

Crisis Management Communication for Law Firms

Nabirye Amina Okwir

Faculty of Business and Management Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

Crisis management is a crucial aspect of the legal profession, as law firms often handle sensitive and confidential matters that can rapidly escalate into reputational threats. Effective crisis communication is essential to mitigating risks, preserving trust, and maintaining the firm's integrity. This paper examines the unique nature of legal crises, emphasizing the necessity for specialized crisis management strategies tailored for law firms. It examines best practices in internal and external communication, the role of designated crisis response teams, and proactive engagement with media and stakeholders. Through case studies and industry best practices, this study highlights the importance of preparedness, transparency, and swift response in crisis communication. The findings underscore that well-structured crisis communication plans are vital in ensuring a firm's resilience, reputation management, and long-term success.

Keywords: Crisis management, law firms, legal crisis communication, reputation management, internal communication, external communication.

INTRODUCTION

Crisis management is an imperative aspect of the legal profession. For law firms, which often have to handle sensitive and confidential information, crises can arise out of seemingly minor acts but fester or explode into much larger problems. A minor data leak, a statement by a partner that is not completely accurate, or an accusation of illegal activity can all play out and attract unwanted press and attention. The reputation of any profession – but law firms in particular – is extremely important. Trust is one of the most fundamental requirements in the attorney-client relationship. Crises in the legal profession often do a great deal of harm to the reputation of the law firm, potentially risking trust with the client. It is important, therefore, that law firms have proper crisis management strategies in place. [1, 2]. In understanding the dynamics of crisis management and communication in law firms, it is important to understand the nature of legal crises. Legal crises involve, but are not exclusive to, 'mala fides' or civil and criminal discord; necessitation of court orders for investigations and hearings; widespread interests of multiple stakeholders; provision of legal advice to external clients; and legal oppositions representing multiple interests. However, the essence of law as a word and as a concept (jus as a lex) denotes a system of rules that a particular community or country recognizes as regulating the actions of its members and can be enforced by the imposition of penalties to secure compliance. In legal crises, these penalties may include both market and reputational sanctions, as well as legal actions, decision outcomes and their consequences on corporate and/or individual reputation, and, upwards, the representation of such events in both formal and informal media. Efforts to predict and forestall such outcomes are the task of crisis management. Just as the law is a complicated and nuanced subject, the complexity of legal crises requires specific crisis communication strategies and crisis management frameworks uniquely tailored to law firms. Despite using some general crisis management theories and models, it ought to be acknowledged that legal crises are different from those in other industries. Thus, law firms need to embrace a bespoke approach particularly suited to the field. The most effective way to handle a crisis, as with law as a whole, is through preparedness and planning. Assist efforts to frame the most useful strategies with an overview of extant crisis management models and case studies tailored to the legal industry [3, 4].

Understanding the Importance of Effective Communication in Crisis Situations

Given that law firms steward a client's most sensitive and closely held information, managing communication effectively was doubly critical in a crisis. A crisis was rife with communication landmines for law firms. It could affect a firm directly or a client's interest, or it could spring from a firm's crisis. During life-threatening emergencies, there may not be time to be prepared, but for any other kind of crisis, the time to prepare was ahead of time. And any emergency response would undergo heightened scrutiny — was the organization (or firm) adequately trained? Had it conducted drills? Did it follow its protocol? Was the right person in charge? Was there a timely, open, and honest communication effort? As internal and external stakeholders watched and might themselves be affected, the answers to these questions could well have legal, economic, or political consequences [5, 6]. A crisis could engulf law firms or firms by proxy, by way of their representation of an entity or executive embroiled in public or legal turmoil. As corporations were held to be liable for their actions or associations, so did their retained publicity find themselves in the court of public opinion. Watch your bank or your lawyer, was a maxim of the Street. It recommended that stakeholder firms wisely consider whom they represented. Would they be able to handle a hit to their reputation, should the affair of their retainer come under scrutiny, or be the subject of public outrage, lawful or not? Firms were encouraged to do their due diligence. Was a prospective client the class act that Legal 500 rating would have you believe, the envied mainstay of the S&P index? Even if he signified a lucrative and prestigious get, chances were, he was not worth the risk [7, 8]. There was considerable strategic loss in misunderstanding the conundrum. Consider the oil spill of Nornes Crux, one of the five largest oil companies in the world and one of the biggest clients of Melmen Watson, a venerable Magic Circle firm. On 22 March 2018, an explosion and subsequent spill in the Gulf of Wauhaitao led to a Deepwater Horizon-scale disaster: the Nornes Crux Rig #5 exploded and sank, killing 11 crew members and gushing more than 300 Mn gallons for 85 days until it was capped. The spill devastated the area's marine life and wildlife and severely damaged the reputation of all involved. Initially, most reports focused on Bellis Mae, the small independent driller company that owned the rig. But within days, it emerged that legal representatives for this organization had previously instructed Melmen Watson to conceal certain paperwork relating to the structural integrity of the rig. This revelation was largely responsible for the spill usurping Macondo's sobriquet and the subsequent bankruptcy of Bellis Mae. It also had ruinous effects on the law firm, severely tarnishing a century-old reputation for discretion and confidentiality. Slippery when oiled, pondered the true cost of standing by a wealthy client when the costs, economic and otherwise, were devastating [9, 10].

Key Components of a Crisis Communication Plan for Law Firms

A comprehensive crisis communication plan comprises several key components. An important aspect of the early phases of developing a crisis communication plan is identifying potential crisis scenarios, even if the likelihood or imminence of such scenarios is low. For law firms, this step may be relatively easier than for other industries, such as retailers or sports organizations, because examples of potential crises are generally well-reported in the media and because a client going public about an incident can itself create a crisis for the firm. For example, a cybersecurity incident can create a crisis in itself, but even if the incident is small, the firm's failure to disclose a breach to relevant regulatory authorities or a key corporate client can escalate a minor incident into a full-scale crisis for the firm [11]. In the eyes of some clients, but particularly the public, allegations of professional misconduct can be seen as guilty until proven innocent. However, any law firm that has been disclosed in a large corporation's compliance report or realization memo knows how much internal work went into those reports by relevant stakeholders and why only a minutiae of details are published, such a there is no need to prove guilt and there should be a lot of misbehavior across multiple firms to avoid exclusions [12, 13, 14]. A designated crisis communication team (CrCT) is responsible for managing an organization's response to major incidents. The CrCT is responsible for overseeing and coordinating communication responses to a crisis, from briefing and debriefing involved parties to developing messaging and questions and answers, and working to help operational heads understand the PR implications of their decisions. The CrCT will request that the Chief Operating Officer (COO) always contact or CC the Head of Communications (HdC) before making any public statement or issuing any press release related to an incident. There must be clear communication protocols in place, understood across all relevant areas of the business, so that when an incident occurs, an immediate and effective response can be coordinated. Any official information released during and after the incident must be consistent to avoid the media picking up and magnifying any mistakes. Efforts related to client communication, whether it be the release of information to the broader public or dealing with client inquiries, should always be coordinated through the designated spokesperson(s) unless they explicitly defer to another (certified by the HdC). Piggybacking on crisis

training, key individuals should be prepped as to what to say in advance of anything occurring, developing works-on-the-shelf that can be easily modified for varying situations [15, 16, 17].

Best Practices for Internal Communication during a Crisis

In a crisis, the internal communication channels can consist of different communication media and channels. In this perspective, there are lists of recommendations to streamline the internal communication that can convey information about the crisis in real time and possibly reduce possible false alarms. Furthermore, the Guidelines for a Crisis Manual for internal communication is given [18, 19]. Internal communication is crucial during a crisis since every organisation wants to keep its staff and other internal stakeholders informed about the development of a crisis. Furthermore, the organization has to take care that in case of a medium-scale crisis that could be misinterpreted as a chemical or nuclear accident, the staff must be kept informed, and the anxiety of possible false alarms must be reduced. Knowing what the situation is about usually reduces the stress. At the severe accident level, however, there may be only a short time for actions, and the operational interruptions take over the internal communication. But also in that case, it is good to tell the staff about the situation before they hear the news from the media (this reduces the stress a lot) [20, 21]. Transparency combined with regular updates is recommended to keep the staff informed about the crisis. The updates can be given via info-desks, pre-set web-pages, closed web-tv systems, a toll free phone-line or similar. The top management has an important role in guiding the communication. Similarly, as in normal time internal communication, there has been a role for the direct supervisors of workers. Regular meetings are recommended with the direct supervisors in case the shift work is not stopped. The top management shall give clear guidelines to these meetings and emphasize that the uncertainty for the situation is still high. Probably, one meeting does not reach everyone. Therefore, it is important to have individual meetings. This, in theory, consumes a huge amount of time and, in practice, is extremely difficult. Individual meetings can be "virtual". The relevant people go through the text their direct supervisor should use in "ordinary circumstances" (this assumption reduces the uncertainty). Virtual people also need tools to use in the actual crisis. A role also needs to be clearly defined. However, the practical experience is that in most cases, the information about the progress of the crisis is not passed to the lower levels. Some organisations have experience from multi-incident exercises (this exercise includes also a transition and communication afterwards). But the transition due to an actual event is manifold compared to exercises and, therefore, different. Feedback channels have to be established (this can be one-way like the questions-only channel at public meetings, but there should be a channel for possible complaints). The idea is, however, to tell people to ask if something is not clear. There are several other recommendations on how to improve this channel. Before a real crisis, it is highly recommended to make training and exercising initiatives. As in every strong organisation, there are always discontent people that, at the time of crisis, see the blame on how the management handles the situation. Those people have no earlier experience of multi-organisational crises. These people might have experienced a special organisation's crisis, but the multi-organisational crisis is a completely different experience [22, 23, 24]. The Managers role during a severe accident, i.e. when a potential severe accident is in progress, or it is in the planning stage, Spokesman, i.e. the public face of an organisation, throughout the incident, Liaison officer, i.e. someone to manage potential negative media, more uses for PR than during a real event, Need separate liaison section. Finally, an essential reminder is that Crisis communication will change the organizational behaviour and should not jeopardize the protection of the own internal culture by a desire to open everything during the crisis because of the criticism of the external world.

External Communication Strategies and Media Relations for Law Firms

A crisis can arise instantly. It is important to engage with the media proactively on your terms and share your message. Make sure your key spokespeople are properly equipped to be interviewed. It is critical to ensure stringent vetting of the identity and reputation of all journalists before providing comment and to monitor the broadcast and print media. Effective management of the media can have a significant impact on public perception of the crisis and of the company's handling of it. Crisis communication plans should be flexed explicitly to include external media engagement in person, in writing, or through social media. Law firms, especially their management, need to act proactively and decisively following a crisis, and external communication and media management lie at the heart of that [25, 26]. External stakeholder analysis is a key first step in the development of a crisis communication strategy. This analysis helps guide communication strategy, ensuring that communication is timely, informative, and tailored to the circumstances. Proactive client and stakeholder communication is crucial following a crisis. It is important to be empathetic, sensitive, and understanding, but also to reassure the person of the commitment and action that will be taken to rectify the situation. It is in any case, imperative to engage

with clients following a crisis to provide them with clarity and reassurance. The stories told should reflect the underlying values and commitments of the organization. The organization's actions will be scrutinized following crisis events, and it is critical that the stories it tells portray a just representation of the facts. This is especially pertinent in the case of law firms, where there is scepticism about the operation and actions [27, 28]. To successfully manage the media, key spokespeople must be properly briefed. They must understand the purpose and aim of the crisis message and have the training required to answer even the most difficult questions effectively. It is important to make eye contact, lean slightly into the microphone, and never, ever lose your temper. It is also important to never lie, even if you fudge the figures a little. The process potentially involves interview rehearsals, training exercises, and regular monitoring and evaluation of media coverage. After a crisis, it is important to expect challenging questions and to have considered responses in advance; crafting the right responses often takes time. Regular monitoring of the media landscape is also important and should feed into real-time adaption of the crisis communication strategy. It is crucial to know not only what is being said about the crisis but also what is being said about your industrial peers. Keep track of social media accounts regarding public sentiment. This can help build a true analysis of the public mood and inform the organization's response. Effective engagement with external audiences builds credibility, trust, and support for the firm's activities post-crisis. This engagement should take place as part of a broader stakeholder management campaign, including transparent and honest communication and the establishment of industry-wide best practices [29, 30, 31].

CONCLUSION

Crisis management communication is indispensable for law firms seeking to navigate legal and reputational challenges effectively. A proactive and well-prepared crisis communication strategy helps mitigate risks, maintain client trust, and uphold the firm's integrity. Key components such as clear internal communication, a designated crisis response team, media engagement, and stakeholder transparency are fundamental in crisis mitigation. By learning from past crises, law firms can develop tailored strategies that ensure resilience in the face of adversity. Ultimately, crisis preparedness is not merely an option but a necessity for law firms committed to sustaining their reputation and professional standing in the legal industry.

REFERENCES

1. Coker JO, Uzougbo NS, Oguejiofor BB, Akagha OV. The role of legal practitioners in mitigating corporate risks in Nigeria: a comprehensive review of existing literature on the strategies and approaches adopted by legal practitioners in Nigeria to mitigate corporate risks. *Finance & Accounting Research Journal*. 2023 Oct 13;5(10):309-32. feprbl.com
2. Li M. Adapting legal education for the changing landscape of regional emerging economies: A dynamic framework for law majors. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*. 2023 Oct 2:1-30.
3. Brescia RH. Ethics in Pandemics: The Lawyer for the (Crisis) Situation. *Geo. J. Legal Ethics*. 2021;34:295.
4. Shanahan EA, DeLeo RA, Albright EA, Li M, Koebele EA, Taylor K, Crow DA, Dickinson KL, Minkowitz H, Birkland TA, Zhang M. Visual policy narrative messaging improves COVID-19 vaccine uptake. *PNAS nexus*. 2023 Apr 1;2(4):pgad080.
5. Kwok L, Lee J, Han SH. Crisis communication on social media: what types of COVID-19 messages get the attention?. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*. 2022 Nov;63(4):528-43.
6. Jebran K, Chen S. Can we learn lessons from the past? COVID-19 crisis and corporate governance responses. *International Journal of Finance & Economics*. 2023 Jan;28(1):421-9. ssrn.com
7. Andrews DS, Fainshmidt S, Schotter AP, Gaur A. Formal institutional context in global strategy research: A layer cake perspective. *Global Strategy Journal*. 2024 Feb;14(1):3-24. [\[HTML\]](#)
8. Challoumis C, Eriotis N. The historical view of banking system in greece during the financial crisis. *Journal of Ecohumanism*. 2024 Nov 17;3(8):991-1011.
9. Akpan EE. Environmental consequences of oil spills on marine habitats and the mitigating measures—The niger delta perspective. *Journal of Geoscience and Environment Protection*. 2022 Jun 17;10(6):191-203.
10. Ukhurebor KE, Athar H, Adetunji CO, Aigbe UO, Onyancha RB, Abifarin O. Environmental implications of petroleum spillages in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: a review. *Journal of Environmental Management*. 2021 Sep 1;293:112872. cpur.ac.za

11. Coombs WT. Parameters for crisis communication. *The handbook of crisis communication*. 2010 Jan 19;17-53.
12. Arikawe O, Edwards-Fapohunda MO, Waite P. Strategies for Student Related Crisis Management in The Learning Environment in Further Education Colleges in UK. *Iconic Research And Engineering Journals*. 2024 Aug;8(2):576-86. [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)
13. Heide M, Simonsson C. What was that all about? On internal crisis communication and communicative coworkership during a pandemic. *Journal of Communication Management*. 2021 Jul 20;25(3):256-75.
14. Wang L, Schuetz CG, Cai D. Choosing response strategies in social media crisis communication: an evolutionary game theory perspective. *Information & Management*. 2021 Sep 1;58(6):103371.
15. Macnamara J. New insights into crisis communication from an "inside" emic perspective during COVID-19. *Public Relations Inquiry*. 2021 May;10(2):237-62.
16. Chatzipanagiotou P, Katsarou E. Crisis management, school leadership in disruptive times and the recovery of schools in the post COVID-19 era: A systematic literature review. *Education Sciences*. 2023 Jan 23;13(2):118.
17. Puthusserry P, King T, Miller K, Khan Z. A typology of emerging market SMEs' COVID-19 response strategies: the role of TMTs and organizational design. *British Journal of Management*. 2022 Apr;33(2):603-33. [wiley.com](https://www.wiley.com)
18. Ali BJ, Anwar G, Gardi B, Jabbar Othman B, Mahmood Aziz H, Ali Ahmed S, Abdalla Hamza P, Burhan Ismael N, Sorguli S, Sabir BY. Business communication strategies: Analysis of internal communication processes. Ali, BJ, Anwar, G., Gardi, B., Othman, BJ, Aziz, HM, Ahmed, SA, Hamza, PA, Ismael, NB, Sorguli, S., Sabir, BY (2021). Business Communication Strategies: Analysis of Internal Communication Processes. *Journal of Humanities and Education Development*. 2021 May 22;3(3):16-38. [ssrn.com](https://www.ssrn.com)
19. Lee Y. Dynamics of symmetrical communication within organizations: The impacts of channel usage of CEO, managers, and peers. *International Journal of Business Communication*. 2022 Jan;59(1):3-21.
20. Ruck K, Men LR. Guest editorial: Internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Communication Management*. 2021 Jul 20;25(3):185-95.
21. Qin YS, Men LR. Exploring the impact of internal communication on employee psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: The mediating role of employee organizational trust. *International Journal of Business Communication*. 2023 Oct;60(4):1197-219. [sagepub.com](https://www.sagepub.com)
22. Levin-Zamir D, Sorensen K, Su TT, Sentell T, Rowlands G, Messer M, Pleasant A, Saboga Nunes L, Lev-Ari S, Okan O. Health promotion preparedness for health crises—a 'must' or 'nice to have'? Case studies and global lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Health Promotion*. 2021 Jun;28(2):27-37. [sagepub.com](https://www.sagepub.com)
23. Lowenstern JB, Wallace K, Barsotti S, Sandri L, Stovall W, Bernard B, Privitera E, Komorowski JC, Fournier N, Balagizi C, Garaebiti E. Guidelines for volcano-observatory operations during crises: recommendations from the 2019 volcano observatory best practices meeting. *Journal of Applied Volcanology*. 2022 Jan 14;11(1):3. [springer.com](https://www.springer.com)
24. Wackerhage H, Schoenfeld BJ. Personalized, evidence-informed training plans and exercise prescriptions for performance, fitness and health. *Sports Medicine*. 2021 Sep;51(9):1805-13.
25. Tsoy D, Tirasawasdichai T, Kurpayanidi KI. Role of social media in shaping public risk perception during COVID-19 pandemic: A theoretical review. *International Journal of Management Science and Business Administration*. 2021 Jan 7;7(2):35-41. [academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu)
26. Abbas J, Wang D, Su Z, Ziapour A. The role of social media in the advent of COVID-19 pandemic: crisis management, mental health challenges and implications. *Risk management and healthcare policy*. 2021 May 12:1917-32. [tandfonline.com](https://www.tandfonline.com)
27. Ogenyi FC, Eze VH, Ugwu CN. Navigating Challenges and Maximizing Benefits in the Integration of Information and Communication Technology in African Primary Schools. *International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Science (IJ-HuMaSS)*. 2023 Dec 20;6(2):101-8.
28. Wang Y, Hao H, Platt LS. Examining risk and crisis communications of government agencies and stakeholders during early-stages of COVID-19 on Twitter. *Computers in human behavior*. 2021 Jan 1;114:106568.
29. Li B, Zhang T, Hua N, Wang Y. A dynamic model of crisis management from a stakeholder perspective: the case of COVID-19 in China. *Tourism Review*. 2021 Jul 27;76(4):764-87.

30. Conway AE, Gupta E, Verdi M, Berger WE, Anagnostou A, Abrams EM, Bansal P, Stukus D, Blatman KS, Mack DP, Abramson SL. A media advocacy toolkit for the allergist-immunologist. *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology: In Practice*. 2024 Jul 10.
31. Taher SS, Chan TJ. Case Study of Sriwijaya Air Crash from the Lens of Crisis Communication and Management. *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*. 2023;6(2):1-0.

CITE AS: Nabirye Amina Okwir (2025). Crisis Management Communication for Law Firms. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, 7(1):75-80
--