



WHY YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO PUT OFF PLANNING FOR A CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

The biggest test of a company's reputation is how it handles a crisis.

Some crises will be bigger than others. Some may result in loss of life or significant injuries. Others will be less dramatic, such as a major IT failure.

All have the potential to cause a media storm, 24 hour news coverage, unhappy customers, employees asking questions and falling share prices.

If meeting the media is stressful at the best of times, it's doubly so in times of a crisis, for there is little time for calm reflection, clearing facts with colleagues and planning responses.

The media will be more demanding than ever and the public hungry for information.

The reality is that all organisations are vulnerable to a crisis regardless of their size and lightning can certainly strike more than once.

Failure to weather the storm can result in serious reputational damage.

CASE STUDIES

Thomas Cook

We can all recall examples of crises which have been dealt with poorly.

A recent example which most people have referred to as a 'PR disaster' is the way Thomas Cook dealt with the tragic deaths of two young children from carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty boiler while on holiday in Corfu.

Nothing the company could have done would have brought the children back, but its handling of the case was a lesson in how not to handle a crisis.

Under advice from lawyers the company refused to apologise for the deaths until it was forced to do so by the weight of public anger.

The company showed a complete lack of empathy, alienating itself from the people on the street who buy its holidays.

The result? A tarnished reputation and a damaged business – £75 million was wiped off the company's share value in the weeks following the start of the crisis.

CASE STUDIES

British Midland

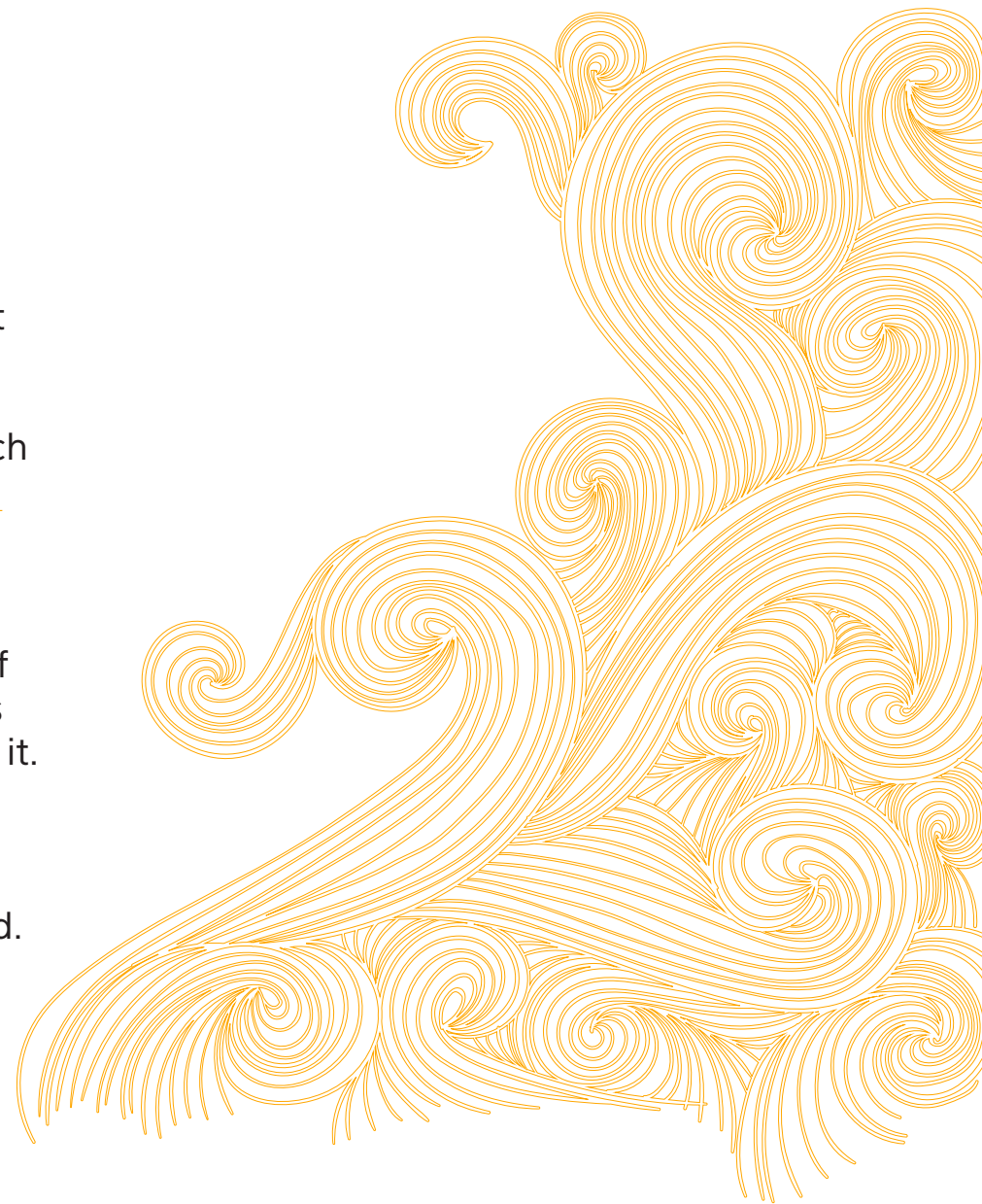
Good examples of crisis management are harder to recall – not only does bad news sell, but it also sticks in the memory.

But, there is a particularly memorable example from 1989 which is still relevant today. In January of that year, a British Midland Boeing 737 crashed near the village of Kegworth, killing 47 people and leaving another 74 seriously injured.

The company's chairman Michael Bishop was on the scene half an hour after the accident and made himself available to press and broadcast crews, giving information as fast as he received it.

He spoke with compassion and said he understood how the relatives of passengers must be feeling because he personally knew every member of the crew and the pilot was an old friend.

The result was that a small airline emerged even stronger from the crisis. In the long term the airline became BMI and was eventually bought by Lufthansa, which sold it on for £172m.



CASE STUDIES

Virgin

Someone who has an excellent track record in crisis communications is Richard Branson.

He successfully handled the tragedy of the Virgin train crash in Cumbria in 2009, travelling back through the night from a family holiday in Zermatt to meet passengers and crew members in hospital.

He was at the scene of the incident before the cause of the accident had been determined.

He branded the train driver a 'hero', invited press to his factory to see how safety was built into the carriages and e-mailed every customer to explain what had happened. His actions resulted in him being branded a 'PR genius'.



DEFINING A CRISIS



All the above examples include loss of life. But, to be clear, that does not define a comms crisis.

Take Volkswagen for example. Its dodgy emissions may have made breathing a bit harder for us all but it has not killed anyone – yet it is facing a huge reputational challenge.

A crisis can come in many shapes and sizes. Fatal accidents, environmental spills, product recalls, removal of services, natural disasters, criminal activity and redundancies are just some examples which could trigger a crisis.

In the modern world of social media, even a bad customer review could spread rapidly causing damage to your organisation and potentially attract mainstream media attention.

THE MEDIA ARE NOT THE ENEMY

You could be forgiven for thinking that the media are the enemy and when you are in the middle of managing a crisis it can certainly sometimes feel that way.

But you cannot allow those thoughts to impact your judgement.

The media is a tool you need to embrace – they have direct access to the audiences you need to reach. Use them to get your messages across to your customers.

You need the media, so don't ignore them and hope they move on to another story.



WHY COMMUNICATION AND SHOWING YOU CARE IS KEY

The examples highlighted earlier show that the way an organisation communicates in a crisis is vital.

Communicate well and you can develop some control of the situation and the way it is reported. Get it wrong and your reputation could be in tatters.

There are some cases where you may decide to say nothing, for example if you have assessed the crisis is unlikely to go public.

But even then you must develop some robust 'lines to take' and attempt to anticipate how the story will evolve should it leak out and be reported.

WHY COMMUNICATION AND SHOWING YOU CARE IS KEY

However, in the vast majority of cases you will need to be open, proactive and act quickly.

Getting your messages out quickly, even if initially through a simple holding statement, will show that you are aware of the situation, are taking it seriously and are in control. It will prevent the spread of rumour and speculation. You don't want to be on the back foot responding to questions from journalists.

An organisation may be tempted to try to cover-up some of the bad news. Don't. You need to be open and honest with the media, and in turn your customers. Journalists will know if you are trying to hide something and they will find it. No-one wants to be accused of a cover-up.

WHY COMMUNICATION AND SHOWING YOU CARE IS KEY

As the situation becomes clearer and your message develops it will need to include the elements of what we refer to as CARE, which stands for Compassion, Action, Reassurance and Examples.

- **COMPASSION:** You need to show the audience (your customers) that you understand the severity of what has happened and the impact it has had. Phrases like 'deeply sorry' and 'deep regret' are useful here. If the crisis revolves around an accident, show how you are helping those who have been injured. One of the great failings in the Thomas Cook crisis (mentioned earlier) was the complete lack of empathy.
- **ACTION:** Outline what your organisation has already done and is doing to deal with the crisis.
- **REASSURANCE:** Put the incident into context and show it is isolated. If the crisis is an accident, talk about the safety protocols you have in place and your previously good record. This was a regular message put forward by [Merlin Entertainment](#) when managing the media following a serious crash on a rollercoaster at Alton Towers.
- **EXAMPLES:** Use examples to illustrate the key message you want to get across.

CRISIS COMMS MESSAGING DEVELOPMENT TEMPLATE:

Key message:

Supporting message(s):

Examples to support your messages and show you are taking action:

What difficult questions are likely to be asked?

Is there anything similar currently on the news agenda?

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SPOKESPERSON

Comms teams often assume it will be the chief executive or company chairman who would front a crisis.

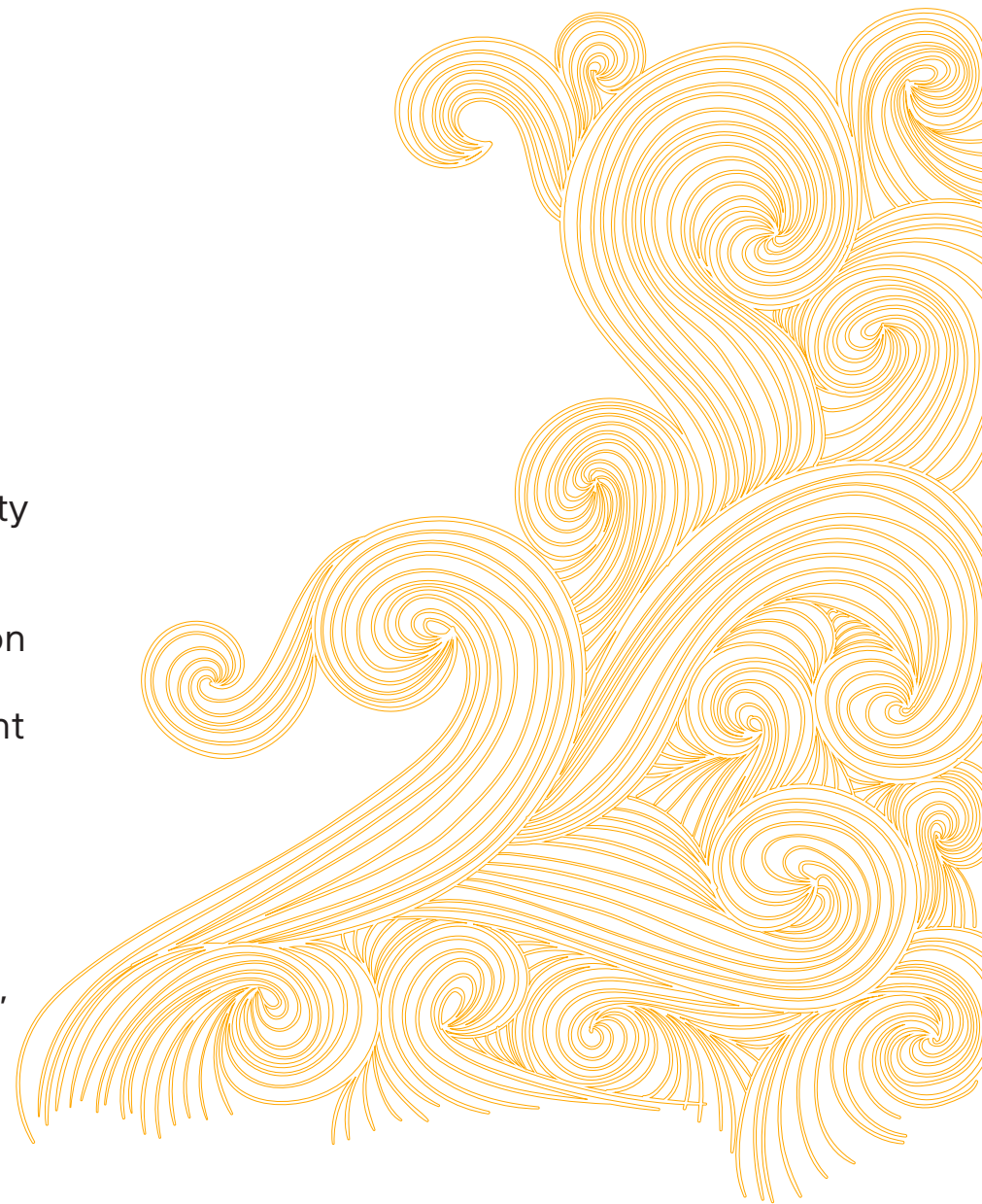
But they may not always be the best person to put in front of the media.

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

They need to have a detailed understanding of the organisation and its sector and it is essential they have previous media experience and had recent practical media training with current working journalists tutors.

Strong body language and a professional appearance are also important.

Of course if your crisis is a tragic accident with multiple deaths, the head of the organisation needs to be there to show they care and are accountable.



CHOOSING THE RIGHT SPOKESPERSON

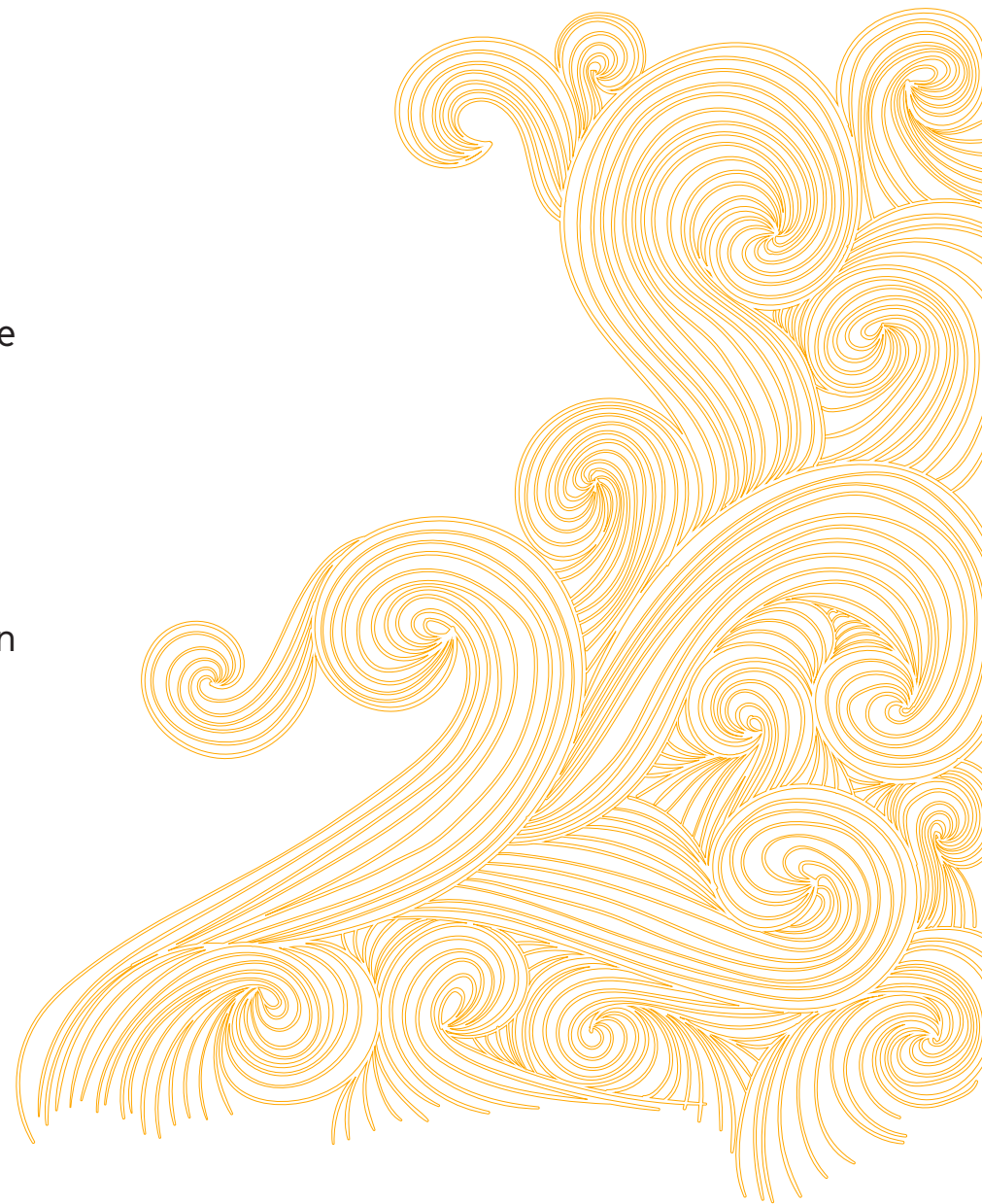
If, to give another example, your crisis is a large IT failure leaving customers unable to access a service, would your IT Director not be better placed to lead the media response? If the problem escalates then bring the chief executive into play.

You will also need to consider having more than one spokesperson.

If the crisis has affected multiple sites or the situation is likely 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.

A regional spokesperson can also be beneficial in some situations.

It can help you engage and win the trust of the audience and shows a commitment to the area and people who live there.



HERE IS A CHECKLIST TO HELP YOU IDENTIFY YOUR SPOKESPEOPLE FOR A CRISIS:

Spokesperson	Previous media experience	Recent media training	Strong body language	Topic	Understanding of issue	Location	Availability
A							
B							
C							
D							
E							

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

The key to crisis planning is to expect the unexpected. You are unlikely to be able to predict the exact scenario but you can take a look at your organisation, anticipate its vulnerabilities and forecast potential storms on the horizon.

What could expose your organisation to public attention, intense media scrutiny and damage your reputation?

As we outlined earlier, a crisis can come in many shapes and sizes.

Identify your organisation's vulnerabilities and create a risk register. If your organisation has a risk manager you will already have a detailed register in place and you should ensure comms is included on it.

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

EXAMPLE 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	

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED



Once you are familiar with your organisation's risk register, or have devised your own, you need to test your crisis communications plan against those risks with some role play and desktop exercises involving realistic and fast moving scenarios.

In these exercises you should look to develop your holding statements and anticipate the media questions you would be likely to face.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

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?

When considering these questions it is important to think about what else is on the news agenda at the time. If the incident is a fatal accident, consider whether anything similar has happened recently the media could draw comparisons to? Has a rival company had to withdraw a similar product recently? Failure to think about what else is 'moving' on the topic could leave your organisation exposed.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPLEXITY

Social media has brought us many communication advantages but it can be an added complexity and even be a cause of additional pressure in a crisis situation.

As well as meeting the demands of the media you are now faced with a range of extra channels to monitor, manage and feed.

Social media also means a crisis is likely to reach the mainstream media much quicker than before.

Your customers will start tweeting and posting information about your crisis as soon as it happens and journalists who spend their days monitoring these channels will get a lead for a story.

In fact your social media manager is likely to be the first person in your organisation to be aware of the crisis – and they will need to act quickly to prevent a media storm.



THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPLEXITY

The good news is that the communications principles remain the same.

You need to respond quickly, provide regular updates and communicate with compassion, concern, honesty and empathy.

When a fire broke out on a British Airways flight in September 2015 the [McCarran International Airport](#), in Las Vegas, used its Twitter account expertly.

The Boeing 777 was due to take off at 4:05pm local time but when the plane reached a speed of around 90mph the decision was taken to abort. At 4:13pm the captain made a mayday call to air traffic control requesting fire crews. Around a minute later he called again to say the aircraft was being evacuated. By 4:18pm the plane was empty and the fire was out.



THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPLEXITY

Just four minutes later @LASairport issued its first two tweets. It confirmed there had been a fire on a plane but that it had quickly been put out. It was also able to confirm all passengers were off the stricken plane and that there were no known injuries at that stage.

The airport effectively broke the story and from that strong starting position then continued to drip feed information to journalists.

This example shows how social media can be used effectively in a crisis to provide resources to the media.

It is also a great opportunity for your organisation to communicate directly to its customers and provide them with information first hand.



DON'T FORGET YOUR COLLEAGUES

In a fast moving crisis it can be all too easy to focus on your external message and forget about your internal comms.

But an organisation's employees are its ambassadors and can be strong advocates.

Make sure they are aware of what the company is doing to deal with the situation, be honest and ensure visible leadership.

An engaged workforce is less likely to give potentially damaging information to a journalist or post something unhelpful on social media.

It is vital internal comms colleagues are involved in your crisis communications.

DON'T FORGET YOUR COLLEAGUES

It is also important to carefully consider who else in the organisation could be exposed to the media in a crisis situation.

Receptionists, security and maintenance staff, will all often wear branded clothing and are highly visible members of the team and easily accessible to journalists.

Investing in some media awareness training for these colleagues is essential so that they have a basic understanding of what to expect from the media and know how to escalate any interest from journalists.

This level of training does not need to be face-to-face and can be easily delivered through a webinar or through a speaker at a work conference.

THE MEDIA FIRST GOLDEN RULES

We cannot stress how important it is to prepare in advance for a communications crisis. Here are our golden rules to help you get that preparation right:

- ★ Identify and understand your organisation's vulnerabilities
- ★ 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



FINAL THOUGHT

A crisis can strike any organisation at any time. Clearly there are some sectors where a crisis could be considered more likely to happen but you simply cannot afford to have an 'it can't happen to us' attitude. No organisation is immune.

Managing a crisis is never going to be easy but you can ease some of the pain by being prepared.

Plan well and execute that plan effectively and your organisation's reputation and share price may emerge from the storm unscathed.

Remember a crisis is an opportunity to show your customers you care. A well-managed crisis also has the potential to be a career defining moment.

ABOUT MEDIA FIRST

Media First has been delivering bespoke media, presentations and communications training for more than 30 years.

In that time we have delivered a large number of bespoke crisis communications courses.

Our practical and realistic journalist led training courses will give you and your company the best possible preparation for an unexpected event.

Depending on your requirements we can take delegates through a complete role-play scenario, with a crisis that builds throughout the day, dealing with constant phone calls, putting together a statement, and managing a press conference.

We can also help you manage your online communications – from devising a social media strategy to managing the actual day to day running of your online strategy.

In short we teach you to remain in control and demonstrate concern and compassion while not seeming weak.

If you would like to find out more about our bespoke crisis management training courses, please get in touch on **0118 918 0530** or **crisiscomms@mediafirst.co.uk**.