

How to Prepare For the 4 Cs—Part 1

A solid communications plan for crises and catastrophes could save your business.

By Linda Duke

The recent data breach at P.F. Chang's in June should be a wakeup call to everyone in the restaurant industry. The breach, which involved thousands of customer credit and debit cards, brought unwanted media attention to the company, creating a public relations crisis that threatened to hurt business for weeks—if not months—to come. Fortunately, with the right crisis communications plan in place, P.F. Chang's can minimize the damage to its reputation and rebound from the disaster.

Crisis communications is one of the most critical areas of the PR field. A solid communications plan helps you manage your relationship with news media, employees and customers during problematic events known as the 4 Cs: Crisis (such as a data breach or the shooting of a delivery driver); Catastrophe (fire, hurricane, flood, etc.); Construction (when construction in your area makes it hard to get into and out of your pizzeria); and Competition (when a competitor moves into your neighborhood).

In this month's article, we'll deal with the first two Cs—Crisis and Catastrophe. In these situations, every minute counts, and silence can cost you everything. You need to develop a communications plan for every contingency. Here are some tips to get you started:

1. **Create a crisis management team.** It needs to be a diverse team that represents different aspects of your company. A team approach can bring perspectives that one person alone wouldn't necessarily have.
2. **Establish relationships.** Build positive relations with local police and fire departments, the health department and the media long before a crisis hits. If these groups know you're serious about issues like sanitation, driver safety, employee training and responsible alcohol service, that will affect their attitudes during a crisis.
3. **Work with, not against, the media.** All experts agree that restaurateurs should decide whether to contact the media about a crisis—such as an outbreak of foodborne illness—on a case-by-case basis. But if the media finds out about it anyway—or, more importantly, if some customers need to know they may be at risk—you have no choice but to alert the press and work with them to ensure fairness and accuracy. Don't go into denial mode or see the situation as “us vs. them.” Present the facts forthrightly to the press and always be available to correct any mistakes reporters may make. Your message should be clear, straightforward and candid. Go through exactly what happened and exactly what you've done to prevent further incidents. Getting through the first 48 hours will be the hard part; after that, you'll likely come out OK.



4. **Get customers back in the door.** Once you've survived the crisis through careful planning and forthright communications, what can you do to drive traffic through the door again? Here are some ideas:

- **Customer Appreciation Day**—This one-day event could feature specials on food and drinks, live music, contests and raffle prizes. Promote it on social media and consider taking out print ads in the same local papers that covered your crisis.
- **Host a fundraiser**—After a shooting, one of our clients hosted a fundraiser to benefit the shooting victim and awarded a “badge of courage” to the customer who came to his rescue. The promotion made the local news, and business picked up right after that.
- **Reach out to fellow business operators**—Send letters to area business owners, Chamber of Commerce members and civic groups and ask them for their support and patronage. 🍕



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