Crisis Management and Communication

A short guide for candidates, political parties and campaign teams

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1 What a reputational or communications crisis is

A reputational or communications crisis occurs when the image, message, or public perception of a candidate, leader, party, or government deteriorates suddenly. What defines it is the potential damage to reputation or narrative, not the size of the triggering event.

The origin may be a statement, an incident, a leak, or digital content. In practice there is almost always an underlying fact and, on top of it, a perception of that fact. The reputational crisis is that second layer: how what happened is interpreted and how it is handled.

This guide addresses the communications dimension. It does not cover operational or security crises, although they sometimes overlap. If the incident has legal implications, the response should be coordinated with legal counsel.

2 Preparing before the crisis

What can be achieved in the first hours depends on what was defined beforehand. A team that organizes only after the crisis has begun spends time on matters that should already have been settled.

The minimum viable preparation consists of three roles: who decides, who speaks, and who monitors. In a small team these may be three people or fewer, with combined functions. Added to that are a list of key contacts, a message-approval circuit that can be executed under pressure, and some baseline messages ready to adjust.

It is also necessary to define the response capacity available: an internal team with experience or external support specialized in reputational or communications crises. External support does not replace the internal protocol; it can be integrated into it or work in parallel if the team considers it necessary. Having that capacity resolved in advance reduces the risk of improvising at the most costly moment.



3 Monitoring and anticipating potential crises

Monitoring

Monitoring serves to detect signals before a situation escalates. Tracking media, social platforms, and relevant conversations makes it possible to know what is being said and how it is being interpreted.

It is not about reacting to everything, but about separating what can damage reputation from what cannot. Orderly monitoring buys time to decide whether to act and how.

There are signals that a controversy is turning into a crisis: it grows quickly, reaches broad audiences, is picked up by media or influential figures, or touches the core of the message or the credibility of the person involved.

Minimum monitoring does not require expensive tools: alerts with the candidate's and party's names, tracking of media and relevant social accounts, and a person responsible for flagging when something exceeds the agreed threshold.

Anticipation

Monitoring only shows what is already happening. Anticipation is different: identifying in advance which situations could affect reputation and acting before they occur. Not every crisis can be avoided, but many can be foreseen. When done well, some never materialize and others arrive with less force.

An anticipation protocol can include a periodic review of vulnerable points: past statements, old posts, contradictions between discourse and conduct, issues sensitive to the public, or internal tensions. It also means establishing positions and messages on delicate topics before anyone asks, and preparing baseline responses for the most likely scenarios.

What can be corrected should be corrected in time. And when something is going to come to light anyway, it is worth evaluating whether it is better to disclose it oneself, with context and at a chosen moment, rather than waiting for someone else to reveal it. That decision depends on each case and, if there are legal implications, should be made with legal advice.

This protocol does not eliminate risk or replace preparation to respond. It reduces surprise and gains time. It must also stay alive: reviewed regularly and, above all, before moments of higher exposure, such as the launch of a candidacy or a campaign.

4 The first hours: what to do

The first hour

In the first hour the objective is to organize, not to resolve. Confirm what happened with the information available, activate the team, define who speaks and who does not, and decide whether there will be an initial response or whether a few more minutes are needed to verify. In a digital crisis the situation can escalate in hours, so waiting without deciding is also a decision, and it has a cost.

First 24 to 48 hours

During the first 24 to 48 hours the scope is assessed, the message is refined, and next steps are defined. If a response is given, the message must be clear, brief, and consistent. It is advisable to inform the internal team and key allies first, so they do not learn about it from the media.

When several voices speak at the same time, the situation becomes more complicated. Acting in an orderly way reduces the risk of aggravating the damage.

5 How to decide the response

Before responding, some basic questions should be asked:

- Is what is being said true, or can it be shown to be false?
- What reach does it have and who is amplifying it?
- Does it touch the core of the message or the credibility of the person involved?
- What is gained and what is lost by responding, and what happens if one waits?
- Could there be legal implications that require caution?

Depending on the answers, the path may be to clarify or correct, accept responsibility and apologize, or contain with orderly silence. If what is said is true, denying is usually the worst option: the reasonable course is to acknowledge what is appropriate and explain what will be done. If it is false, clarify with evidence and without aggression. If it is unclear, state what is being verified and when information will be provided.

These questions guide, but they do not replace judgment. Every crisis has its particularities.

6 What not to do

The most frequent mistakes are denying without verifying, responding with aggression, and disappearing without explanation when the issue is already public.

It also does not help to multiply versions, allow different people to speak without coordination, or blame third parties without evidence. All of that tends to enlarge the problem rather than contain it.

Disappearing is not the same as deliberately remaining silent. Orderly silence is a conscious decision, with a spokesperson ready and a defined reason. Disappearing is having decided nothing.

7 When the crisis is digital

A video, a post, a screenshot, or a leak can become a reputational crisis when it begins to circulate and is interpreted negatively. The origin is digital, but the effect is one of perception.

Here monitoring makes it possible to measure the speed of circulation. And if a response is given, one must assume that the content may continue to move even while clarification is attempted.

Before responding, verify that the content is authentic. False or manipulated screenshots, audios, and videos circulate, and responding to something false without checking can give it more reach than it had. It is also useful to distinguish whether circulation is organic or there is coordinated amplification, because the response changes.

Deleting one’s own posts without explaining why can make things worse: the content has usually been saved and the deletion is read as concealment. If something is removed, it is better to say so and explain the reason.

8 After the crisis

When intensity decreases, the crisis is not over. Credibility still needs to be recovered, and that is rarely achieved with statements alone. A verbal response carries more weight when backed by facts: correcting what is appropriate, repairing the damage or changing the practice that originated it, and communicating that clearly.

An evaluation should also be done with the team: what happened, what was done well, what failed, and what is adjusted in the protocol. That review turns the experience into preparation for the next one, leaves a record of decisions and response times, and allows the anticipation protocol to be updated.

9 A clarification

Not all crises are resolved the same way. Some require an immediate response. Others are better contained with orderly silence. What is common is that the first hours make the difference.

Improvising without information or without coordination usually costs more than taking a short time to evaluate.

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