



Crisis Communication: Cincinnati Zoo
Harambe Incident, May 2016

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I. Executive Summary

Risk management and crisis communications are relevant to virtually every organization and industry. The role of a professional communicator is to identify risks and assemble a structure of people and processes to be activated quickly in a crisis. When an incident occurs, the professional communicator first determines if it is a crisis, then implements a strategy. Tactics involve monitoring public conversation, effectively delivering accurate information to stakeholders, ensuring internal and external messaging is consistent, and looking for opportunities to regain trust and organizational image.

Professional communicators have a critical role in guiding an organization from crisis to recovery, and thus it is crucial to adhere to principles outlined by the International Association of Business Communicators. These principles include ethics, consistency, context, analysis, strategy, and engagement. As crisis managers, this means representing the organization “truthfully, fairly, and accurately,” establishing a clear and consistent narrative, and understanding both the organization’s culture as well as the larger context, among other responsibilities (The Global Standard of the Communication Profession, n.d.).

This document analyzes crisis communications through the lens of an incident at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (“the Zoo”) involving a child and a gorilla, Harambe. Discussion of the crisis and initial response is followed by a three-month crisis communications plan.

What happened

On May 28, 2016, a three-year-old boy breached a barrier and fell 10-12 feet into a moat inhabited by three gorillas. Keepers successfully called two out of the area but a 17-year-old Silverback Gorilla named Harambe refused to leave. Initially Harambe stood close to the boy and “seemed protective” until Harambe began “violently dragging and throwing the child” (Gorilla killed after 3-year-old falls, 2016). Concerned about the boy’s life, the Dangerous Animals Response Team and local fire department made the decision to shoot Harambe. The boy was sent to the hospital with serious but not life-threatening injuries.

Immediately following the incident, the gorilla enclosure was closed indefinitely. The Zoo was tasked with managing perceptions of public safety with their despair over the loss of Harambe, and sensitivity to the boy’s family. Video of the incident quickly went viral and the decision to shoot Harambe was met with controversy, and in the days following, significant outrage.

II. Public Safety vs. Organizational Image

Following a crisis, an organization’s response and motives are highly scrutinized – are they more interested in protecting their publics or their image? Public safety strategy strives to ensure “the welfare and protection of the general public” (Public Safety, n.d.), and must be the primary consideration in crisis management. According to the Institute for PR, “A failure to address public safety intensifies the damage from a crisis. Reputation and financial concerns are considered after public safety has been remedied” (Crisis Management and Communications, 2014). Organizational image strategy works to protect the reputation, minimize financial impact, and re-establish goodwill with stakeholders.

Zoo Director Thane Maynard’s initial statements captured in the Enquirer article were intended for a wide audience including journalists, the Cincinnati community, and people interested in this story around the world. To be more effective, the language should have reflected more

sensitivity and emotion. Maynard said, “The choice was made to put down, or shoot, Harambe, so he's gone. We've never had a situation like this at the Cincinnati Zoo where a dangerous animal needed to be dispatched in an emergency situation.”

“So he’s gone” reads as flippant, “dangerous animal” places blame on the gorilla which will further incense people who didn’t believe shooting the animal was justified. Finally, the use of “dispatched” sounds cold and detached.

These factual statements coupled with the decision to close Gorilla World indicate that public safety is the Zoo’s priority. However, the language used hurts their organizational image since, “No matter how well an organization handles the corporate side of a disaster, if it doesn’t meet the emotional needs of stakeholders, the outcome will be seen as a failure” (PR News, n.d.).

Maynard and the Zoo more effectively expressed their sentiments in the May 29th blog post, which both addressed public safety concerns and benefited the organization’s image. Sharing that the Zoo was “devastated” and “in mourning” over losing Harambe, Maynard described key events that led to putting the gorilla down in more personal language such as, “a child’s life was in danger and a quick decision had to be made by our Dangerous Animal Response Team” (Cincinnati Zoo Devastated, 2016). Importantly, he also explained why a tranquilizer wasn’t a safe option and listed the roles of people on the Dangerous Animal Response Team to show credibility.

The post reiterates that this is the first time a barrier breach has occurred in 38 years, and that the barriers comply with standards set by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). This is important in showing that the Zoo is compliant and competent – two issues called into question after the incident.

Despite the Zoo having been in compliance, Maynard states that “Nevertheless, we will study this incident as we work toward continuous improvement for the safety of our visitors and animals” (Cincinnati Zoo Devastated, 2016). They close out the blog post with information about the wild gorilla population and conservation efforts, a strategic inclusion in this highly-viewed release.

III. Risk vs. Crisis



The Zoo’s initial communications about the Harambe incident rightly framed it as a crisis rather than risk. According to the CDC, a crisis typically “occurs unexpectedly, may not be in the organization’s control, requires an immediate response, and may cause harm to the organization’s reputation, image, or viability” (Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication, 2016). A risk, on the other hand, is a potential hazard that hasn’t occurred.

Since this particular incident involved a series of highly unusual events resulting in the immediate closure of Gorilla World, further risk to the public was low. Thus, the communication

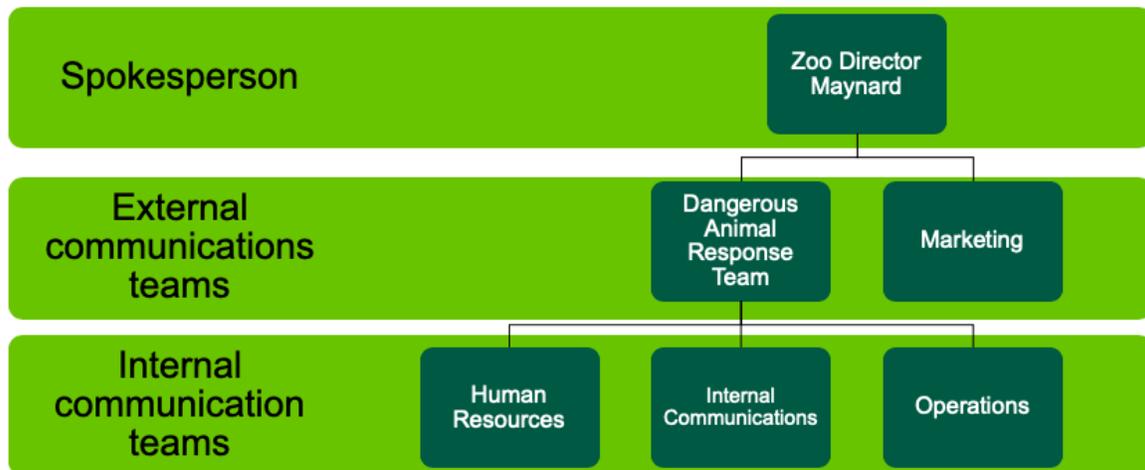
focused on conveying facts about the crisis - who, what, when, where, and why. In the May 29th blog post, Zoo staff reiterated details but included the important step of promising to use the experience to improve. This promise along with information about their wildlife conservation advocacy attempt to rebuild trust and goodwill with their audiences.

An effective risk communication strategy “informs people about hazards to their environment or their health...and communicates potential crisis and emergency situations well, encouraging prudent action and reducing panic” (Risk and Communication, 2016). Crisis communication strategy, on the other hand, attempts to deal with and repair the damage from a “calamitous event” by providing information about what occurred and why, and steps to resolve the emergency (Risk vs. Crisis, n.d.). For both risk and crisis communications strategies, the CDC recommends six principles: Be First, Be Right, Be Credible, Express Empathy, Promote Action, and Show Respect (Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication, 2016).

IV. Crisis Management Communication Plan

This section details a three-month crisis communications plan including key people, messages, and communication channels. Though it is subject to change, this plan will be a useful guide to the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden’s recovery.

Crisis Communications Team



The crisis communications team consists of Zoo departments directly involved with the incident and that have responsibilities within the Zoo’s multi-faceted communications presence.

In addition to the staff listed above, the team will work closely with external partners communicating about the incident such as the police and fire departments.

Communications channels

To disseminate information, we will maximize the Zoo’s owned channels - website, blog, Facebook, and Twitter – and utilize earned media channels such as news outlets.

Website: Aside from the blog, much of the website will remain as is. We can run banners with announcements, such as when Gorilla World will reopen or opportunities to donate to wild gorilla population. The website maintains a sense of normalcy and positivity useful to recovery.

Blog: Main strategic channel for controlling the narrative. Where we post press releases and updates for stakeholders and media. Link to these posts on social media and use for media inquiries.

Twitter: Short-form breaking news and updates. Link blog posts and other relevant information. Monitor constantly for conversation to determine when to engage and what information to provide. Halt all pre-scheduled updates.

Facebook: Fewer, longer form updates. Link to blog posts and refer people to Twitter for more frequent updates. Monitor conversation related to incident constantly. Halt all pre-scheduled updates.

Internal communications and HR will identify the best channels for employee communications to ensure consistent internal and external messaging.

Key messages and timeline

Our messages will be frequently be informed by a structure offered by the CDC, “Six components of a crisis message” (Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication, 2016):

Six components of a crisis message:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Expression of empathy2. Clarifying facts/call for action (who, what, when, where, why, how)3. What we don't know4. Process to get answers5. Statement of commitment6. Referrals: Contact and plan next scheduled update

Messages will be developed according to the unique needs of each phase of crisis management. The CDC outlines four phases: Initial, Maintenance, Resolution, and Evaluation.

In the initial phase we heed the CDC's advice to be first and be right. We acknowledge the event with empathy, establish credibility, and commit to continue communication (Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication, 2016).

Immediately following incident:

- Draft press release stating facts about the incident (*see below*). This allows us to establish a credible narrative and offer information to reduce speculation.
- Post on blog and link on social media.
- Monitor social channels and news for conversation and questions related to incident.

Example press release:

We are deeply saddened to report an incident that took place today in Gorilla World. A child crawled through a barrier and fell several feet into a moat where three gorillas were present. Keepers successfully called two gorillas out but a silverback gorilla, Harambe, stayed back and began aggressively handling the child. The Dangerous Animal Response Team made the difficult, but ultimately necessary decision, to shoot Harambe to safely retrieve the child. The child was taken to the hospital and we do not yet have information about his status. We are in close contact with authorities and will update as more information becomes available.

Within 72 hours:

- Draft blog post that provides greater detail and addresses common questions including public safety concerns, why a tranquilizer was not used, the credibility of the team who made the decision, and status of the child. Link post on all social channels and on the homepage of the website.
- Work with HR and Internal Communications to determine best way to communicate with employees and provide a channel for them to communicate with leadership.
- Zoo Director Maynard directly contacts important stakeholders, such as board members and community partners.

3-7 days after:

- We start to move into the Maintenance phase in which we continue to provide additional information and correct misinformation through owned channels and media interviews.
- Conversation monitoring continues and we continue to focus on crisis updates on our social channels.

1-4 weeks after:

- We move toward the Resolution phase by finalizing a plan for how to improve safety going forward and share it across all channels.
- Look for opportunities to repair organizational image and positive news to report and start posting “regular” content again on social media.
- Direct people to the Zoo’s gorilla conservation efforts and ask for support.
- Gauge employee satisfaction with internal communication efforts and improve efforts as necessary.

1-3 months after:

- Moving into the Evaluation phase, we document processes and measure recovery efforts using key metrics.
- We implement safety improvements and content on all owned channels returns to normal.

V. Closing Thoughts

By nature a crisis is unwanted, unexpected, and wildly disruptive. While there is no way to fully prepare, planning ahead where possible is vital to the long-term viability of an organization. Crisis preparation includes assessing risks, identifying crisis team members, developing templates and messages, deciding how information will be shared, and so on.

When crisis hits, it is a bewildering experience, but one that can ultimately lead to a stronger organization. With vulnerabilities exposed, there is an opportunity to respond in an ethical and responsible manner and clean up the mess. Once the dust settles, evaluation offers gems of insight – what happened, how did we respond, and what can we do better? And then with deeper understanding, the organization can move forward with greater strength.

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