

# Managing a healthcare crisis

Why compassion and empathy are key for lowering the temperature in a healthcare crisis.

By Dawn Dankner-Rosen and Mackenzie Maher

In today's hyper-connected world, where news and information spread instantaneously, every business or organization will inevitably face some type of crisis that can threaten its hard-earned reputation. The stakes are even higher in healthcare, where effectively managing a crisis could be a matter of life or death. Medical groups and practices, doctor's offices, hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare facilities and organizations must prepare for potential crises that can disrupt patient safety, tarnish reputations and impact public trust. This is where a public relations expert specializing in healthcare and crisis management is critical for mitigating the impact of a crisis.

Healthcare crises emerge for a number of reasons, from a misdiagnosis or surgical error to a patient data breach, staff misconduct or ethics violation, a shortage of doctors or nurses, or a public health scare. A well-coordinated response can help rebuild public trust while minimizing long-term reputational damage. PR teams work closely with healthcare providers to share accurate information and highlight corrective actions to resolve the current problem quickly and to prevent future incidents. By fostering open communication and offering a sincere apology when necessary, PR professionals help humanize the facility and demonstrate its commitment to patient safety.

Reputation management and crisis communications go hand-in-hand and enhance each of these strategic initiatives. An ongoing reputation management program that monitors online chatter and social media engagement can often avert a full-blown crisis altogether. However, if a crisis is imminent, an effective crisis management strategy that communicates clear, honest messages is key to maintaining a positive reputation. A successful crisis communications campaign can even turn a crisis into an opportunity to build trust and loyalty, as well as turn your biggest critics into enthusiastic supporters.

An example of this is our crisis communications campaign for one of New York's largest multispecialty medical groups with an estimated 350,000 patients annually, who had been experiencing problems with its patient portal and call center. These problems resulted in patients being unable to access their medical records and test results, as well as having to endure excessively long wait times on the phone. The medical group was being inundated with patient com-

plaints and flooded with emails and phone calls, along with endless negative posts and conversations on social media.

To extinguish the fire, DDRPR developed and executed a three-month multichannel campaign aiming to replace bad news with good and balance any negative coverage with a barrage of positive news about the medical group's doctors, services and advancements. Our campaign started with crafting a series of "compassionate" individually-targeted communications for patients, physicians and staff, featuring an apology from the CEO and highlighting details and steps that would be taken to resolve various issues. We then worked to seamlessly communicate our client's messages, announcements and responses while staying focused on addressing key concerns, providing quick and continuous updates and offering reassurances. We strived to ensure that all communications worked in tandem and aimed to protect our client's reputation and emphasize their sincere compassion and strong commitment to acting quickly and to resolving the issues. The other key elements of our campaign included:

- Continuously monitoring the online chatter on social media.
- Crafting purposeful responses to comments on social media.
- Conveying patient requests sent to us by Facebook DMs from patients to the Medical Group's Patient Liaisons for expediting.
- Identifying media, patients and staff who could become key allies and serve as "ambassadors" for quotes and testimonials.
- Creating a media campaign that focused on new and existing patient services.
- Creating graphics and videos with live demos and key interviews to highlight and educate patients about the patient portal, programs and processes.

Our agency has created award-winning campaigns for healthcare clients using our 5Cs Approach to Crisis Communications: be compassionate, control the situation, communicate with clarity, monitor chatter on social media and show a strong commitment to patients. Through this approach, we have achieved exceptional results in reaching our client's key objectives: to defuse anger, lower the temperature and reverse course.

Here is our tried-and-true 5Cs Approach to Crisis Communications:

**Compassion and empathy** top our list. PR professionals must carefully craft em-

pathetic communications, acknowledge the issues and emphasize corrective action and accountability. It's essential to express remorse and a sense of caring. Communicating concern, compassion, consideration and respect is paramount. In addition, a sincere apology can, more often than not, defuse the situation, prove your commitment to resolving problems and reduce anger and frustration.

**Control and responsibility** are key to rebuilding trust. Proving that you are in control of the situation and understand its impact will lower the temperature and foster patience as you work to rectify any mistakes. It's important to demonstrate that all necessary steps are being taken to address the current issue and prevent future incidents.

**Communicate clearly and continuously** to internal (employees, administrators) and external (patients, media) stakeholder groups. Make sure your messages are repeated often and are consistent across various channels and platforms to minimize the risk of misinformation and spreading rumors. Creating specific content for each of your stakeholder groups and ensuring that your messages are honest and transparent is of the utmost importance in conveying the challenges the facility is facing and providing updates on the solutions being implemented. It's important to remember that your goal is to maintain trust and reduce or eliminate the negative impact on your client's reputation. Carefully crafted communications can give you control over the story that will be heard and repeated by your patients and the media alike.

**Chatter on social media** can be a treasure trove of information to learn what is being discussed online and to identify key concerns and perspectives through the feedback and opinions found on social media networks. This information offers a golden opportunity to respond directly to the comments posted. In addition, posting announcements, updates and news on social media and online is a powerful way to reach audiences with targeted messages and information.

**Commitment to showing you care and striving to address concerns** should be



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