

Five Steps to Protect Your Digital Health Company's Reputation



Digital Health Startups Need a Crisis Communications Plan. Here's Yours in Five Steps.

If you've been following the Theranos catastrophe, you know that the consumer healthcare technology startup has been skewered in the media for more than a year, accused of a laundry list of misdeeds ranging from promoting technology that just doesn't work to deliberately misleading investors.

While the future of the embattled company remains to be seen, if it does manage to recover, it faces a terrifyingly steep uphill battle. Probably the biggest takeaway for entrepreneurs (plenty of lessons-learned articles have been written for investors) is to have a crisis plan in place *before disaster hits*. This is especially true for healthcare startups, where new scientific claims are likely to come under intense scrutiny.

By enabling you to communicate immediately, before speculation takes hold, a crisis communications plan can help you prevent or minimize damage and emerge with your reputation intact. The key is to control the message.

And while you can't plan for every possible crisis, you *can* create a plan that can be adapted and followed as a situation unfolds, which is much better than starting from scratch when you're under stress and probably not thinking clearly. Follow these five steps and you'll be well on your way to avoiding reputational risk, or saving face quickly should a crisis hit.

Choose a team. If your company comes under fire, it's important to already have a team in place that can speak about the key issues clearly and transparently. Before a crisis hits, elect a spokesperson who is integral to your organization. That person will speak on behalf of your company, making official statements and answering to the media. Make sure your spokesperson is media trained (it's a good investment) and that the rest of your employees know whom to refer questions to until the crisis is over. (Make sure employees know not to speak to the press, or post comments on social media, on their own.)

Create a holding statement. As quickly as you can, create a holding statement—a few sentences that contain the basic facts surrounding the situation, and that state that you are actively handling the situation. Your holding statement should be factual, clear and transparent. Be sure to own up to any mistakes and admit any wrongdoing. Circulate your holding statement to staff and to the media, if asked. Then follow up when you have more information.

Practice. It's never a good idea to speak off the cuff in a crisis. Practice what you're going to say and how you'll handle tough questions. It's easy to become defensive or emotional, but practicing your talking points will help you avoid these pitfalls.

You should also avoid saying “no comment,” which makes you look like you have something to hide, and make sure to avoid using jargon as well as filler words like “uh” and “um.” If you can’t afford media training, there are several good books on the subject. I like [The Media Training Bible by Brad Phillips](#). If you’re a little tight on time, his blog has short entries that contain great information also – [Mr. Media Training](#).

Target your stakeholders. Make sure all of your stakeholders receive your message. This includes employees, customers, the community, investors, business partners, the media and anyone else who might be affected by the crisis. Keep a list of who might be affected and a log of whom you’ve spoken with.

Communicate often (and early). Communicate often and early to avoid leaving your reputation in the hands of other people. Determine the best and most appropriate platform to deliver your message and get your message out quickly, either by posting it on social media, such as Twitter, or by releasing your holding statement. Then follow up as new information becomes available. You might not be able to avoid a crisis, but you can sure take steps to minimize the damage and even build your brand depending on how you handle the situation.



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