# Improving Disaster and Crisis Management: *Plans and Exercises to Build a Timely Communication Response*

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## About the Author



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# Plans & Exercises to Build a Timely Communication Response

When asked what areas need to be improved after any crisis or emergency, respondents will inevitably list "communications" as one of the most important areas for improvement. "Communications" is, of course, a broad topic; however, there is one comment that is universal: "Communication needs to be more *timely*."

Is that your experience? When surveying our client population, we often find that timeliness of communications is one of their biggest issues. Over the years, we have developed plans and exercises specifically to help companies develop a timelier response. The goal of this white paper is to share some of the ideas that clients tell us have been the most successful.

Our strategy is simple and straightforward: Develop and use simple communication tools, and then exercise them.

## COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Communications teams usually have some type of "crisis communications" plan in place, but it is often limited. We find that there are often three things missing:

1. Effective use of an emergency notification system (ENS).

2. Identification of key stakeholders in a communication matrix.

3. Pre-approved message templates.

### Effective Use of an Emergency Notifications System

Many of our clients have an Emergency Notification System (ENS) but in our view, the defined use during an event is too limited. Many companies only use it to reach employees, and even then, the idea of "reaching employees" can be too limited. Often we find that the people who are authorized to deploy an ENS are limited to a small number of individuals, and the ENS itself is used only for broad employee communication. Most ENS software is robust enough to allow creation of sub-groups. Why not set up call groups for individual teams? We recommend call groups for the Initial Assessment Team, the Incident/Crisis Management Team, Executives, individual

Business Units, media contacts, vendors, and other key stakeholders. You can probably think of other groups that make sense in your company.

Many ENS products are able to send messages via multiple communications paths. Can't reach someone via a phone call? The system can send a text message. The text message doesn't get a response either? The system can send an email. The more options the ENS provides to reach someone regardless of device or location, the better your chances are of providing key information to the stakeholders.

And, as another benefit of an ENS, the pre-approved message templates could be built out in the system, where the Communications team can easily find them in an emergency.

When used widely and effectively, an ENS can be a great way to remove all of that contact information from your other plans, and use the ENS as the storage tool for all communication data.  And, as you might think, it is always a good idea to have paper back-ups in case the ENS fails.

Rethink how you use an ENS and use it more widely to improve timely communications.

## The Communications Matrix

A communications matrix is a valuable tool; you need to create one. The process is simple:

1. Identify all of the stakeholders (internal and external) that you will need to communicate with after any incident.

2. Name the internal "owner" of that communication relationship.

3. Specify what tools will be used to communicate with each stakeholder.

4. Create the initial message (to be modified at the time of the incident).

This simple matrix is very powerful, helping to immediately speed up communications because it shows who is talking to whom at a glance. This is a great task to do as a "whiteboard activity." Simply get your team into a room with a large whiteboard or flip chart set up with three large columns. In the first column, have the team list every possible stakeholder that you are likely to communicate with after an incident. In the second column, note the communication owner. In the third, list what tools are likely to

be used to reach each stakeholder. And don't forget – you can use your ENS to deploy all of your approved talking points to the identified key stakeholders.

Your communications matrix might look something like this:

| Stakeholder Name | Relationship Owner – Name and Dept. | Communication Tool | Message |
|---|---|---|---|
| Employees | Human Resources | Employee hotline<br>ENS<br>Website<br>Notification system<br>Company email<br>Facebook/Twitter | |
| Clients | Individual Business Units | Website<br>ENS<br>Client email<br>Facebook/Twitter | |
| Board of Directors | CEO/Comm. Team | Phone<br>ENS<br>Email | |
| Regulators | Individual Business Units | Email<br>ENS<br>Phone | |
| Investor Community | Investor Relations | Website<br>Email<br>ENS<br>Facebook/Twitter | |
| Suppliers | Purchasing | Email<br>ENS<br>Phone | |

## Communication Templates

The third critical planning activity to achieve timlier communications is to develop initial communication templates for all of your stakeholders. These initial templates are pre-

written "scripts" that contain the basic outline of what information might be needed. They can then be quickly modified with current and pertinent information during an incident.

To determine what should be in each pre-written script, have a good read of your hazard risk assessment. Once you see what likely events could occur, you can prepare the initial communication messages accordingly.

Another strategy to take in developing initial communication messages is the one that we most often recommend: Write basic theme messages for two types, or "styles," of events:

1. **The event happened only to you.** The incident only happened to you, and the "rest of the world" is fine. Imagine such events as a fire, workplace violence situation, water pipe break, etc.

2. **The event happened to everybody.** The event is widespread or regional in nature, and many people are affected. This could include earthquakes, hurricanes, severe winter storms, etc.

Once the templates have been written, get all of the formal approvals now, before an event occurs. Pre-approval may need to include legal counsel, senior management, and/or investor relations; your company may require other approvers. As part of this process, decide in advance who will have the authority to approve the modified messages at time of disaster. Because the basic templates will have been pre-approved, the list of those who can modify the message when an event happens should be a short one. Then, at time of disaster, modify the appropriate initial message, have the agreed-upon individuals approve the message, and send it out. This should signficiantly decrease the time to develop the messages and get them out the door.

And, as mentioned before, the pre-approved templates can be built out in your Emergency Notification System so it will be quick and easy for the Communications team to find them during an emergency.

## EXERCISE THE PLAN AND THE TEAM

Communications exercises can be done for just the Communications team or as part of a larger Incident Management Team exercise. Begin by sitting down with the team to determine what they want to get out of the exercise experience. This conversation will help you to develop the specific exercise objectives for the team, which will allow you to design the exercise around those objectives. For example, if the team is interested in

validating their communication matrix and new templates, your objectives might look something like this:

1.  Assess the ability of the Communications team to develop timely communications:

    a.)  Validate the communication matrix: stakeholders, owners, and tools.

    b.)  Utilize the new communication templates. Assess tools and process for timeliness.

    c.)  Assess the abiltiy of the team to monitor and respond to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Digg.

    d.)  Utilize the company ENS to deploy approved talking points to all identified internal stakeholders.

Once you have designed the communications objectives, now you can select an exercise narrative. Create a realistic scenario that will deliver the kind of results you are looking for in the objectives. To best exercise the Communications team, the event should be a "public enough" event to create issues that may impact the company reputation and brand (both internally and externally), and create media interest in the story.

One important aspect of the exercise is the actual simulation. To achieve these objectives, the exercise will need to be fully simulated in order to really push the team to respond in real time and make the exercise feel realistic to the team. Two things will help this:

*   Use a Simulation team for the Communication team to interact with. The Simulation team can act as the media, the investor community, and other key stakeholders. This gives the Communication team someone they have to talk to.

*   Use live media injects to force the team to respond to these "media" inputs. This can include radio broadcasts, video clips, newspaper or web articles, Facebook and Twitter posts and blogs or chat rooms.

## Exercise Deliverables

There are a variety of specific exercise deliverables you might want to have your team develop. This list would, of course, be developed as part of creating the exercise

objectives. At a minimum, I would suggest the following activities as part of your communication exercise:

1.  Create employee hotine message.

2.  Create employee text message (SMS).

3.  Create company website message.

4.  Prepare press release.

5.  Create social media response(s).

6.  Create customer/client message.

7.  Create investor relations message.

8.  Prepare for a press conference.

## Employee Hotine Message

A very reliable form of employee communication is the use of a hotline. These phone numbers are usually toll-free and are ideally hosted out of state (especially for areas prone to regional disasters, such as earthquakes). Employees would call this number to find out simple information (such as if the office is open or closed) and basic employee instructions.

A great way to exercise this is to have a dummy voice mailbox set up to act as the hotline during the exercise. The message is developed and then recorded, so everyone in the exercise can then dial in and hear what has been recorded. It is great practice for the team to actually record the message as well as prepare it. The advantage of using a dummy voice mailbox is that you aren't changing the real number, thereby avoiding a potential "War of the Worlds" situation if someone who wasn't in the exercise accidentally heard the message.

## Employee Text Message (SMS)

If using your ENS, SMS might be the best and most reliable way of communication after a regional disaster, however, it takes practice to provide enough useful information in 140 characters or less, the length of a standard SMS message. Although these should already be in the pre-approved templates, significant modification may be required for a specific event. A goal in any exercise would be to have the Communications team

develop SMS messages for employees participating in the exercise, and then send them.

## Company Website Message

How are updates posted on the company website? Which team makes those changes? If a dummy webpage can be set up for the exercise, it is great practice to change that page to reflect the company's status during the exercise. If that isn't possible, ask the team to develop the message and then post it on a status board in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

## Press Release

A formal press release should be developed for the exercise, either in response to media inquiries or just as a matter of course. This release should be developed, approved through the agreed-upon channels, and distributed to the Incident Management Team during the exercise. Having pre-approved press release templates should speed up the process.

## Social Media Responses

Social media has exploded as a means of communication. Often, your employees are tweeting and sending Facebook posts before the Communications team knows what hit them. Being skilled at getting on top of the information flowing from these sites is critical. Although many media outlets now scan employees' Facebook pages and tweets (and other similar sites) for information, ideally, you want those media sources to be looking to your Communications team for the "inside scoop."

Develop Twitter messages and Facebook postings (or other forums that you find) during the exercise. Post these messages on the communications status board in the exercise so everyone can see what you are developing in real time.

## Customer/Client Message

What are the main messages to clients? What are the talking points for sales staff and all client-facing call centers? Develop several customer/client messages during in the exercise and deploy to the business units that would be using them to ensure that they (both the business units and the customers/clients) are getting what they need. If you don't provide talking points, employees will likely make them up themselves – not an

ideal solution for customer communication. Post all client messages on the communications status board in the EOC.

### Investor Relations Message

If you are a publically-traded company, sometimes you need to get a message out to "the Street" rapidly. This is usually an intergrated response between Investor Relations, Legal, and your senior management. Timeliness is important. Use the pre-designed templates and modify them in the exercise. Assess their effectiveness and post in the EOC.

### Press Conference

This is a great conclusion to any exercise. The pre-identified company spokesperson gets up before a group of "reporters" to read the company release and take questions. Of course, there wouldn't be any real reporters in the exercise, so the Simulation team – the people the players have been interacting with – can step in; they make great reporters. Ask each of them to have two or three questions ready about different aspects of the exercise. After the spokesperson delivers the company statement, the "reporters" can spring into action, asking all types of questions. Speaking off the cuff like this is good practice for the spokesperson. If it's possible, videotape the session so the spokesperson can see their performance for their own personal development.

## Qualities of Effective Communication

The qualities of effective communications during an emergency can be summed up in four simple points:

1.  Show concern and demonstrate compassion.

2.  Be transparent and forthright in all communications.

3.  Cooperate with all responders.

4.  Demonstrate resolve to overcome the situation and get back to some semblance of normal.

Keep in mind however, that if these four points are not done in a *timely* manner, they will not achieve the type of results that the company is looking for after a major incident. Work with your team in advance to develop the plans and tools, then exercise them regularly to produce the communication results that you desire.

## About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

### THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

- **Assessment**: When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.

- **Response**: In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.

- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

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