

**WHAT YOUR UNIVERSITY NEEDS
TO KNOW ABOUT CRISIS
COMMUNICATION AND TELLING
MEDIA-FRIENDLY STORIES**

INTRODUCTION

Universities are rarely out of the news.

The media has a fascination with higher education. And there is a constant demand for academic experts to inform the debate.

Journalists love the latest academic research and examining how it can make our lives better. But the sector is also often front page – or bulletin leading – for more challenging reasons.

Student protests, no-platform disputes, the escalating cost of student life, ‘rip-off’ degrees and sexism and racism claims are just some of the reasons that have seen universities face intense scrutiny.

So, it is perhaps not surprising we are increasingly asked to deliver media skills and crisis communication training for the country’s top universities, helping them to tell their story and ensure they are prepared for when the worst happens.

It is something we’ve been doing for 40 years.
And we thought, ‘Why don’t we share some of this knowledge and experience in an eBook?’
So, here it is.

CRISIS COMMS

Shall we start with the bad stuff?

No one wants to see their university in the spotlight for the wrong reasons. But a crisis can strike any organisation at any time, including universities.

And there are many potential causes.

Your university's next crisis could be caused by student protests, no-platforming, or bullying, misogyny and racism allegations, to give a few examples.

We've seen universities put in the media spotlight for accepting donations from sources some people view as having questionable morals.

The pandemic is fresh enough in our minds to know a public health emergency could place you in crisis mode.

What about if your campus flooded? Or there was a tragedy involving students?

Even something that has been previously overlooked could spark controversy and scandal in the modern world of rapidly changing attitudes.

Are you crisis-ready? Are your spokespeople ready for the media frontline?

TAKE C.A.R.E

A crisis has the potential to cause huge damage to your university's reputation.

As Warren Buffet famously said: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it."

But there are steps you can follow now to limit the fallout and impact on your reputation.

The way you communicate is vital.

Do it well, and you can retain some control of the narrative and shape how the situation is reported.

So what does 'communicating well' look like in a crisis?

Well, it starts with getting your messages out quickly. Even if this is initially through a simple holding statement, it will show you are aware of the situation, are taking it seriously and are in control.

And that helps prevent the spread of rumours and speculation. You don't want to be on the back foot responding to questions from journalists.

Holding statements – and all your subsequent crisis communication – should be based on CARE.

It is an acronym we use during our crisis communication training for universities. It stands for Compassion, Action, Reassurance and Examples.

COMPASSION: You need to show that you care. And that you understand the severity of what has happened and the impact it has had.

ACTION: It's vital you show people you are doing the right things to improve the situation.

REASSURANCE: Put the incident into context and show it is isolated.

EXAMPLES: Use examples to illustrate the key message you want to get across.

SPEED

When crisis strikes, you must respond quickly.
But just how quick is quick?

Well, current thinking suggests you may only have around 15 minutes before you need to start communicating. That's a daunting figure, and good preparation is the key to meeting it.

During our crisis communication courses, we always stress the importance of universities planning for a crisis. Part of that planning process involves preparing several holding statements that can be used at the start of a crisis with just a few tweaks.

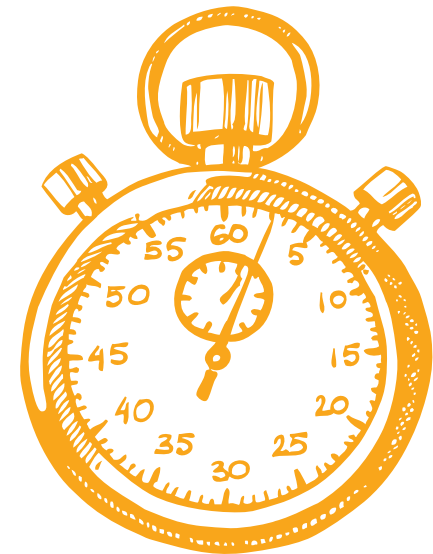
But can templates written in advance work?

The crucial thing to remember is that when the worst happens, social media users and journalists will not expect you to have all the information at your fingertips, so these holding statements do not need to go into great detail.

But they do need to show you are aware of the incident, acknowledge that something has gone wrong and show you are trying to resolve the situation.

A good holding statement will allow you to do this while buying you the time you need to get a clear understanding of what has happened, before you issue something more detailed.

Responding quickly will also enable your organisation to position itself as a trusted source of information and help control the narrative, rather than letting rumours and inaccurate information set the agenda.



RISK REGISTER

As well as holding statements, another essential part of crisis preparation is to plan for the unexpected.

You are unlikely to be able to predict the exact scenario you will face. But you can look at your organisation, anticipate its vulnerabilities and forecast potential storms on the horizon.

What could damage its reputation?

Identify your university's vulnerabilities and create a risk register.

Many organisations already have them but don't involve the comms department.

If that sounds like you, ensure that the comms team are included.

For those who don't have one, an example of what a simple version could look like can be found on the next page.



RISK REGISTER

Event	Person responsible for risk	Comms lead	Risk rating (1-9 – higher number equals higher probability)	Action taken	Next review
New website launch	IT Director	Joe Bloggs	7	Lines to take prepared	
Results of Health & Safety Executive investigation	HE Director	John Smith	9	Call made to Executive to check timing of report and any media activity	

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CRISIS COMMS SPOKESPERSON

Who would you put in the media spotlight if your university was in crisis mode?

It is a question often explored during our crisis communication training.

There is often an assumption that the vice chancellor would be the default crisis spokesperson.

But they may not be the best person to put in front of the media.

You need someone who can demonstrate compassion, authority and honesty and be able to connect with the audience.

Of course, there will be situations where they need to be there to show they care and are accountable.

But let's say your crisis is a large IT failure, leaving students and academics unable to access your systems.

Would your IT Director be better placed to lead the media response? If the problem escalates, then bring the vice chancellor into play.

You also need to consider having more than one spokesperson. If the crisis is expected to last several days, you will need to ensure you have more than one spokesperson trained, engaged and available to meet the demands of the media.



TESTING TIMES

Once you are familiar with your university's risk register - or have devised your own - and have identified your spokespeople, you must test your crisis communications plan against those risks with role play and desktop exercises involving realistic and fast-moving scenarios.

We have designed and delivered crisis testing exercises for many universities.

We stress test their plans in a safe, 'behind-closed-doors' environment, expose weaknesses and enable team members to learn from mistakes.

The exercises also help them develop and modify holding statements and anticipate the media questions they could face.

Here are the questions we think you are likely to face in the initial stages of a crisis:

- What happened/went wrong?
- Where did it happen?
- When did you become aware of the problem?
- What action have you taken?
- Who is affected?
- Were there any warning signs?
- Who's to blame?

THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPLEXITY

Social media has brought us many communication advantages. But it can be an added complexity in a crisis and means an incident, protest or boycott call is likely to reach the mainstream media much more quickly than before.

The key with social media is to stick to the essential crisis comms principles - respond quickly, provide regular updates and communicate with compassion, concern, honesty and empathy.

Social media can be used effectively in a crisis to provide resources to the media, and it also offers a great opportunity for you to talk directly to students, alumni, the surrounding community and other stakeholders and provide them with information first-hand.

THE CRIS COMMS GOLDEN RULES

We cannot stress enough how vital it is for your university to prepare in advance for a crisis.

Here are our golden rules to help you get that preparation right:

- Identify and understand your vulnerabilities⁴
- Develop a crisis communications plan
- Create a crisis team
- Identify and train your spokespeople
- Test your plan, team and spokespeople
- When crisis strikes, move fast and communicate, communicate and communicate some more

IT'S NOT ALL BAD

Universities don't just need to engage with the media when things have gone wrong.

Academic experts are needed by the media to offer insight, give opinions on subjects in the news and show how their work is making a difference.

Research has shown that in 2020 there were more than 7,000 stories about universities in the leading national daily and Sunday newspapers.

Many of those will have not been flattering, as we have highlighted. But many will have been. And it highlights amount of interest in the higher education sector.

To ensure your university gets more positive media coverage, it needs to be able to tell media-friendly stories.

How do you do that?

Well, to start, you need to know who you want to tell your story to.

Without knowing who your audience is, your message will fail, and you will not succeed.

Think about who you want to hear and see your message.

Then, put yourself in their shoes to gain an insight into what they need to know about you and what they want to hear from you.

It helps to look at the audiences of the UK media.

In the following pages of analysis, we'll guide you through who is consuming news on television, radio and in national newspapers.

It will help you begin to identify the most appropriate media for reaching your audience.

WORDS AND PICTURES: THE FIGURES BEHIND TV NEWS

Of all forms of media, television is still the most-used platform when it comes to news consumption, according to figures published by Ofcom.

70 per cent of adults in the UK report using TV as a source of news. And it increases to 75 per cent when on-demand content is included.

TV news declines in popularity among the youngest age group (16-24), where just under half reported using TV for news - they are more likely to use social media.

BBC One remains the most used news source followed by ITV. Facebook takes third spot.

One in five adults also name BBC One as their 'most important' news source.



RADIO – ON YOUR WAVELENGTH

Radio doesn't have the glamour of TV or the funkiness of the internet and nor does it often create the storms a strident newspaper headline or opinion piece can generate.

And yet, it can grab people's attention like nothing else. Who hasn't stopped still in the kitchen because of something striking and perhaps moving that they've heard on the radio?

Or waited in their car that little bit longer before going into the house or office to hear the rest of an interview? As we say, the best pictures are on radio.

And more people are listening to radio than ever before. According to RAJAR – the organisation measuring UK radio audiences - 50 million adults tune into the radio each week. That works out as 89 per cent of the UK adult population.

Additionally, the average listener tunes into more than 20 hours of live radio a week.

Most radio stations only provide short bulletins once an hour. But it is worth noting that both BBC Radio 1 and BBC Radio 2 – mainstream music stations – feature in the top 20 sources of news, according to Ofcom.

Flagship news programmes continue to perform well. Radio 4's Today programme has 5.6 million listeners a week. Nick Ferrari's LBC breakfast show has 1.4 million weekly listeners. For Radio 5 Live's breakfast programme, the figure is more than 1.2 million people.

But BBC local radio, where regional content has been cut back, has seen a 10 per cent decline in its weekly reach year-on-year, which now stands at 4.8 million people.

The statistics also show 33 per cent of adults listen to podcasts at least once a month, again highlighting the growing importance of the format. Global's The News Agents podcast, fronted by three former BBC journalists, surpassed 24 million downloads in 2023. Do podcasts feature in your comms strategy?



BLACK, WHITE AND STILL READ ALL OVER?

Print interviews continue to be a crucial component of our media training courses.

But do people still read newspapers? When was the last time you bought a paper?

Has print become a niche medium serving a rapidly shrinking audience?

Circulations have fallen and have been declining for many years.

But rather than dying out, newspapers have evolved and attract millions of readers online - alongside those who still like to hold a newspaper in their hands - where their trust and prestige continue to appeal.

More than 24 million people read UK news brands – a term used to reflect how newspapers now reach their audiences – every day.

That number swells to 39 million every week and 45 million every month.

And news brands appeal to the young, with 24 per cent of 18-34-year-olds consuming them daily.

So, there is still plenty of life in the old dog.

One of the things we notice during our courses is that it can be easy to put all newspapers – and their digital versions - into one basket.

But their readerships are different, and this may impact who you target and who might cover your story.

You can take a closer look at them in this [blog](#).

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE NEWS

As you have seen from our newspaper guide, while circulations are dropping, there is massive demand for news online.

In fact, figures from Ofcom show online sources are the second most used platforms for news behind broadcast TV and are used by two-thirds of UK adults.

More than 80 per cent of 16-24 year-olds consume news online. They tend to find that news via social media rather than going directly to websites.

Alongside this, TikTok has been growing in popularity as a source of news, reaching 10 per cent of UK adults.

The BBC website has the highest reach among those using online sources for news, according to Ofcom.

There are also plenty of blogs covering higher education in the UK, including Wonkhe, The PIE News and Advance HE.



WHAT MAKES SOMETHING NEWSWORTHY?

Once you have identified who you are talking to, you need to put yourself in the journalist's shoes and understand what they look for in a story.

What makes something newsworthy can sometimes feel like a puzzle, even for academics.

But our TRUTH test is here to decode it and show what your story ideas and pitches must include to gain media coverage.

It stands for Topical, Relevant, Unusual, Trouble, Human.

TOPICAL: Journalists want the stories that are timely or trending

RELEVANT: The story needs to be relevant to the audience and relatable in terms of the language, images and spokespeople you use

UNUSUAL: The media loves the 'unusual' element. It is something you can have a lot of fun with. It could be an unusual story, anecdote or figures. It could be the first, the biggest, the last, the cheapest, the most expensive or the longest. And there are analogies, like 'the size of Wembley Stadium' and 'the height of the Empire State Building'. If you can bring the unusual, journalists' ears will prick up.

TROUBLE: Reporters are drawn to trouble or tension which will get the audience hooked. Some adversity that has been overcome works well.

HUMAN INTEREST: This is vital and should probably come at the start. But then our lovely acronym would not make sense. Stories are about people. What is in your announcement for people? What impact will it have on them?

If a story includes at least four of the five elements of TRUTH, you have the basis of something which could attract media interest and become impactful.

The human aspect really is essential.

The most common phrase uttered in a newsroom is ‘so what?’ Journalists will look at a potential news item and ask, ‘So what does this mean to my audience?’

At the very least they will want to know who the people are behind the story.

Look at any newspaper, news website or news programme, and you will find all the stories have a human angle.

The reason is simple – people are fascinated by stories about people. They tap into our natural curiosity.

So, try to include the human factor in your story. And, if you can’t, consider how what you are saying will impact people.

Facts and figures are also vital to help illustrate and strengthen your points.

WHO SHOULD TELL YOUR POSITIVE STORIES?

Once you have TRUTH in place, you need to carefully consider how you will tell your story.

You need someone who can make the complex simple and build connections with a non-academic audience.

Experience has shown us that this can be tricky for people close to their research.

But remember the words of Albert Einstein: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” Using stories and metaphors that compare things to everyday situations can help.

They can also make messages memorable, create soundbites that will be aired on radio and television, and provide quotes print journalists will want to use.

You also want spokespeople who can bring passion and enthusiasm to the subject. People are more likely to believe messages delivered with passion.

OYSTER LOVE HOTELS

So, what does this all look like in the real world?

How easy or difficult is it to deliver messages that resonate with those watching, listening and reading?

Well, a marine biologist from the University of Portsmouth produced an example we often highlight during our media training courses.

Dr Joanne Preston appeared on Radio 4's Today programme to discuss regenerating oyster populations through seabed cages – not the easiest subject to grab the audience's attention.

In fact, it had plenty of potential to overwhelm, confuse and ultimately lose the audience altogether.

But Dr Preston kept it simple from the start, explaining that oyster grounds have been destroyed through over-fishing. "85 per cent of all oyster ecosystems globally are now extinct," she said.

And then she succinctly explained why this matters: "One of these critters could filter 200 litres of seawater a day.

They eat the algae, the green stuff floating around the water that we don't like to have too much of, and they can clean the water. But more than that, they create a whole ecosystem."

Excellent stuff, but the best part was still to come.

Asked what the university was doing to reintroduce them, her response included the line, "We are hanging oysters in cages, like love hotels".

So, what's so good about 'oyster love hotels'?

Firstly, it's unusual – who has heard of an 'oyster love hotel' before? Because of that unusual statement, it made me – and I'm sure many others – sit up and listen that bit more intently.

It's free of jargon and complex language – you could imagine Dr Preston using the same language if she was talking to a friend in a coffee shop. It's conversational English. But equally, it helps paint a picture.

It's also a funny expression which just lightens the tone – it even made the reporter laugh. And finally, it's short and snappy – if this had been a print interview, you could easily see 'oyster love hotel' forming part of the headline.

BE PREPARED (OR PREPARE TO FAIL)

Great interviews like this don't happen by chance. When your university chooses a media spokesperson, it needs to select someone who is prepared to prepare properly.

Being prepared boosts confidence and will help them feel more comfortable about the interview.

And it reduces the chances of being caught off guard by difficult questions and anything unexpected the journalist brings into the conversation.

Together, you need to anticipate challenging questions and wider topics that could be brought into the interview. And ensure the message and examples are fine-tuned.

Preparation also means ensuring the basics are covered – the format of the interview, what else will be included in the package, and who else the journalist is speaking to, particularly for panel discussions.

Before the interview starts, we recommend spokespeople warm-up vocal cords by reading aloud a children's book. This is also a good way of practising varying tone and adding pauses for emphasis.

One of the most crucial things to remember is that over-preparation poses a significant risk to media interview success.

Huge interview briefing documents are hard to absorb and recall when the pressure is on in media interviews.

Even if spokespeople retain some of these responses to specific questions, spokespeople will seem like talking robots, unable to create a natural-sounding conversation.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Every university has a story to tell. And a staff of academics with valuable insight and opinions to share.

Tell it well, and you win hearts, captivate minds, evoke emotions, build connections and raise and maintain your university's profile.

There is a massive demand for these stories, and there is nothing like engaging with the media to raise awareness of the work carried out by your academics and researchers, boost engagement and position them as 'go-to' experts.

But the higher education sector also faces intense media scrutiny.

So, you must have plans in place for the unthinkable to protect your reputation.

Whether you have a fully developed media strategy in place or are at the early stages of looking to boost your media profile, media skills and crisis communication training are essential.

During training, we often find different strategies, messages and approaches emerge as our training is delivered by working journalists and television presenters who have a unique understanding of what makes an audience tick.

Some big organisations are still cautious about engaging with the media.

But journalists are not the enemy. They are vital in ensuring your story is heard by as large an audience as possible.

Engage with them and think like them by putting yourself in their shoes.

Think of it as a mutually beneficial relationship. The media needs stories to fill space in newspapers and airtime on television and radio; you need the media as a facilitator to get your message out to your audience.

WHO HAVE WE WORKED WITH?

“Thank you so much for organising my media training. It was probably the most productive day’s training I have ever done. I can highly recommend it to others.”

Carolyn Taylor, Clinical Research Fellow, Oxford University

“Superb media training, tailored to the needs of our media strategy, and with levels and points of focus pitched perfectly to trainees of differing media experience and temperament. Nothing but positive feedback from trainees.”

Pete Castle, External Communications & Public Relations Manager, University of Reading

“Scientists have a crucial job to do to inform the public through the media about some of the biggest issues facing society, but many of us really struggle with the weird world of news. Attending a Media First training session gave me a big boost in seeing past some of the weirdness of live TV, giving me the confidence to focus on what is important.”

Professor Hannah L Cloke OBE, Professor of Hydrology, University of Reading

“The process of organising the training for our large cohort of MBA’s was very easy and straightforward. The course was highly interactive, well-structured and the trainers were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Every student received personalised feedback during and after the course as well as access to a bespoke online resources platform designed to meet our students’ needs.”

Rita Cairns, Senior MBA Programme Coordinator, University of Cambridge Judge Business School

ABOUT US

Media First has been delivering bespoke media, presentations and communication training for more than 40 years.

In that time, we have delivered and developed a range of practical training techniques and courses that use experienced professionals, such as practicing journalists and presenters.

We have worked with press and communication teams alongside their spokespeople in over forty different sectors.

Our presentation training courses work because they are realistic and practical and fun.

If you'd like to find out more about our training courses, please get in touch:

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