Social Media Crisis Planning For Non-Profit Organizations
By Melissa Agnes

Social media crises have been happening left, right and centre to brands of all different types, industries and sizes - non-profit organizations not excluded.

We’ve seen organizations like Susan G. Komen fail under the pressure, while others such as The Red Cross excel and extinguish the sparks before they have the chance to turn into a fire. So what do they do differently? How come some non-profits excel and others fail under the pressure of a social media attack?

The answer boils down to two main strategic elements that the organization either equips themselves with or doesn’t:

- A social media crisis plan
- The right social media crisis mentality

Within this White Paper, I highlight some different steps and strategies specifically targeted and veered for the non-profit community and their social media crisis planning.

Let’s begin with some strategies to take when faced with a social media crisis:

**Be clear and explain thoroughly**
Sometimes new management or new regulations and strategies result in a change in policy, distribution of funds, or other actions. This may seem logical for your organization, and is most probably adapted and decided upon with your organization’s best interest at heart. However, people are creatures of habit and don’t always take well to change. For this reason, when instilling these changes to your organization, make sure to address the issue publicly. Hold a news conference, write a blog post, post it to your Facebook wall, release a press release, etc. Combine traditional with social media and publicly declare the changes to the organization, and most importantly, the reasons behind these changes.

This is very important because your donors and supporters need to fully understand the reasons behind the organization’s new direction so that they can continue to support your cause. With this in mind, when you declare these changes or this new direction, be sure to:

**Include a logical explanation and links**
Without a logical explanation, complete with links and content to back it up and support it, people who do not understand will get emotional. As soon as emotion...
begins to fuel a campaign or issue, it takes on its own uncontrollable momentum and begins to go viral.

Within your explanation, be sure to include the new policies as well as links to the old ones so that donors, media relations and bloggers will have the tools to conduct a full research if they so desire. Don’t forget to make these links easily accessible by all. The last thing you want is to be accused of hiding information or concealing facts, links, old policies, or anything else.

**Stand by your decision**

If you’ve made the decision with your cause and donors’ best interests at heart, then you’ve probably made the right decision. One that aligns with your organization’s goals and objectives and will keep moving the foundation in the right direction for the long-term. In this case, you can be sure that you’ve made the right decision. So don’t panic if a few others don’t agree or have a hard time with the change.

Your job is to guide the organization to continue to be able to adhere to its cause, and to give an informative justification of that decision. So don’t be afraid to stand by your organization and the change. Don’t waver or succumb to peer pressure or controversy. If the decision was made in the better interest of the organization and cause, then you have nothing to succumb to.

**Transparency is crucial**

Be forthcoming about the reason for your decision, or the situation behind the crisis. Hiding facts or covering up mistakes will only subdue you further into attacks and humiliation.

If you’ve made a mistake, you’re only human, they happen, but the important thing is that you realize your mistake and correct it. Admit, confess, leave nothing out and definitely do not attempt to cover any part of it up. This includes but is not limited to:

- Deleting tweets or posts
- Erasing comments from fans and donors
- Taking down pages of your website including policies, rules and regulations, old blog posts, press releases and others.

People expect and appreciate honesty and there is a [lot of power behind a true and sincere apology](#).

**Respond a.s.a.p.**

No time is too soon to respond to a social media crisis, for profit organizations and non-profits alike.
If we look at the recent example of Susan G. Komen, they decided to take their time to respond to the crisis and all it did was:

- Allow for the crisis to escalate until it was beyond their control
- Gave people a reason to attack them further
- Made it look as though they didn’t care about the situation or the feelings of their fans and donors
- Made it seem as though they were hiding away in hopes that the crisis would just blow over - which it never does

Nothing good ever comes from ignoring the situation. It is best to confront the crisis head on, while it’s still manageable than to try and ignore it - ending up caught in an unmanageable viral storm.

Strengthening your social media crisis plan with non-profit specific strategies

Although your non-profit’s social media crisis plan should have most of the same strategies that you would find within a for-profit organization’s crisis plan, there are some key strategies that I will mention here that are particularly advantageous for non-profit organizations:

**Begin by defining what a social media crisis is and means to your non-profit organization**

Not every negative tweet or comment means that you’re under social media attack. One of the first steps within your non-profit’s social media crisis plan should be defining what a crisis means to your organization, and what one might look like.

To do this, take the time to do a thorough risk assessment, coming up with several scenarios of possible crises, determining what they might look like, how you to detect them, what your response strategy is and how to best resolve them.

**Predict the public’s reaction**

By brainstorming the different possible reactions that followers, donors, the media and bloggers may have to a situation during a crisis, you’ll be better prepared to handle these reactions. Again, come up with several scenarios, determining a response strategy for each one.

**Determine what key messages are constant, no matter what the crisis may be**

Your organization was founded for a cause and therefore has strong brand values and a clear message. These values are what connect you to your supporters. It’s important for your values and your messaging to always remain consistent, no matter what the situation may be or lead to. If you allow the pressure or stress of a crisis to take you off track from your day-to-day message,
you will only hurt your brand image and disappoint your truest followers and supporters.

Determining and outlining these values and messages before a crisis, and including them within your social media crisis management plan, is a clear way to make sure that these values never get overstepped or under-looked during an attack.

**Identify the right spokesperson**
When you come face to face with a social media crisis, you’re going to need to address the attacks. For this, you will need the right spokesperson. Someone who is an authoritative figure within the organization, someone who keeps their cool and thinks logically under pressure and someone who is trusted and feels comfortable in front of cameras and in the spotlight - not to mention someone who comes across as a sincere and compassionate human being.

**Get all legalities in order before a crisis strikes**
During a crisis, there’s no time to wait on lawyers or upper management. That’s why it’s always good practice to have all necessary legal documents prepared in advance. A crisis strikes quickly and needs to be dealt with in real-time, so any foreseeable legalities should be discussed, and documents prepared, before an attack.

This is something that should be worked out with - and clearly understood by - upper management. Sometimes organizations have a hard time understanding the importance of this, so working towards a resolution before a crisis is always a strategy worth acting on.

**Develop a triage chart**
A triage chart is a great way to clearly and visually identify possible crisis scenarios, outlining how your team members are expected to handle them. This chart should be made accessible to all employees and members of your team.

**Provide your entire organization with key talking points**
It’s pretty safe to say that all members of your staff have a fair sized social graph. That said, it’s also fair to assume that if the crisis gets big enough, they’re the first place their friends and followers, and perhaps even the media, will turn to with questions. For this reason, make sure that each member of your team understands:

- All the details about the crisis
- What questions and information they’re permitted to reply to and reveal
- Where they should turn people to for more information about the crisis (example: an FAQ, blog post, corporate website, etc)
This will eliminate any confusion and will go a long way in keeping your messaging consistent.

**List of outside resources**
If the comments and posts start coming in at such a high velocity that your team is unable to properly track and monitor them; or if other situations emerge where you feel you may need the outside help of professionals, then being equipped with a list of potential third party resources will prove itself very handy.

This as well will require some scenario brainstorming before hand. It’s important that this list be kept current.

**Be equipped with a dark website**
A dark website is a website that is completely set up and ready to go, but only put live when a social media crisis strikes. This may or may not be a great strategy for your organization.

**Track, document and analyze the events within the crisis**
Be sure to have a member of your crisis team who is responsible for tracking and documenting all aspects and events that occur during the crisis, so that you may analyze them and continue to learn and strengthen your strategies after the drama has subsided. This includes, but is certainly not limited to:

- Keeping a communications log: tracking who has contacted you, who you’ve responded to, when, how often, etc
- Tracking the share of sentiment during all stages of the crisis, enabling you to later evaluate the cycle of the crisis
- Shares and sharers

**Focus on building your following before a crisis occurs**
Your followers are your most avid supporters and in a crisis they can really come to your defense and help you regain control of the situation. The best way to go about implementing this strategy is by taking the time to grow and bond with your followers and fans before a crisis ever even shows its unappreciated little head!

**Practice! Practice! Practice!**
Like you would practice a fire drill before you ever experience a real fire, it’s a good idea to practice putting your social media crisis management plan into action, before you ever really need to. Doing this once or twice a year will keep the strategy and plans of action at the top of everyone’s mind, allowing less room for error when a crisis presents itself for real.

Social media crises are a stressful time for everyone, and a poorly handled crisis can evidently lead to the demise of your organization. By preparing your team in advance, you’ll be protecting yourself against any future attacks, and equipping yourself with the
right mindset, tools and techniques to leveraging a crisis into a positive brand opportunity.

**In closing**

Thank you for your interest in this white paper. I hope it has provided you with value and insight. I welcome (and encourage) your feedback, comments and suggestions, and I would love to hear how this white paper has helped you develop and/or strengthen your organization’s crisis plan!

You may reach me via email at: melissa@melissaagnescrisismanagement.com

**About the Author**

**Melissa Agnes** is an online crisis management specialist and president of Melissa Agnes Crisis Management, a firm specializing in online crisis prevention, planning and training, as well as online reputation management.

MACM has helped companies and organizations ranging from non-profits, global organizations, universities, government agencies, food industry companies and more, with their online crisis prevention, planning, management and training.

Whether you’re currently facing an online attack, foresee one arising in the near future or simply want to (do the smart thing and) prepare and protect your organization from online and social media crises before they materialize, Melissa Agnes Crisis Management has the expertise, skills and dedication to help your brand prepare for and manage any type of online crisis situation.

We invite you to discover the many [specialized services](https://www.melissaagnescrisismanagement.com) Melissa Agnes Crisis Management offers, as well as subscribe to receive weekly updates from Melissa’s daily online crisis management blog.

For more information about Melissa Agnes Crisis Management and the specialized services they offer, click on the link below, or feel free to contact Melissa Agnes directly.

**Website:** [MelissaAgnesCrisisManagement.com](https://www.melissaagnescrisismanagement.com)
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