

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Traditional channels of communication are almost always compromised following a major disaster due to the disruption of telecommunications and transportation systems as well as the chaos environment caused by the disaster itself. Businesses struggle with getting in touch with their employees, their vendors, and their customers – as well as their local government, economic development organization or chamber. Businesses don't always know who to trust or where they can get accurate information. Rumors and wrong information spread quickly in this type of environment, which can greatly impede the recovery of businesses and industry or encourage them to permanently move away from your impacted community or region.

Therefore, the business community must have a seat at the table with the community decision-makers who are making critical choices in regard to disaster response and recovery. This can be done at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and the Economic Recovery Team, where business and industry should be represented.

Communicating with the Business Community


The key role of the economic development organization, or an Economic Recovery Team, in economic recovery, is to address the following urgent communication needs of business and industry following a major incident: Listening to businesses to understand their needs in order to:

- Help connect businesses with available resources and services providers
- Understand the need to work with all local partners to persuade decision-makers at the local, provincial and federal level of any needed additional resources to meet local business needs
- Quickly disseminate relevant information to businesses regarding available resources and connect them to service providers who can help with cleanup, financing, business counsel, and rebuilding efforts

Communicating with Stakeholders at the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC)

Economic development organizations should make sure they have a senior staff member serve at the local area's Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to facilitate communication and dispel rumors and misinformation among the business community. The EOC functions as the central location for coordinating and carrying out the emergency planning, training, and response and recovery efforts of the local jurisdiction. The EOC helps to ensure the continuity of government operations in the event of a crisis. In a case where the EOC is fully activated by a major incident, it will include the co-location of representatives of various municipal departments, emergency responders, state and federal agencies, and non-profit and faith-based organizations.





Communication regarding local business damages and what they need to recover is an important function that the economic development representative can play at the EOC. This representative can learn about available federal and provincial state resources that may be available to local businesses and help facilitate this communication in the days and weeks following a disaster. This position of business and industry representation at the EOC should be established well before a major crisis.

Communicating with Media

In addition to communicating with the business community, the lead economic development organization, along with the Economic Response Team its partners, must **develop a communications strategy for dealing with the media, before a community experiences a major crisis**. Depending on the magnitude of the disaster and the competition for news coverage, the media will be seeking to fill space in their 24/7 news cycle with details on your community's disaster. Is your community prepared to handle that type of attention from regional, national and global media outlets?

CREATING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY BEFORE A CRISIS

Regardless of the nature and severity of the disaster, a key responsibility of any economic development organization playing a lead recovery role is to develop a crisis communication strategy. There are four essential steps involved to create your crisis communication plan. These steps should be completed with input from the Economic Recovery Team and other partners.

Step 1: Designate the Key Members of Your Crisis Communications Team – and Their Backups. This includes a primary spokesperson, a secondary spokesperson, a technical expert, and a chief communications or public relations officer.

Step 2: Brainstorm “What-ifs?” Be Creative – and Pessimistic! Explore all aspects that might precipitate a crisis, including your geographic area, political climate, security issues, financial concerns, weather, logistical issues, health considerations, etc.

Step 3: Determine Who You Will Need to Contact in Various Crises and Gather Their Contact Details. It is important to have a contact list of those who play a critical function either internally or externally for your organization (employees, vendors, clients, and key local officials). Make sure to have ALL of their home and office contact details so you can communicate with them even if the power is out, and it's a Sunday or a holiday weekend.

Step 4: Update Your Plan, Frequently! Review your plan at least once year, particularly the ‘what-if’ scenarios, the crisis communications team roster, and contact list.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

After a disaster, it is essential to communicate on all platforms to reach businesses with essential information for their own recovery process such as the timing on restoring utility service, the city's inspection and rebuilding requirements, a list of local- and/or provincial-licensed contractors, how to select and pay a contractor, how to deal with insurance companies and more.

Businesses, particularly small businesses, also need information on how to navigate local, provincial and federal government assistance programs and other sources of financial assistance such as a bridge loan for working capital. Local business leaders also need to be aware of response efforts and involved in the decision-making process of plans to rebuild the community. Even when decisions about the process have not yet been made by local government, it is still important for local officials to communicate with community stakeholders about the progress rather than leave a vacuum, which is likely to be filled with speculation and misinformation.

Communication needs include every method possible to ensure information is being disseminated out to as broad an audience as possible. This includes:

- Texting – Due to differences in networks between texting and cell phone services, texting is often available even when cell phone networks are down. Key tips:
 - Collect numbers before the disaster
 - Know your audience
 - Keep it simple and clear
 - Arrange for a mass text messaging service before the crisis
- Social Media – Social media has become an essential component of disaster communication. Due to wireless networks, the internet can be accessed by smartphones even when telephone or cellular networks are down. This makes it an essential tool for communication in the aftermath of a disaster. Tips for communicating through social media, channel by channel are:
 - Facebook – depending on the disaster you may want to create a dedicated group with reference to the crisis in your title
 - Twitter – Twitter provides the opportunity to get the word out very quickly and when posting make sure to link to your own response page
 - LinkedIn – Use this service in the recovery phase to connect with larger organizations to solicit support or spread messages on a broader scale
 - Instagram – strength of Instagram is the photo uploads to create the visual required
 - Blogs – if your organization has a blog make sure to update regularly, it can be extremely valuable in recovery efforts
 - Online message board and bulletin boards – used primarily for post-disaster and are effective for locating missing persons or offering or seeking assistance



- **Web Portal for Businesses** – Websites work best as post-disaster economic recovery tools, ideally as a page housed on an existing website, most likely that of the lead economic recovery group. It will contain business information that addresses both preparing for a disaster and critical resources for a post-disaster situation.
 - Central source of information. The lead group and all partners should promote the site to business constituents as the place to turn for key information post-disaster.
 - Create a business contact database. A web portal can house a database for displaced businesses to provide updated contact information. This process is easily achieved with accessible technology found on Google Drive.
 - Enable the site for mobile visitors. Increasingly, mobile technology is used to browse the internet. A web portal should be easy to use via phone or tablet.
 - Ensure accessibility. Provide business recovery materials and loan/grant applications in relevant languages to assist major demographic groups in your communities.
- **Business Recovery Centre and Hotline** – A business recovery center (BRC) is a one-stop shop set up to provide local, provincial, and federal resources and services for businesses after a disaster. Because their services are tailored to address business needs, they typically are established separately from a local disaster recovery center to avoid confusion with individuals needing social services.
- **Media Strategy** – Communities need to understand how their economic assets are perceived to be damaged by the national public, and craft effective marketing campaigns to change perceptions. More often than not, there is need to implement a strong “We are Open for Business” marketing campaign on behalf of the local community and its businesses. As part of your media strategy, consider that media outlets will often update the progress of recovery within the community on the one-year anniversary of the event as well as the five-year anniversary. Be prepared to develop a media strategy for the anniversary in connection with a memorial event.
- **Developing Media Releases** – Communicating with the media traditionally requires sending key information through a press release, media alert, or other proactive communication. As a common tool, developing press releases before a crisis can help the organization to structure appropriate key messages to convey under various scenarios. It is best to consider drafting a sample press release in a calmer environment. This is another activity that can be done with your Economic Recovery Team.
- **Working with Media** – If your organization is an appropriate source to comment on a crisis, then make sure to provide a written fact sheet or press release with contact information that is being monitored on a 24/7 basis (a news reporter’s deadline is often after hours). Your organization should establish a primary spokesperson who is known to the media and is trained to handle media inquiries.
- **Do Not Use “No Comment”** – Even in the case of ambiguity, it is important for your organization to not use the phrase “no comment” as it conveys a message of guilt or fault. It is far better to state that specific details are unknown at this time than to remain silent on a subject with the media.