies who build audiences by being first with information or opinions about your work. Neutralize their appeal by sharing news with audiences first. You control the information. Why would you allow an outside critic to direct the debate? Stay ahead of your own good and bad news by breaking it first, every time. If you do that consistently, the critic will become less of a source and their audience will dwindle.


- Stay flexible. Adjust campaigns according to the tone of conversations you see online. But don't stop. A sustained campaign will eventually establish you as the leading source of information about these topics.
- Online misinformation during the pandemic qualifies as an ongoing communications crisis. But this same approach would work in a developing situation. If a story were breaking, post updates on the story early and often. You likely know the most about the situation, so make sure your organization is the leading source for information about it.

**Example of a social media policy:** [CDC Enterprise Social Media Policy](#)

## Managing Public Meetings

The consideration of public health measures in schools has become a flashpoint for people on both sides of the mask and vaccination mandates debate. Some of the most graphic displays of outrage have occurred in front of television news cameras as parents throw verbal and physical punches at elected and public health officials, and sometimes at each other. You can learn from these events and take proactive steps to prevent your meeting from becoming a crisis. Do not be afraid to lead the approach. Make a plan that employs tactics to reduce risks. This includes ensuring that the right messengers are available to address critical audiences with credible perspectives.

“My best advice is that when you need to talk with parents about school requirements, find someone with a stethoscope and bring them with you. Doctors and nurses are routinely the most trusted messengers for information about COVID.”



**Gillian SteelFisher, PhD, MSc, Director, Global Polling Unit, Harvard Opinion Research Program, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**, on the Public Health Review Morning Edition newscast, August 16, 2021

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Actively engage all factors of the decision-making process. Where public meetings are required, think about ways to prevent conflict while still preserving the free speech rights of those with differing viewpoints.
- Manage timing of meeting posts, wording about the issue on public agendas, placement of the item on the agenda, whether the issue should be the subject of a special meeting, and how to manage public comment and access to public officials safely.
- Carefully consider your messengers. Even if the meeting is open to the public, that does not mean you cannot invite people to speak on behalf of the issue. In the days before the event, call supportive groups and ask them to attend. Or ask a trusted third party to rally supporters to attend and speak. Do not send emails or text messages that could be discovered through the public records process. Do what you can to make sure the debate is open and balanced.
- Encourage your leadership to allow an angry person to speak for as long as they want, rather than cut them off. Even if they go over their time limit, let them vent until the audience tells them to sit down. It is possible for audiences to change their minds when arguments begin to annoy them as well.

TIP



Protect your organization's officials by having a meeting entry and exit plan. Don't leave leaders to walk through an angry crowd into or out of the meeting. Discuss with them in advance how you intend to get them to and from the meeting safely. Park their vehicles in a secure area away from the meeting and establish a holding room where they can wait until the crowd is off the property. If you can prevent this interaction, you'll also avoid unwanted photo ops.

- Prepare the media ahead of time with information about the decision under consideration. Don't hand out statements or news releases at the meeting. Email them to journalists in attendance after the meeting has started. Opponents sometimes attempt to weaponize releases and media handouts, so don't give them the opportunity.
- Clear the room when the meeting ends. Have staff politely ask people to move outside so the room (or the building if the meeting is at night) can be closed. Shuttle officials to their vehicles and make sure they don't have to drive past a lingering crowd. Hold them until people have dispersed if necessary.
- Have staff members available to monitor any interviews opponents might give in the parking lot after the meeting. Don't get caught unaware of comments that will be included in stories about the meeting.
- Stay in close contact with the media for at least 24 hours following the event to make sure you know first about any fallout that should be addressed with additional statements, interviews, or other tactics.

## Disarming Political Attacks

Public health professionals are trained to identify and prevent disease. They generally are not skilled in the theatrics of a political food fight, especially one of global proportions. Yet, the pandemic has thrust all of them into an arena where only the most strategically nimble can survive.

Every statement, decision, and policy has been subjected to a level of political and media scrutiny not experienced by anyone working in public health today. People who've dedicated their careers to building safe and healthy communities have been forced out of their jobs, threatened, and vilified online, mischaracterized, and degraded by unwarranted and ugly political attacks.

Sadly, today's communications cycle does not favor those who assume they can succeed if they ignore the politics of these issues. Although unfamiliar, and sometimes risky, the only option when politics dominate the conversation is to respond, when possible, with a like-minded political approach.

Political campaigns are often reviled for their tactics. While it is usually illegal for government employees to dabble in political campaigns, the public and members of the elected class are using these tactics against public health agencies daily. They work if they go unanswered. They are less effective when their targets respond in kind. How is this done?

The most effective approach to these attacks is to respond "like" a political operative, not word for word, and certainly not in equally political tones. But rather with the aplomb of a campaign consultant: smart, strategic, and timely, using focused and effective language, engaging internal and external supports, and using all appropriate communications channels.

Successful political strategists often enter a communications fray first. They always respond quickly, are relentless with the message, and adjust equally fast and as often as necessary. They maintain a 24/7 communications posture, speak simply, are sincere, show emotion, get outside help from other messengers and experts, and never quit.

Best of all, these behaviors are completely legal and fully available to public health leaders and their communication teams.

“Public health needs to operate like a political campaign in the truest sense... learning how to answer more quickly, how to deal with things as they come through the door and address them sooner than three or four or five days later.”



**Robert Johnson, former Director of Communications for the Transportation Security Administration during the chaotic first year of the agency post 9/11, and host of the Public Health Review podcast and the Public Health Review Morning Edition newscast, on the Public Health Review podcast, August 25, 2021**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Too often, government communicators are overrun by outside critics who can say anything they want, have no limitations on their activities, and don't require approval for their comments.
- If political groups or individuals are attacking you, your organization will need to change its approach to survive the onslaught.
- First, speed up your approval process for statements and responses. Ensure everyone in the review chain knows they need to cut their review time from hours to minutes. If possible, streamline the number of people who need to approve a response. Do whatever you can to respond within an hour.
- Draft shorter, more quotable statements. Make sure your response is always attributed to a person and worth including in the story. Shorter statements also are easier to review and approve.
- Use plain language. Convince leadership before a crisis that neither legal language nor jargon can compete when the antagonist is the only one who sounds like the people in the audience.
- Get help. Call supporters and ask them to weigh in with the journalist. The critic will get part of the story, but not as much if the journalist has three credible sources refuting negative comments. Do whatever you can to isolate and surround the opponent's comments with contradictory voices.

TIP



If you can take the story back by advancing the narrative with a new angle, then do so. You know more about the issue than your critics and your organization is better positioned to change the story. Consider announcing a solution, or the steps being taken to correct the problem. Offer a new angle that favors your message. When you are under attack, this is the best way to regain control of the narrative.

- Stay vigilant for new or recurring attacks. Be ready to engage any time of the day or night. Make sure reporters know to contact you any time they need a comment. Don't let a day off become an opportunity for a vocal critic.
- Remain flexible. Talking points may need to change many times during the crisis. Don't be afraid to adjust messaging as the crisis develops.



## Communicating Tough Decisions

It can be difficult to message deaths, job losses, or community restrictions during a crisis. But public health decisions with potential economic impacts must be carefully and thoroughly communicated as early and as often as possible.


Because of the political nature of decisions to impose curfews or other restrictions on wide swaths of a community, deliberations over such actions often play out in public forums very slowly, giving opponents time to build momentum with negative messages.

Public officials routinely find themselves hamstrung in these situations. They might believe they can only communicate once all the facts are known. Others might be unwilling to take proactive communications steps that could leave elected leaders isolated with their own stated positions, angry that “subordinates” are disobeying their political wishes. Or they simply might not be able to formulate a response quick enough to contain, much less control, the public reaction.

Internal communication with elected leaders, early messaging efforts, and constant contact with the media, directly or indirectly, can help balance the debate and lessen the chances of bad feelings about the decision. Partnerships with other government agencies and third parties to help those impacted before a closure takes effect also qualify as a positive communications strategy since these steps convey empathy and concern for those hurt by restrictions and display a sincere attempt to mitigate the potential for economic pain and hardship.

“

“When I’m at a podium talking or I’m doing some sort of interview, I don’t come at it just as a physician. I don’t come at it just as a public health professional. I come at it as part of the community.”



**Umair Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health, state of Washington**, on the Public Health Review podcast, September 22, 2021

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- No matter what you do, a tough decision that closes businesses and puts people out of work will be bad news for the community. But communicators can drive a plan that helps those impacted and improves the tone of the stories that will be reported.
- Before the announcement, press leadership will need to create specific plans to help those who'll lose their jobs or businesses when the decision takes effect.
- Develop as many solutions as possible. Announce these solutions with the restrictions. Information about these efforts will help offset the negative aspects of the story, supporting the notion of a jurisdiction that understands the impact of a necessary action.
- Resist the urge to leave the hard work of creating assistance programs until after the announcement. Help leadership see how journalists will report the announcement if the story is largely about the closure, versus the potential to focus more of their time discussing the many ways people will be helped while the virus plays out. There is no guarantee, but if nothing is announced in tandem with the decision, critics will have even more to say about the news.

TIP



Engage third party voices to echo your messages. Build as much vocal stakeholder support as possible for the plan. Encourage them to reach out to the media to share their views about the decision.

- Messaging should be empathetic and personal. Audiences need to know that people who live in the community and will be similarly impacted by these decisions are making tough calls out of concern for the long-term health and well-being of everyone.
- The work doesn't end with the decision and the announcement. Show the solutions at work. Provide updates to the story. Identify milestones and seek media coverage. Continue to involve third party voices as proof that the decision has support extending beyond the jurisdiction. Stay on top of opportunities to reinforce messaging until the decision runs its course.

# SECTION 6: CHECKLIST FOR PLANNING AN EVENT

Campaign Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Dept/Office/Program: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Team Lead: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Campaign Timeline: (Start) \_\_\_\_\_ (Finish) \_\_\_\_\_

Communication Assets Needed	PIO/PAO	Is Tool Needed? (Yes or No)	Deadline	Notes/Comments
Media Advisory				
News Release				
Fact Sheet/Brochure				
Talking Points				
Editorial				
Tag Line				
Photography/Video				
Web Story				

Communication Assets Needed	PIO/PAO	Is Tool Needed? (Yes or No)	Deadline	Notes/Comments
Web Rotating Photo				
Media Pitch				
Blast Email				
Internal Newsletters				
Community Calendars				
Paid Advertisements (radio, tv, print)				
Social Media Presence (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram)				
Community Listservs				
Flyer/Poster/Banner				
Media Tour				
Other: (Specify)				

Potential Target Audience	Potential Messages and Talking Points
Internal Audience	
External Audience	

Media	Things to Remember
Media Advisory/News Release	Research and draft media advisory/news release and provide drafts to reviewers/approvers. The media advisory should include the WHAT/WHO/WHEN/WHERE. A post-event news release should describe the event with all the salient details.
Photos and Visuals	Pictures tell the story and put a human face on the program/project. Images can also be posted on the website.
Talking Points	Ensure that you have developed at least three core messages.
Website Postings	Ensure that the news items convey a clear message to our internal and external audiences.
Paid Advertising	Check with the department/office to see if there's a budget for advertising.
Printed Material	Check with the department/office to see if there's a budget for printed material.
Special Events	Media/photo ops can take four to six weeks to plan and promote. Plan early!
Events	Ensure that the event has been placed on the events calendar.
Broadcast Email	A broadcast email should be sent internally.

Media	Things to Remember
Working with the Media	<p>Send a media advisory one week beforehand if you're inviting the media to attend. An advisory is like an invitation. <b>Call, email, call, email.</b> Email all reporters before and after the event to encourage them to cover your story, and then follow up with a quick phone call. Because of Caller ID, if you reach a reporter's voicemail, leave a message. Again, have your message pitch prepared and practiced in advance. Email your media advisory and/or news release with a short, engaging introduction, then make your follow-up calls. You also can consider providing local and community newspapers with a simpler release story (plain language format for a very basic reader) they can run with a photo and details about the program. Pitch the release the same way you would a regular news release, but with a local angle.</p>
Writing Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor	<p>Submit your op-ed at least three weeks to a month before you would like it to run. Make it timely. Use data. Current statistics and reports will give your op-ed more credibility. Keep it brief. Check submission guidelines. Generally, up to 750 words is acceptable. Make one point. Space is tight. Make one argument clearly and persuasively. Avoid jargon. Keep it simple, with no acronyms or technical language. Use examples. Try to bring the piece to life with a true story. Make a specific recommendation using a subject-matter expert. Show how the situation can be improved. Create a strong lead. A well-crafted first paragraph is essential to get the reader through the piece. Give readers information on how to learn more. A website or phone number is helpful. End strong. Summarize your argument memorably.</p>

## Media Pitching Timeline

Timing is everything when it comes to getting the media to cover your efforts. Following is a general timeline for when you should begin reaching out to encourage coverage.

### ● Four to Five Days Before Event

Email a news advisory to everyone on your media list with specific information about the event. Make follow-up calls to pitch the event and gauge media interest. Finalize the news release, prepare press packets to distribute at the event, and send via email.

### ● Two Days Before the Event

If you have been unable to contact a beat reporter on your list, try calling the assignment desk to make sure someone at the outlet is aware of the event.

### ● One Day Before the Event

Make a last round of calls to key outlets to confirm participation or attendance and answer any logistics questions.

### ● Morning of the Event

Call TV news assignment desks to attend your event since they make assignments the same morning. Send the news release directly before or after the event begins.

### ● Following the Event

Assess media coverage of the event. Follow up with reporters who were unable to attend the event. Send an electronic press kit, photos, and videos.

Suggested Tweets	Suggested Facebook Posts



## SECTION 7: APPENDIX

### Sample Crisis Communication Messages

During and following an incident, each audience will seek information that is specific to them. “How does the incident affect my order, job, safety, community?” These questions need to be answered when communicating with each audience.

After identifying the audiences and the spokesperson assigned to communicate with each audience, the next step is to script messages. Writing messages during an incident can be challenging due to the pressure caused by “too much to do” and “too little time.” Therefore, it is best to script message templates in advance if possible.

Pre-scripted messages should be prepared using information developed during the [risk assessment](#). The risk assessment process should identify scenarios that would require communication with stakeholders.

There may be many different scenarios, but the need for communications will relate more to the impacts or potential impacts of an incident:

- Accidents that injure employees or others.
- Property damage to company facilities.
- Liability-associated injury to or damage sustained by others.
- Production or service interruptions.
- Chemical spills or releases with potential off-site consequences, including environmental impacts.
- Product quality issues.

**Messages should be scripted to address the specific needs of each audience, which may include:**

**Customers:** “When will I receive my order? What will you give me to compensate for the delay?”

**Employees:** “When should I report to work? Will I have a job? Will I get paid during the shutdown or can I collect unemployment? What happened to my co-worker? What are you going to do to address my safety? Is it safe to go back to work?”

**Government Regulators:** “When did it happen? What happened (details about the incident)? What are the impacts (injuries, deaths, environmental contamination, safety of consumers, etc.)?”

**Elected Officials:** “What is the impact on the community (hazards and economy)? How many employees will be affected? When will you be back up and running?”

**Suppliers:** “When should we resume deliveries and where should we ship to?”

**Management:** “What happened? When did it happen? Was anyone injured?”  
“How bad is the property damage? How long do you think production will be down?”

**Neighbors in the Community:** “How can I be sure it’s safe to go outside? What are you going to do to prevent this from happening again? How do I get paid for the loss I incurred?”

**News Media:** “What happened? Who was injured? What is the estimated loss? What caused the incident? What are you going to do to prevent it from happening again? Who is responsible?”

Messages can be pre-scripted as templates with blanks to be filled in when needed. Pre-scripted messages can be developed, approved by the management team, and stored on a remotely accessible server for quick editing and release when needed. Another important element of the crisis communications plan is the need to coordinate the release of information. There may be limited information about the incident or its potential impacts when there is an emergency or a major impact on the business. The “story” may change many times as new information becomes available.

One of the aims of the crisis communication plan is to ensure consistency of message. If you tell one audience one story and another audience a different story, it will raise questions of competency and credibility. Protocols need to be established to ensure that the core of each message is consistent while addressing the specific questions from each audience. Another important goal of the crisis communications plan is to move from reacting to the incident, to managing a strategy to overcome the incident. Management needs to develop the strategy, and the crisis communications team needs to implement that strategy by allaying the concerns of each audience and positioning the organization to emerge from the incident with its reputation intact.

**Source:** [Crisis Communications Plan | Ready.gov](#)

## Resources for Crisis Communications

Resources should be available within the primary business site, and provisions should be made to set up similar capabilities within an alternate site in case the primary site cannot be occupied, including:

- Telephones with dedicated or addressable lines for incoming calls and separate lines for outgoing calls.
- Access to any electronic notification system used to inform employees.
- Electronic mail (with access to “info@” inbox and ability to send messages).
- Fax machine (one for receiving and one for sending).
- Webmaster access to company website to post updates.
- Access to social media accounts.
- Access to local area network, secure remote server, message template library, and printers.
- Hard copies of emergency response, business continuity and crisis communications plan.
- Site and building diagrams, information related to business processes and loss prevention programs (e.g., safety and health, property loss prevention, physical and information/cyber security, fleet safety, environmental management, and product quality).
- Copiers.
- Forms for documenting events as they unfold.
- Message boards (flipcharts, whiteboards, etc.).
- Pens, pencils, paper, clipboards, and other stationery supplies.

**Source:** [Crisis Communications Plan | Ready.gov](#)