



**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS:**  
**Preparation and Management**  
**Essentials**



## **A COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS IS NOT A MATTER OF **IF**, BUT **WHEN**.**

While a corporate crisis can be one of the most difficult situations for PR pros to navigate, every company and every communications team must be prepared to handle one at any moment. Crises require rapid, carefully thought out and consistent response across channels. A crisis situation can disrupt operations, damage reputations, destroy shareholder value, and trigger other threats. So, effectively managing a crisis and protecting your brand reputation is ultimately about safeguarding your entire organization.



# 95%

Nearly all business leaders (95%) expect to be hit by a corporate crisis in the future, and 69% have experienced at least one corporate crisis from 2014-2019 (prior to the global pandemic of 2020) – with the average number of crises experienced being three (PWC).

The role of communications and public relations is to positively place a brand into news stories, and to develop positive and lasting relationships with the public. That's why PR is the one function within the marketing organization that is positioned to step up, take a leadership stand and have the greatest impact on company reputation during a crisis.

One of your most important responsibilities as a communications professional is putting together an effective crisis communications strategy and a step-by-step plan that allows you to prepare for a crisis, move quickly and avoid pitfalls when it hits, and move on afterward with your brand reputation intact or even improved as a result.

**Crisis preparedness is the next competitive advantage. It has enabled leaders to emerge stronger on the other side of COVID-19. Their secret sauce? Data, responsive culture & leadership, and resilience.**

# Table of Contents

- **What is a PR crisis?** \_\_\_\_\_ **5**
- **Navigating PR crises** \_\_\_\_\_ **9**
  - **How to prepare for a PR crisis** \_\_\_\_\_ **11**
  - **What to do during a PR crisis** \_\_\_\_\_ **20**
  - **How to move on from a PR crisis** \_\_\_\_\_ **24**
- **Next steps** \_\_\_\_\_ **27**

# WHAT IS A PR CRISIS?

## First things first: what is a PR crisis?

While every issue must be addressed, not every negative review or social media post is worthy of a crisis classification. Before you create a crisis response and management plan, it is important to define what constitutes a crisis and what does not. There are also different types of crises that may require different levels of response and different teams to be involved.

### Determine whether an issue is a PR crisis by asking these questions:

- Who is most likely to be affected by this issue? (e.g. which key stakeholders, how many, etc.)
- Who is talking about the issue? (e.g. top influencers, mass media, etc.)
- Will this issue critically affect the company's operations?
- Is it likely that this issue will result in significant financial losses?
- Will this issue damage the company's brand reputation?

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### A PR issue becomes a crisis when it has a significant impact on your:

- Operations
- Brand reputation
- Bottom line

Generally speaking, a PR issue becomes a crisis when it is severe enough to affect a large number of your key stakeholders and negatively impact the brand reputation, operations and / or bottom line of your business. When it comes to a PR crisis, it is necessary to have a well-prepared, timely and frequently practiced response plan in place.



## CHRISTINE WHITE

A recently retired crisis and risk executive at a global food company (PRNEWS)

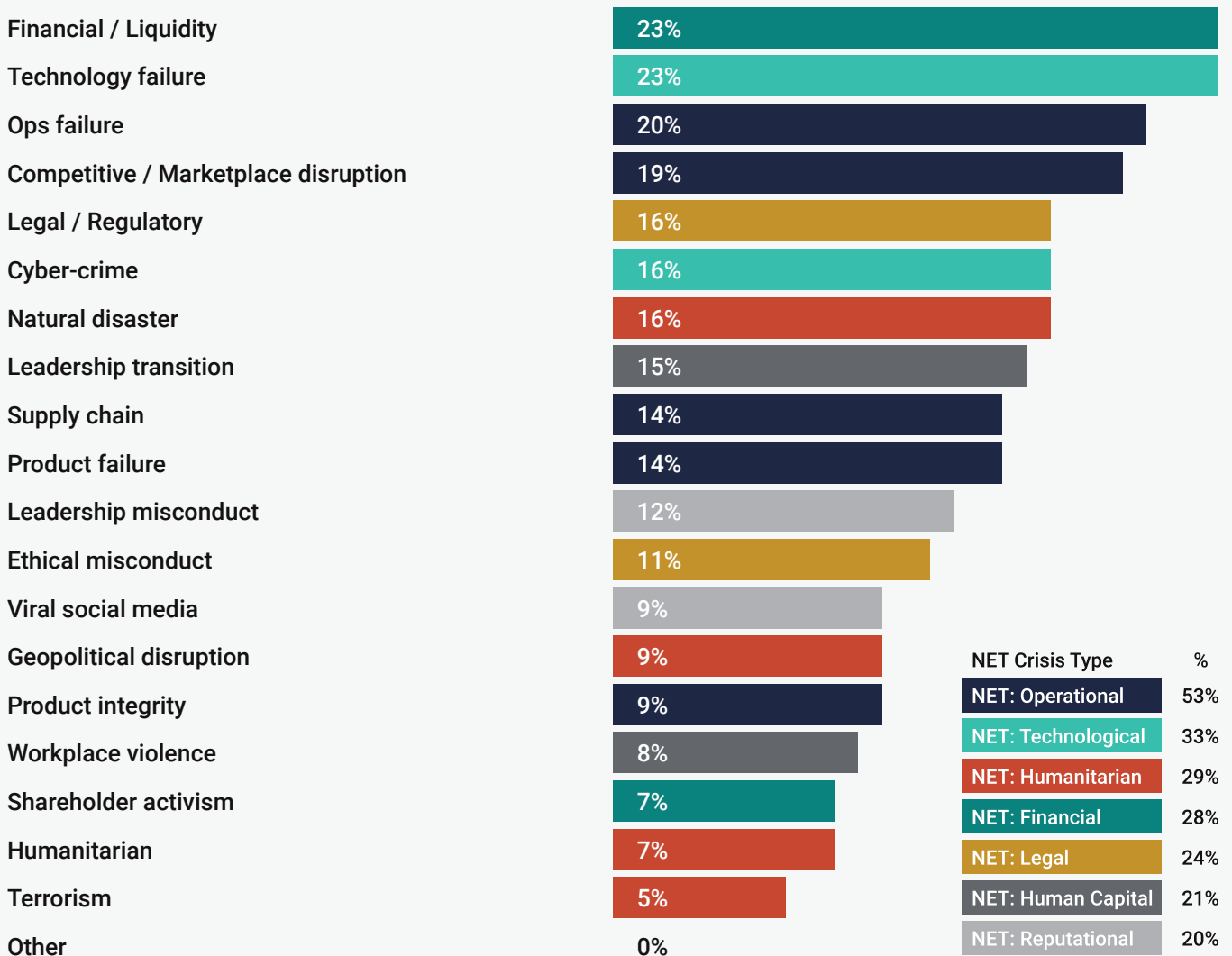
*Many organizations do not realize the ROI of having periodic exercises / round table discussions to review their crisis management plans, using real or hypothetical scenarios.*

# Types of PR Crises

In our highly complex and connected world, organizations face different types of crises with varying levels of severity. We saw several of them unfold in 2020: a global pandemic that caused massive economic and social disruptions; public scandals that resulted in political and corporate leaders stepping down; racial injustice issues that shook an entire nation to its core. All of these happened in just one year.

In addition to these most recent examples, there are many other kinds of crises, as well. In its first-ever Global Crisis Survey 2019, the most comprehensive repository of corporate crisis data ever assembled, PwC discovered a large diversity in the types of crises that were reported by 2,084 senior executives in organizations of all sizes, in 25 industries, and across 43 countries – 1,430 of which had experienced at least one crisis between 2014-2019, for a total of 4,515 crises analysed overall (note that this excludes a pandemic):

## Crisis triggers / types experienced

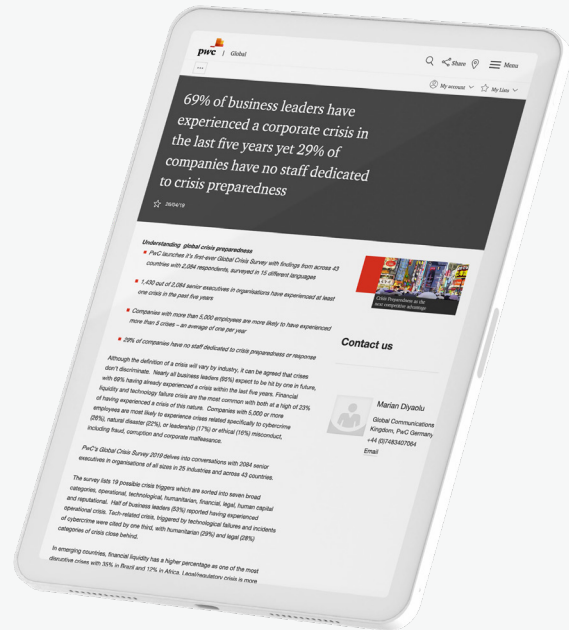


Source: PwC Global Crisis Survey of 2084 responders

## KRISTIN RIVERA

Partner, Global Leader, Forensics & Global Crisis Centre, PwC (PwC)

*Crisis can happen to anyone, anywhere and at any time. Being ready is vital to mitigating its impact on customers and your organization. Using data as a way to understand your organization's profile around financial liquidity, product failure and other forms of crisis alongside your crisis response is imperative in crisis preparedness.*



In addition to listing the various types of PR crises, we've also categorized them by their origins, which affects how you respond to them:

- **Category 1:** an internal crisis with a high potential to damage your company's financial health or reputation, such as a product recall, a corporate misconduct or scandal, a data leak or a legal issue. In other words, it's your responsibility to make things right.
- **Category 2:** an external crisis, such as an industry issue that could damage your brand by association, or a natural disaster—or a global pandemic—that could put a major pause on your business. These issues could be as significant as internal issues, but they must be dealt with differently because they didn't originate from inside your company.
- **Category 3:** negative reviews, customer complaints and other negative public statements by others. Though some of these issues could be less significant than those in categories 1 or 2, they could also turn into a full-blown crisis unless they are addressed quickly and effectively.



## NAVIGATING PR CRISES

In 2019, most business leaders who participated in the first PwC Global Crisis Survey said they expected a crisis to hit within the next two years. However, over 30% of respondents to PwC's second Global Crisis Survey 2021, which included more than 2,800 senior executives from 73 countries and 29 industries, did not have a designated core crisis response team in place when the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

After living through the past year, overwhelmingly, 95% of business leaders report that their crisis management capabilities need improvement.



# 95%

95% of business leaders report that their crisis management capabilities need improvement. (PWC)

**Information is the most critical asset for crisis management. It enables data-driven crisis preparedness, response and post-crisis analysis.**

The most critical asset in a time of crisis is information, and utilizing data to understand and analyze the situation is vital. Just like insurance, it's important to have comprehensive media monitoring and PR analytics tools so that you know immediately when a crisis starts. Aggregating content and identifying trends without reading every article can provide you with a warning system so that you know when to activate your crisis communications strategy.

Having access to complete and accurate tracking of the situation coverage is key before, during and after a crisis. Things move fast during a crisis so identifying where and when your strategies have taken hold and creating benchmarks that signify your progress over time will enable you to ask, *“How did we do?”* and *“What can be done differently in the future?”* after a crisis has passed so that you can establish the takeaways to add to your crisis communications plan. Thinking about the five elements of a PR crisis data cycle is a good start:



After careful planning, quick response and the establishment of takeaways from the real-time data-driven iterations of your PR response, adjust your protocols and plan for the future. Handling every aspect of a crisis perfectly may not be guaranteed, but it is possible.

## How to Prepare for a PR Crisis

**The best way to prepare for a crisis is to invest in a crisis response and management program.**

A situation that once may have taken weeks to unfold can now grow into a crisis in a matter of hours. No brand is immune. Crisis communication strategies need to be designed for both internal stakeholders – employees, teammates, management – as well as a variety of external stakeholders – customers, partners, and of course the media. There is a lot to think through and put in place. To help you get organized, we have created a Crisis Preparedness Checklist.



62%

Only 62% of companies have crisis plans, and it's uncertain how many regularly update them. In addition, few companies consistently practice crisis scenarios. (PRNEWS)

# 1

## Identify the types of crises your business is most likely to face.

Some of these will be different for every company—depending on factors like your scale, organizational structure, the technology you leverage, and your geographic location. If a certain technology is your main competitive advantage, your organization may be more prone to a technological crisis, while a business headquartered on the Gulf Coast will likely need to prepare for hurricanes.

In addition, there are incidents that may occur regardless of the type of business and industry you are in, such as sexual harassment, workplace violence, lawsuits, or key public-facing employees being dismissed. Knowing what types of issues your business is most likely to face and being prepared for these nuances is key to successfully navigating a crisis.

# 2

## Expect the unexpected.

It's good enough to identify the issues that are most likely to occur, right? Well, just like everything else in life, a PR crisis will probably throw some unexpected twists and turns your way.

To be better prepared for the unexpected, it is also useful to come up with a number of less likely scenarios to include in your crisis response and management plan. Your executive team, communications team and the entire company can put their heads together to draw on personal experiences and research additional examples from other companies. Contingency planning will get you far when it comes to crisis response.

# 3

## Listen, listen, listen!

Media monitoring is essential to being prepared and catching a crisis early and quickly. You'll need to have a monitoring tool in place, and identify who is responsible for listening, and when. Are you covered on weekends and off hours? Establish an escalation protocol. Once someone at your company or agency partner (i.e. a PR manager or social media manager) identifies a potential crisis, it is important to know the next steps to take.

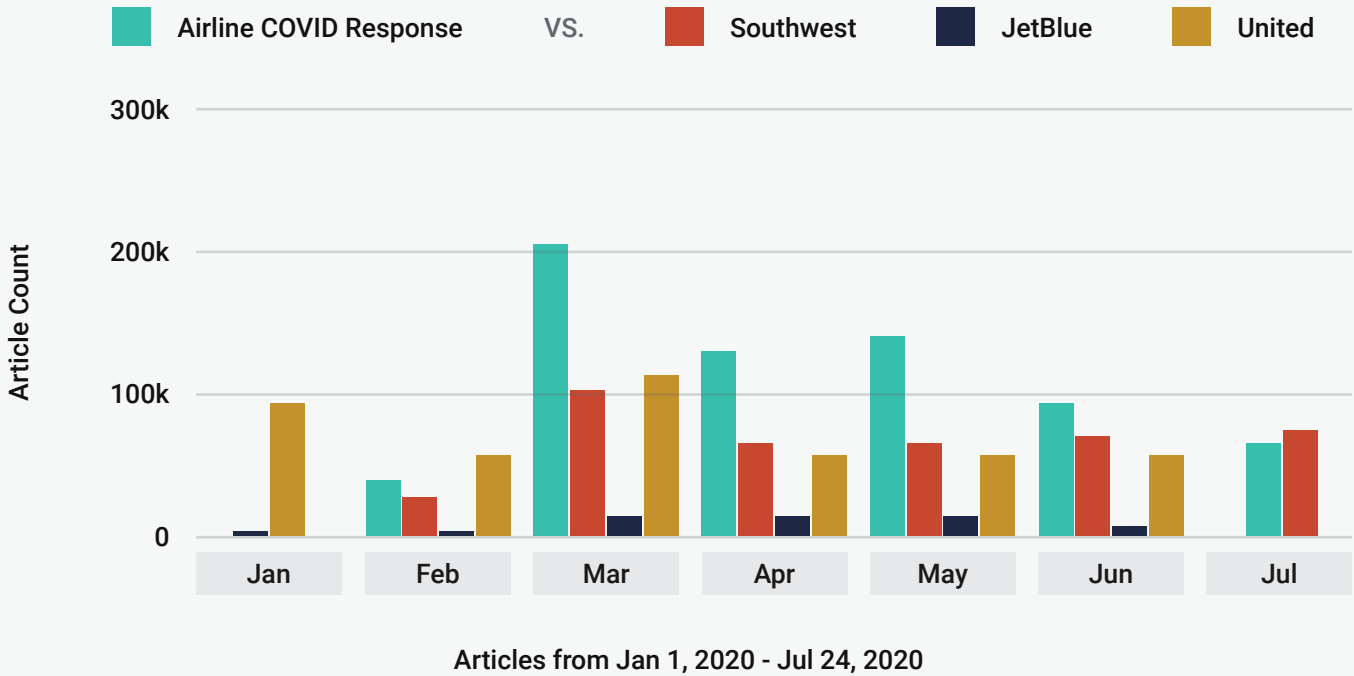
Here are a few specific metrics and tools that our customers use for ongoing media monitoring and crisis preparedness:

- **Brand Sentiment:** keep track of the tone of coverage about your brand and your competitors
- **Power of Voice:** identify top-ranking coverage for your brand, including crisis coverage, with optional sentiment filters
- **Research Trends:** identify whether this crisis or other issues are affecting your industry overall
- **Message Resonance:** see how often spokespeople, products and specific messaging are being included in your earned media and newswire coverage, and owned media
- **Competitive Intelligence:** identify whether competitors are being mentioned in coverage of this crisis or other issues

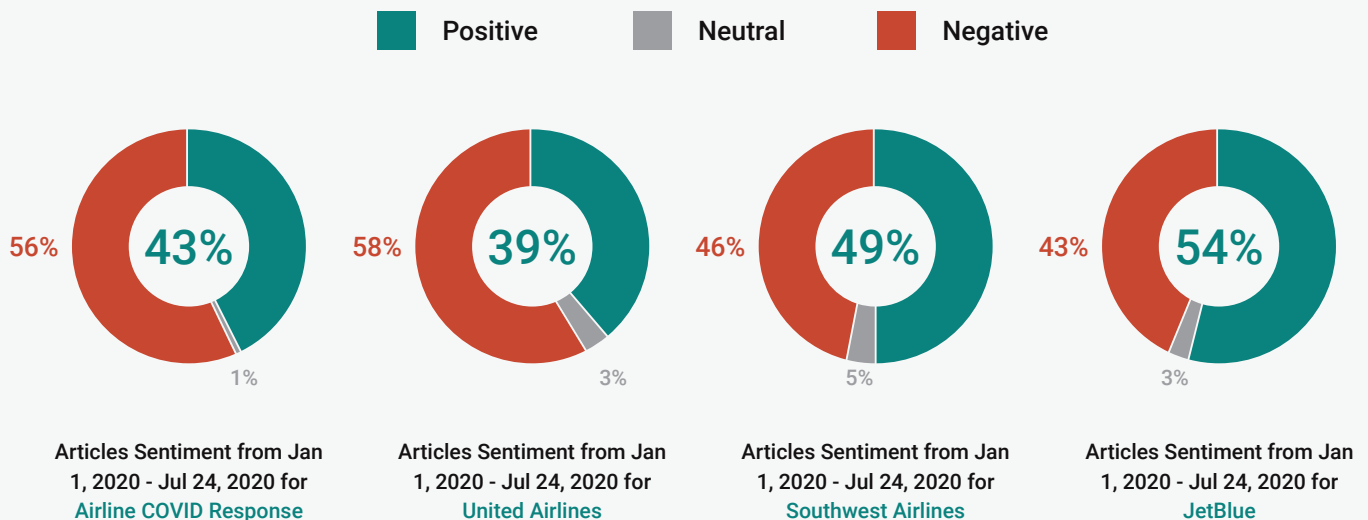
# AIRLINE INDUSTRY EXAMPLE: Quality Over Quantity

Take a look at how several different U.S. airlines fared during COVID-19. While United and Southwest dominated with share of voice, what really counts is that Southwest and JetBlue did better than the rest of the industry in terms of positive brand sentiment. This means that the majority of their crisis media coverage was actually positive, creating a great opportunity for them to plunge ahead of the competition during and after the pandemic.

## Comparison Coverage



## Sentiment



# 4

## Develop and circulate a crisis management plan.

When a crisis hits, it is not the time to come up with a response plan from scratch. You simply will not have that luxury in the middle of an unfolding situation, when every minute and every hour counts. Being ready with a PR crisis management plan not only shows that you are prepared and in control of your response, but it also saves everyone involved unnecessary stress and confusion.

Here are the key elements of a crisis response and management plan to consider:

- **A crisis management protocol:** think of it as the steps that need to happen to develop the best possible response and action plan in an event of a crisis. For example, assessing the facts; identifying key response team members and advisors, review and approval workflow, and roles and responsibilities; drafting crisis communications, etc.
- **Contact information for the key people involved:** these are all of the people who may be needed during a crisis, such as the CEO and the executive team, company spokespeople, marketing and social media managers, subject matter experts, legal team, as well as friendly media contacts, influencers and brand ambassadors who can help shape and sway public opinion.
- **Details for your communication channels:** prior to the crisis, choose which communication channels will work best for reaching your key internal and external stakeholders. It depends on your industry, your business and your audiences. And remember to include multiple channels, for example, social media, blog and email, because different people prefer different ways to connect with you. Tools such as email newsletters and email digests, which compile and share real-time coverage updates, may be especially useful during a crisis.
- **A media monitoring solution:** it goes without saying that today, every company needs a media monitoring system. In addition to helping you discover trending topics, key influencers and authors, and your message resonance with your audience, media monitoring will assist in crisis preparedness by identifying and surfacing negative trends and potential issues before they reach significant momentum.

The development of this plan will likely involve various teams in your organization, and once the initial iteration is done you will need to circulate it and keep it up-to-date, so that everyone knows what to do in the time of crisis.

**Organizations with a strategic crisis response plan in place are able to mobilize quickly, respond effectively to disruption, and pivot their business if necessary.**



# 5

## Prepare draft messages and content guidelines.

While you won't be able to draft the exact messages for every crisis, it is important to have templates in place that can be easily adapted when time is of the essence. You can create preapproved fill-in-the-blanks messaging and a repository of holding statements for those potential issues that you have already identified in steps one and two of this checklist, and use those as the basis for any crisis. It's good to have templates for press releases, social media posts, talking points and interview checklists.

It is also necessary to develop content guidelines and policies that provide clear instructions for crisis communications. During a crisis, everything that is communicated out through the regular channels, such as press releases, blog posts, social media and interviews, must be consistent with the crisis protocols and go through the appropriate approval process.

# 6

## Create and train a crisis response team.

Navigating a crisis is not a solo race—it's a team sport. There are many aspects to addressing an issue, and you will need a lot more than just one pair of hands.

First, map out who needs to receive your company's communications, such as the various stakeholder groups including employees, customers, investors, influencers and the media. Once you have the list, you can decide who will respond to, inform and manage each of these audiences, act as spokespeople interacting with the public and the media, keep the executive team informed, and monitor all the information and activity. Everyone on your crisis response team will need to be trained and provided the tools that they will need in a crisis. For example, you'll need to make sure that your designated spokespeople have media training and key talking points to reference.

# 93%

A vast majority of companies who are "in a better place" (93%) after a crisis say that they acted as a team in response to the crisis. (PWC)

Knowing who in your company needs to get involved, what questions to ask during a crisis, and how you'll use data to strategically craft your message with the appropriate systems in place in advance can make a significant difference.

**7**

**Keep your plan up-to-date  
and practice often.**

This one is just as important as the other six. If you've ever participated in fire drills that businesses are required to do every so often, you can appreciate the utility of an up-to-date process and frequent practice to prepare for a real disaster. Using your list of potential crises, along with the crisis management protocol, content guidelines and response team in place, you can simulate crisis situations of different types and severity and do practice runs demonstrating how you would tackle them.

**4X**

Organizations that have up-to-date crisis management plans and implement lessons learned are 4X more likely to come out on top on the other side. (PWC)

Make sure your crisis response plan is comprehensive and flexible, addressing multiple scenarios and including any recent external and internal changes. Test it, iterate and then test again. The difference: feeling confident during a crisis versus making knee-jerk reactions in the heat of the moment.

## What to Do During a PR Crisis

**Before, during and after a PR crisis, information and communication are key.**

There are very few crisis situations where less communication is better. It is almost always the case that more communication, and more well-informed communication, is the best strategy. That's why media monitoring, sentiment analysis and competitive intelligence gathering are your best friends in a time of crisis. It is also critical to be able to measure how your response is resonating with your intended audiences and how your brand reputation is faring during a crisis.

Based on over a decade of experience in the communications technology space, we've collected some "dos" and "don'ts" during a PR crisis.

- **DO listen, assess the situation and get the facts.** Part of your crisis management plan should be getting the facts straight before drafting a full response or communication back to your stakeholders. It's ok to simply let them know that you're on it until you have the information you need to fully address the situation. Be sure to address the needs of all your primary stakeholders, not just one or two key constituents.

75%

Three-quarters of those in a better place post-crisis strongly recognize the importance of establishing facts accurately during the crisis. (PWC)

- **DO prepare to move fast.** Even when you're still assessing the situation and gathering the facts, it's important to acknowledge the problem quickly and provide updates as they happen. You want to make sure you maintain control over your message versus letting the media or other external influencers hijack it from you.
- **DO respond with honesty, clarity and responsibility.** Once you have the facts ready, use your templates to develop your response plan and communications to your stakeholders. Tell your audience what happened, what you're doing to address it, and what you'll do in the future. If the crisis is your responsibility, be accountable for it and apologize. Honesty is key to building your brand reputation, because people buy from companies they trust.
- **DO emphasize with and support your stakeholders.** A crisis is always a vulnerable time for everyone involved, including your employees, customers and other impacted stakeholders. Making support and empathy a priority in your communications will further contribute to building the trust with your audiences.
- **DO measure your impact as things unfold.** Tracking the overall media trends, share and quality of coverage of your brand and of your competitors, social amplification, message resonance, and most importantly, brand sentiment is absolutely critical during a crisis. All of these metrics will tell you how successful your crisis response is, and what you still need to address. For the ultimate measure of your crisis response ROI, pay attention to the coverage that is driving visitors to your website (they are likely potential customers), and which interactions they perform on your website.

## CUSTOMER EXAMPLE:



One excellent example of a company that recently emerged as a leader during a crisis is Edmunds, a category-leading brand in the automotive industry and a top media publication that guides car shoppers online from research to purchase.

In response to the COVID-19 health and economic crisis, Edmunds leveraged its proven thought-leadership and content distribution strategy to quickly pivot and launch the “COVID-19 Response” campaign addressing the most pressing customer needs. The campaign provided highly relevant content and advice to consumers in a way that felt like talking to an expert car shopping friend—covering topics such as financial payment relief and car price fluctuations during the pandemic.

### The Results

Working with Onclusive, Edmunds:

- Demonstrated its dominance of the media with the highest quality coverage (57% share of voice, 59% Power of Voice)
- Blew out the competition with the 68% Share of Social Amplification
- Captured the largest competitive share (43%) with its target media placements

[Read the full case study](#)

#### TALIA JAMES-ARMAND

Associate Director of PR and Communications, Edmunds

*With the Onclusive platform, we are able to track the metrics that matter. Our communications metrics are integrated into our overall marketing performance measurement framework, and we can show our C-Suite executives how earned media KPIs like Power of Voice tie into the company's business objectives. We've been using Onclusive since 2016, and being able to look back at historical data year-over-year is also highly valuable to our leadership and particularly important in unusual times like these.*

- **DON'T avoid a crisis.** It should be obvious that simply avoiding a crisis will not work. A communication vacuum on your end is sure to be filled with messages from others, including the media, the influencers and your competitors. When you don't yet have an answer, be honest about that. Also, go above and beyond by determining how you can best serve and support your audiences during a crisis, and acting on it (see the Edmunds example above for inspiration).
- **DON'T go to extremes.** One extreme is prioritizing only the crisis and nothing else, while your business needs to continue to operate. Another extreme is doing business as usual. As always, evaluate everything that is now relevant in light of the crisis, and reassess your business priorities, keeping the overall organizational goals in mind. And don't forget to review your planned communications activity, such as scheduled social media posts, to make sure only the appropriate communications go out at this time.
- **DON'T be unavailable, respond too quickly or too slowly.** Honesty, transparency and timing are everything during a crisis. "No comment" is not a response that will elicit trust from your stakeholders, so it's important to always be prepared with an answer, even if it's just the facts and what you're in the process of doing to address the situation. And then, as soon as you have the information you need, respond right away.

# How to Move On From a PR Crisis

## Phew, you've handled the crisis. Now what?

The most valuable action you can take after the peak of the crisis has passed is to harvest your learnings. The last element in the PR crisis data cycle is “analyze”, and rightly so. Now that you've got lots of data collected and measured, what are the key takeaways that you can use to secure future success in a crisis situation?

**Make an honest post-crisis assessment by asking these questions:**

- What worked well during the crisis, and what should we repeat in the future?
- What didn't work during the crisis, and what should we change or improve going forward?
- How well did we handle the crisis as a team?
- Is the PR crisis really over, or do we still have issues to address?
- How do we repair what's been damaged (e.g. brand reputation)?



# 20%

20% of PwC's Global Crisis Survey respondents said the COVID-19 crisis had a positive overall impact on their organisation. What are those organisations doing differently?

**Broadening their approach to risk and crisis, and applying a holistic strategy to organizational resilience by:**

- Thoroughly examining their response to the crisis
- Incorporating insights and lessons learned into their long-term corporate strategy
- Actively building muscle memory to strengthen preparation and response capabilities (PWC)

Once again, while keeping track of the trends, top coverage, and competitors is always needed, brand sentiment analysis stands out post-crisis because it is one of the best metrics of your brand reputation. Crises often take time to subside, and with some, like COVID-19, it's now the "new normal" rather than returning to what used to be. And some crises could lay dormant for a while and then start up again. Continuing to monitor your brand sentiment will give you an in-depth view into how your brand reputation is doing following the crisis. It will also tell you whether there is still some work to do.

## CUSTOMER EXAMPLE:



Another company that has been using metrics and learnings to emerge stronger on the other side of an industry crisis is Experian, a global leader in consumer and business credit reporting and marketing services.

When a significant industry issue impacted Experian's brand reputation a few years ago, they developed a highly effective crisis management strategy using Onclusive's Power of Voice content quality metric along with brand sentiment. Experian continuously tracked how the industry issue was affecting their coverage and how their response was fairing in comparison to the rest of the industry and competitors.

### The Results

Working with Onclusive, Experian:

- Determined which topics continued to generate negative coverage and needed to be addressed on a long-term basis
- Identified reporters writing those stories and created a target media list to reach out to for additional education
- As a result, both the volume and authority of negative coverage dramatically decreased within the next two years

[Watch the webinar](#)

#### KELSEY AUDAGNOTTI

Senior Public Relations Specialist, Experian

*Power of Voice provides an unbiased, accurate and holistic view of our brand worldwide. It has become one of the standard metrics that we report on monthly to CEOs across our global regions. By measuring influential coverage—on our target media list, relevant coverage, and positive, neutral or negative in tone—and diving deeper into those influential stories with Power of Voice, we can derive actions. Power of Voice allows us to understand which content drives measurable impact on brand reputation, enables comprehensive sentiment analysis for effective issue management, and measures communications in a way that resonates with our C-Suite.*

## NEXT STEPS

**Data-driven organizations committed to building resilience and integrating lessons learned reported that they're in a stronger position now than they were before COVID-19. (PWC)**

**75%**

75% of PwC's Global Crisis Survey 2021 respondents said technology has facilitated the coordination of their organization's crisis response team.

### Using modern technology to successfully prevent and manage PR crises

The world of media has changed dramatically in the last decade. Managing your company's reputation through a global crisis is different—there are significantly more authors, bloggers and influencers contributing to many more media outlets than existed before.

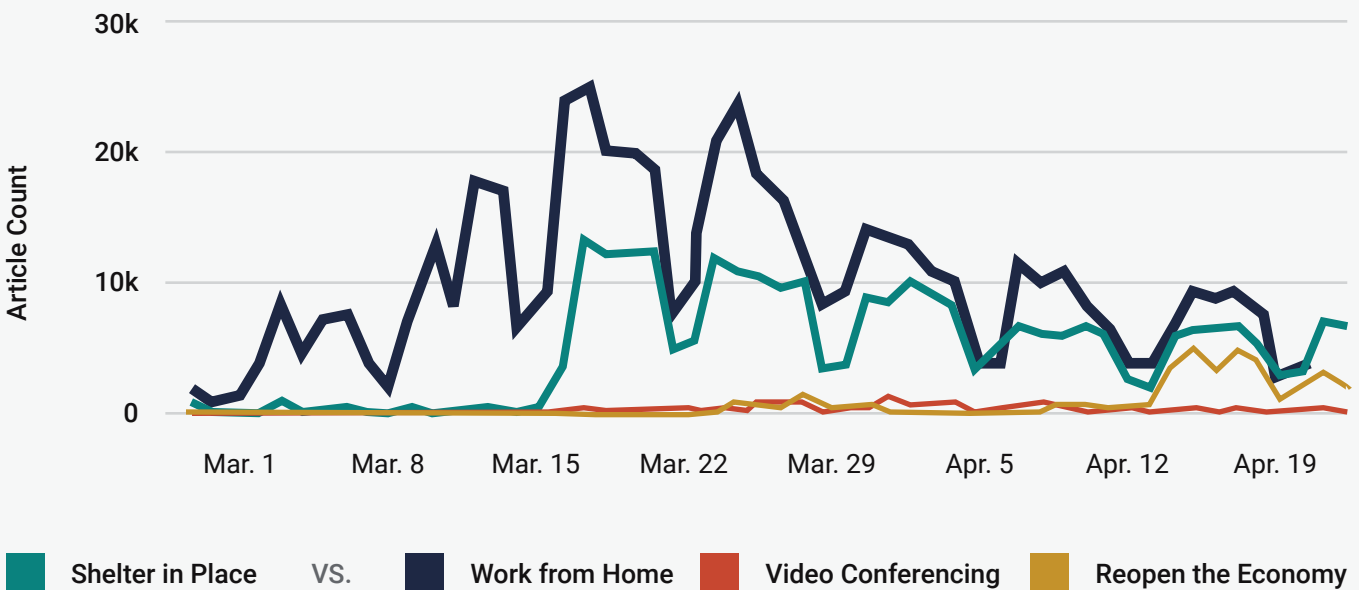
Monitoring the media for trending topics, terms and themes has become as much of a scientific exercise as a marketing exercise. Nuanced shifts in the financial markets, healthcare system, and energy and regulatory industries can have dramatic impacts on news cycles.

Today's communications team is expected to not only keep track of these shifts, but to dynamically synthesize and contextualize them in a way that their company can take appropriate action. The modern communicator is not just a great storyteller. They need to understand data: how to organize it, how to read it, how to interpret it. And since things are changing day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, information needs to be available quickly and on an ongoing basis.

## Be prepared and proactive with real-time data.

Information is king during a crisis, but the integrity of that information is vital. Onclusive gives you access to the most complete and accurate digital media set on the planet, along with useful tools like scheduled real-time news alerts and social media engagement analytics to surface the early signs of a potential crisis, the ability to organize the news into multiple categories, tracking your progress over time, and more.

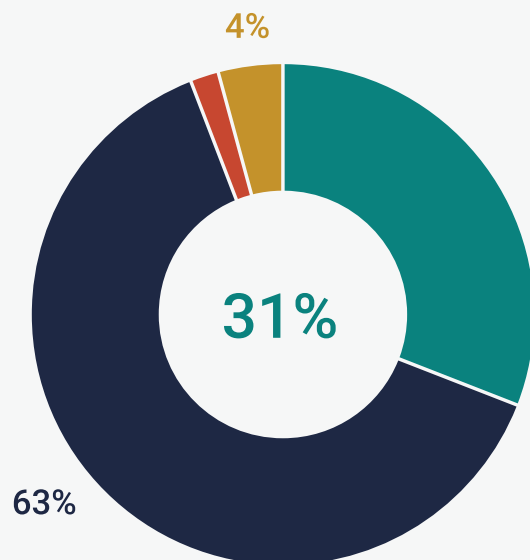
### Competitor Coverage



We provide an Enterprise solution for established organizations, a Pro platform for growing organizations, and a Data-as-a-Service offering for custom applications to enable using Onclusive's data internally. Our Customer Success team is ready to set you up and help you manage inevitable PR crises with the information you need at your fingertips and the support you need to make the most of it.

[Request a demo](#) or [contact us](#) today to discuss which option may be right for your business.

### Share of Voice





# Onclusive

Onclusive PR software empowers communications teams to save time with automation, and measure the business impact of their work. The inventors of PR Attribution™ and Power of Voice™, Onclusive's media monitoring platforms are built upon a proprietary global news-crawler which analyzes millions of earned, owned and newswire content daily in over 100 languages.

Leading global brands and agencies including Airbnb, Intercontinental Hotels Group, 23andMe, Experian, and FleishmanHillard partner with Onclusive to improve their communications. For more information, visit [onclusive.com](https://onclusive.com) and follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#).

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