

Public Relations Crisis Management

Guidelines and Practices

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NSU is one university in three locations: Tahlequah, Muskogee and Broken Arrow. It is possible that some public relations crises might be localized, but it is more likely that the impact will be felt on each campus. For that reason, it is crucial that all members of the NSU family be aware of and adhere to these guidelines and policies.

Under the direction of the President, the Executive Director for Public Relations and Marketing has primary responsibility for developing and implementing all elements of Northeastern State University's public relations crisis response. The executive director will assign responsibilities as appropriate and will communicate those assignments to the President, the President's cabinet and other members of the campus community. In the event of a campus emergency or disaster, these will be coordinated in coordination with the Director of Public Safety and the University Incident Management Team (IMT).

Public Relations and Marketing Staff will refer to [Annex B of the NSU Emergency Operations Plan](#) in the event of a declared emergency

DEFINING A PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS

A public relations crisis is an event or situation that results in significant, sustained media coverage and public concern that may have a significant negative impact on the reputation of Northeastern State University, its programs, departments, board, staff, faculty, students or alumni.

These situations might include:

- Controversial speakers or events on campus
- Crimes committed on campus or off-campus crimes involving members of the campus community
- Discrimination or harassment charges
- Facility issues
- Management errors
- Misconduct charges
- Mismanagement of resources
- Rules violations
- Prolonged recovery periods following declared emergencies
- Prolonged technological outages
- Expressive activity

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OBJECTIVES

In the event of a declared emergency (as defined in the [NSU Media Policy Guidelines – Internal, Section 300.00](#)), the first priority is to respond quickly to immediate threats to the safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors and protect the physical plant on the university. The guidelines are not intended to supplant the Emergency Procedures of Northeastern State University.

In other circumstances, or in a possible protracted recovery phase of declared emergencies, the objective is to communicate openly, honestly, accurately, empathetically and in a timely and up-to-date manner, to correct any inaccurate or damaging information, to establish trust, and protect and re-build the university's reputation, credibility, and key relationships. It is crucial that all official communications be coordinated, approved, disseminated from an authorized source, and reflective of the perspective of the university president or designee. Per the [Clery Act](#), timely warnings and/or campus emergency alerts may be issued by University Police in the event of immediate concerns for life safety.

DEFINING THE STAKEHOLDERS

News and information is distributed constantly, often through informal sources such as social media and comments on web-based news sites. This environment can generate significant misinformation that can cause anxiety, particularly for close members of the campus community.

It should be noted that the names and contact information for faculty and staff are readily available online from the staff directory. Additionally, students can easily be contacted for comment, via social media or face-to-face on campus.

For these and other reasons, communicating appropriately with students, faculty and staff, making certain that they have timely and accurate information, is a high priority.

Other important audiences for relevant news, information and key messages include:

- Alumni
- Board members
- Broader local community
- Campus neighborhoods
- Donors and prospective donors
- Elected officials
- Individuals directly affected by the crisis
- Media outlets
- Prospective students
- Student's parents
- Vendors and contractors

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SUMMARY OF KEY STEPS FOR MANAGING A PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS

- Objective evaluation of the situation, determining the scope, length and breadth of public and media interest
- Fact gathering
- Identification of the main message points
- Distribution of the initial message to key stakeholders and all internal “public access” points
- Confirmation of the primary spokesperson
- Monitoring media and social media sources of information
- Verification of the accuracy of reports and correcting the record as needed.
- Distribution of approved information and statements to media and through other delivery methods
- Conducting interviews or press conferences as needed.
- Communicating with internal audiences and stakeholders throughout the process.
- Tracking major milestones to assist with post-crisis assessment

MONITORING PUBLIC AND MEDIA REACTION

The potential for a significant ebb and flow of public and media reaction during a public relations crisis makes it crucial to use appropriate campus resources to track media contacts, public perceptions, responses and requests for information. This information will be used to help shape future communication with key stakeholders.

It is the responsibility of the communications and marketing department to actively track public reaction and distribute reports of those reactions as needed.

Key resources and methods for monitoring reaction include:

- Facebook
- Google alerts
- Online searches
- Other media tracking services
- Phone receptionists
- President’s office personnel
- Twitter

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL

To accomplish the goal of communicating openly and accurately, messages should be developed that anticipate pertinent questions.

- What happened?
- When did it happen?

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- Where did it happen?
- What was the cause?
- What has the response been?
- What will happen next?
- Whose responsibility is it?

As time and circumstances permit, legal counsel and other members of the Ad Hoc Public Relations Crisis Communications Team (see below) should be consulted in the formulation of messages and statements. The president has ultimate approval of public messages; this approval may be delegated by the President to the Executive Director for Public Relations and Marketing. Exceptions to this are the EAS and Timely Warning requirements.

COMMUNICATION DELIVERY METHODS

In the event of a declared emergency, a specific emergency website will be activated and updated information will be posted on that site. During a non-declared emergency situation, a special link may be added to the NSU home page; otherwise updated information will be posted on the home page in the “news” section.

Approved messages will be distributed using the following methods as appropriate:

- Advertising
- Community meetings
- Email
- Facebook
- Fact sheets
- Flat screen message boards
- Interviews
- In the Loop
- Marquee
- Media releases
- RiverHawk Weekly
- Signage and posters
- Phone receptionists
- Press conferences
- Twitter
- University website
- YouTube
- Text Messages

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AD HOC PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

It is not unusual for a public relations situation to start quietly before evolving into “an event or situation that results in significant, sustained media coverage and public concern, that may have a significant negative impact on the reputation of Northeastern State University, its programs, department boards, staff, faculty, students or alumni.” The executive director for public relations and marketing and other staff must remain alert to the possibility that a crisis situation has evolved.

If it is determined that the scope and duration of media and public interest requires the establishment of an ad hoc crisis communication team, a recommendation will be made by the executive director to the president.

The committee chair will report as needed directly to the president or designee. To maximize effectiveness, at least one backup should be identified for each team member. Team members must be able to meet and communicate as needed.

- Executive Director of Public Relations and Marketing (chair)
- Communications and marketing media relations staff
- Dean or department head
- Legal counsel (as needed)
- Ad Hoc participants with specific knowledge regarding the situation

The ad hoc public relations crisis communication team will provide resources as needed and provide advice and assistance to the executive director.

ON-SITE MEDIA LOCATION

It is NSU’s normal practice to permit reporters to have access to the public areas of the campus after checking in with the communications and marketing department.

In the aftermath of a declared emergency, or other circumstances, it may be advantageous to establish a designated media location. This location is called the Joint Information Center or JIC. This would serve as a controlled staging area for reporters, press briefings and the dissemination of information. This area should be placed where it would not interfere with campus operations, but not be isolated or too distant. This location will be established by the Emergency Manager.

The JIC should be staffed by the communications and marketing staff.

POST-CRISIS EVALUATION

The duration of a public relations crisis is difficult to predict and it is important to continue to monitor public and media reaction until there is some certainty that the situation has returned to normal (or perhaps a “new normal”) where regular operations can continue.

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The executive director should convene the ad hoc committee and/or staff, who were directly involved in reacting to the crisis for an evaluation meeting and develop a brief synopsis. The evaluation synopsis should include:

- Description of initial circumstances
- Media and public reaction
- Message evaluation
- Recap of communication delivery methods
- Recommendations

TRAINING

An annual “table-top” training exercise will be conducted by the Executive Director for Public Relations and Marketing with the communications and marketing staff, for the purpose of reviewing the processes of dealing with a public relations crisis. This will include creating a plausible crisis scenario, following the “key steps” and conducting a mock press conference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A wide variety of resources were identified and consulted in the creation of these guidelines and practices, including:

- Casting your Crisis Plan, James E. Lukaszewski
- Crisis Communication Presentation – Veterinary News Network, Dr. Jim Humpries
- Duke University Communication Plan
- Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, W. Timothy Coombs
- Purdue University/Calumet Campus Crisis Communication Plan
- Seven Dimensions of Crisis Communication Management, James E. Lukaszewski
- South Carolina State Crisis Communication Plan