

- **It's everywhere.** Internet users worldwide spend, on average, **144 minutes per day** on social media, and the number of social media users worldwide is expected to surpass **three billion** in 2020. Social media has

It is imperative that social media professionals are part of planning a brand's crisis response. Whether you're the leader of a social team, a solo social media manager or a communications professional wearing many hats, your understanding of this important channel will inform an integrated, customer-centric communications plan.

Develop an integrated crisis communications plan

When it comes to crisis communications, the best plan is one you never have to use. But we can't all be so fortunate, so it's best to proactively take the necessary time to prepare. Documenting your organization's best practices, crisis response team and policies will ensure that when something goes awry, your team can swiftly leap into action.

You'll notice that the plan template below isn't limited to social media issues. That's because, in the event of a brand crisis, it's impossible to separate social media from other communications channels like public relations, internal communications, content and investor relations (when applicable). The elements of your communications plan can be scaled up or down to apply to your team and your company's unique communications approach.

As you work through every possible scenario, consider incorporating these elements into your integrated crisis communications plan.

Crisis communications team

Confusion only serves to exacerbate an emergency. Eliminate as much uncertainty as possible by determining in advance who tackles what, who their backups are and who will handle which elements of your social media response.

While some crises can be tackled more easily than others—a Tweet from the wrong account may be less severe than a nationwide product recall—having a robust team in place will allow you to scale your response down if the crisis is less severe. Make sure your plan includes the following roles:

- **Crisis communications team leader (CCTL):** Responsible for coordinating the team's response, overseeing message development, scheduling crisis communications team meetings and facilitating approvals with senior leadership. This may be a senior communications leader within your organization.
- **Crisis communications coordinator (CCC):** In the event of a larger crisis, this person will assist the CCTL with prioritizing the team's responsibilities and project managing response. They will liaise with all of the communications team leaders: social, PR, internal communication, investor relations, customer marketing, etc. This may be a communications manager from any discipline or your social team lead.
- **Final approver:** This person is a high-ranking executive and will provide final approval on all publicly disseminated information. They will also act as a spokesperson when necessary, whether in media statements or social content that's part of your response.
- **Legal counsel:** This team member's role is straightforward—they provide legal advice on communication strategies and the business impact of a given situation, and they approve formal company statements and/or the company's message protocol.
- **IT and/or security:** This person will coordinate any technology needed to manage the situation and lead investigation of any security issues.

Of course, add other roles or executives from other functions as applies to your organization. Your plan should include each team member's name, role, contact information (work and home/personal) and who will serve as a backup if they are unavailable.

Crisis scenarios

Identify what types of scenarios might emerge that could adversely impact your business. List the types of happenings that could cause each type of crisis, as well as the right member of your executive team to help your crisis communications team leader run point. Here's an example of how you might list this information.

Type of crisis: Business reputation

- Major product recall, failure or safety issue
 - Point person: CEO, chief product officer or head of product development for that line of business

- Leak of confidential information
 - Point person: CEO or chief responsible for the relevant area of the business

- Controversial statements by leadership or employee (on social media or elsewhere)
 - Point person: CEO if C-level; CMO or head of communications otherwise

- Offensive social media message posted from brand account
 - Point person: CMO or head of communications

- And so on.

While listing out these types of scenarios may not be a pleasant exercise, thinking about them when your business *isn't* at risk will give you one less worry in the event of a crisis.

Crisis assessment criteria

The first step in managing a crisis is understanding what happened and the severity of the issue. Include a list of crisis levels and characteristics in your plan to help your team quickly ascertain the appropriate level of response when a crisis arises.

You might assign crisis severity levels ranging from level one (something that attracts very little attention) to level five (something that disrupts business and/or is an international news story). With this guidance in place, you can begin any crisis communications response planning by gathering the following information, and your crisis team leader can quickly identify the right level and adequate response.

- What happened and where?
- When did it happen?
- Who is involved?
- How did it happen?
- What has happened and/or is planned in response?
- How many people does this affect?
- How many people are aware?

An offensive Tweet may only rate a level one and require a smaller team with an appropriately scaled down response—but if social media alerts you to a dangerous product problem or food poisoning cases from one of your restaurants, you might be ringing the four- or five-alarm bell.

Communication and notification steps

In this section of your plan, lay out what the chain of communication looks like when you need to activate your plan. Generally this would begin when a member of your crisis communications team is first informed of a potential crisis and start with them notifying the crisis communications team leader, and it would continue from there depending on the type and severity of the crisis.

This can also include best practices for how the crisis communications team will stay in touch while managing the situation; for example, establish a daily stand-up meeting and create a temporary Slack channel or Facebook Workplace Group that you'll use for real-time communication.

Account access, policies and procedures

Who has the password to your organization's Twitter account? What's the two-step verification code for accessing your Instagram natively? Where do you respond if your main communications channels are compromised?

Build a central repository of policies, procedures and other documentation for an extra layer of security. That way you aren't relying only on somebody's memory in a high-pressure situation and you aren't stalled if a team member can't be reached.

Get team and leadership buy-in for your plan

The final step of creating a plan is making sure that the right people are aware and on board for their roles in managing a crisis. Share your plan with your direct manager and determine the best way to share with your organization's leadership. Provide a window for feedback and, from there, make sure the plan is housed in an easy-to-access digital location like the policies and procedures section of your company's intranet, central server or Wiki. Finally, review this plan on an annual basis to ensure your protocols and contact information remain up-to-date.

Activate your plan

When it becomes necessary to activate your plan, take a deep breath. Remember, you're prepared for this—which gives you a strong foundation and clear sense of next steps. Now, your job is to find a resolution and put your audience at ease. Here's how to reach that goal.

Remain flexible

A social crisis communications plan, of course, should cover the most crucial steps, but your team should also feel empowered to take actions that best suit the challenge at hand. Just keep all stakeholders in the loop if you deviate from the plan you've laid out.

This flexibility extends to how you handle your scheduled social messages. Many brands have their social posts queued several days or weeks in advance to promote an ongoing campaign or to provide a signal boost to evergreen content. When an emergency hits, turn off any scheduled messages. It doesn't reflect well on a business to share serious information about a product recall, then have a funny Tweet go out an hour later.

Develop a message protocol document

As you work with other communications stakeholders or the rest of your social team to plan your response, an agreed-upon message protocol document will be an invaluable resource. This document should outline:

- Your brand's position, stance or formal response
- Your brand's messaging strategy
- Approved social media copy to publish
- Approved social media messaging or responses

This document should be approved by the crisis communications team leader as well as your company's legal team as needed. With your message protocol in place, you'll be ready to communicate with your audience as soon as you get the green light.

Set up your social media operations

Next, you'll want to establish your social media management plan and processes. On social, you'll need to consider several factors:

- How you will publish information and what platforms to prioritize
- Communications going out on other channels (e.g. customer emails) and timing
- How you will manage inbound messages
- How (or if) you will respond to inbound messages
- How you will assess the situation (at the outset and through the end) and provide insights to the rest of your crisis communications team

Choosing the right platforms

Depending on the crisis at hand and the field you're in, different social platforms may be better for distributing your messages. Know where your core audience is—and it may not just be on the biggest platforms.

The social platforms of choice should also make sense for the situation: a fire at one of your facilities may require immediate notification on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, whereas a response to an insensitive public comment about an employee might require messaging on LinkedIn and Facebook.

Finding, managing and engaging with inbound messages

Using the message protocol document you've developed, you'll know what types of messages you can and should respond to. But in order to find all of the relevant messages, you'll also need to be able to surface posts where people aren't tagging your brand.

To mitigate major issues before or as they arise, have a solid monitoring process in place, one built around your brand as well as your brand category. Through active keyword monitoring, you will be alerted of social discussions directly or indirectly involving your organization.

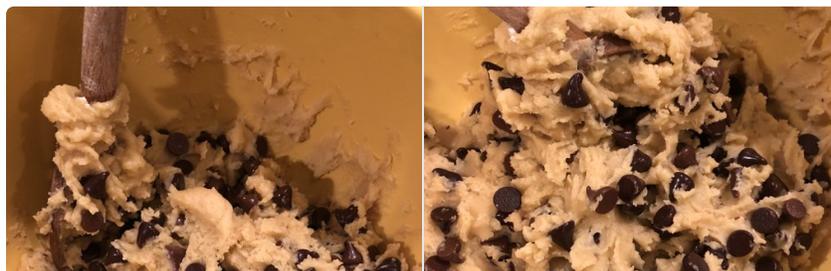
While this example is far from a real crisis, keyword monitoring helped [Nestle Toll House](#) find a customer joking about making a mistake with their recipe while baking, regardless of the fact that the customer didn't tag the Nestle Toll House account, and send a friendly response. Had the issue been something more serious, the same monitoring best practices would apply.

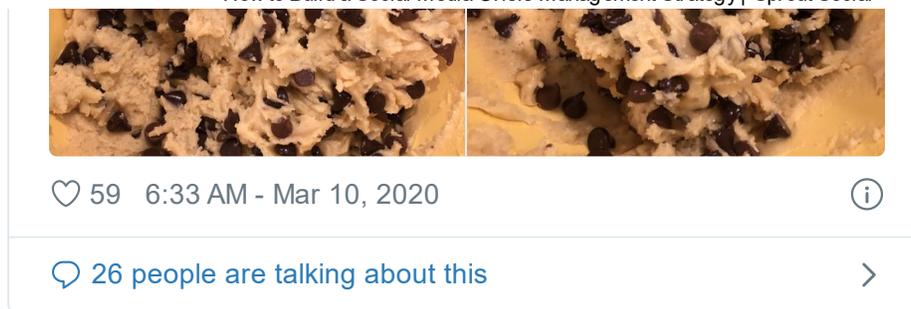


Maxie And Aster 🍷❤️🍷 @WorkingFromHome
@MaxieAndAster

Uhhhhh... I'm making Nestlé Toll House chocolate chip cookies from scratch.

Do ya think I messed up the recipe and put in too many chocolate chips ^^'





In times of crisis, your brand's inbound message volume will likely increase. Determine what kinds of tools can help you provide swift and appropriate responses to people reaching out. For example, chatbots can help you manage a high volume of similar inquiries and route people to appropriate information—while freeing up your team members to address more nuanced issues.

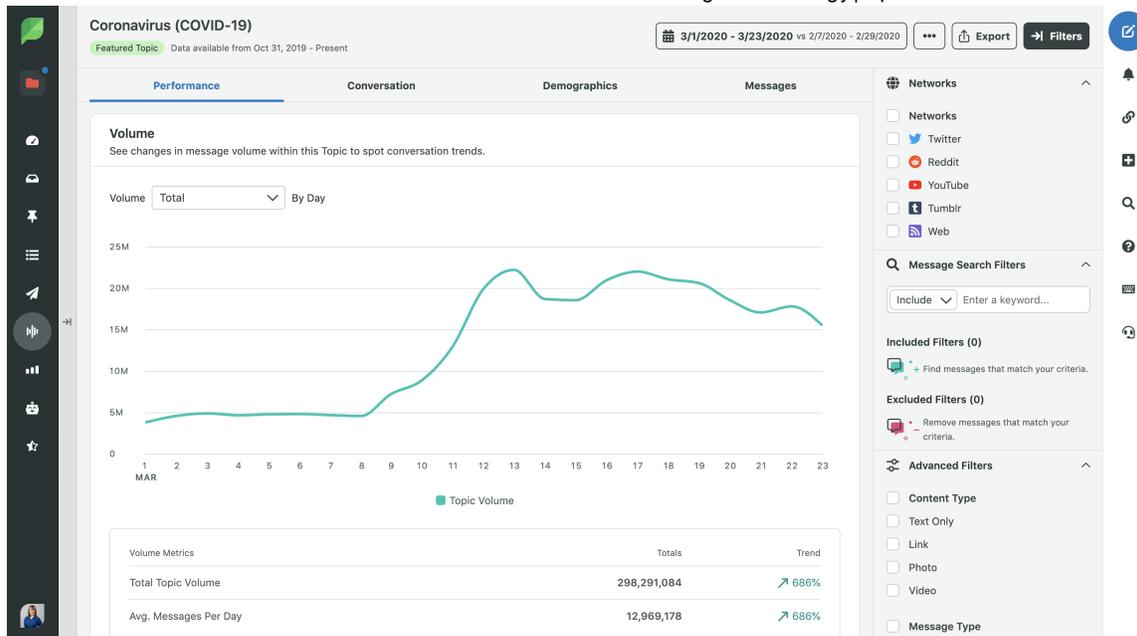
In Sprout Social, setting up [Inbox Rules and Auto-Tagging](#) can help you create a Tag-based Inbox View to manage all messages related to the crisis at hand in one place. This will also enable you to quickly pull a Tag Report to share with your team or members of leadership to give them a sense of the conversation.

Situational assessment and providing insights to leadership

Use social listening to get a bird's eye view of the situation, understand the trajectory of the crisis and identify what specific related issues are driving the most negative sentiment.

One of the first things to do is set up a [Listening Topic in Sprout](#) or your tool of choice to access insights from aggregate social data. This will enable you to see how the volume of messages and engagements about the issue fluctuates, what moments in the social conversation caused inflection points and what specific messaging is or isn't resonating with your audience.

With social listening, you can quickly aggregate and export these insights as a report to share with your team and leadership. Doing this at the beginning of a crisis can inform a customer-centric messaging strategy and continuously empower you to adapt your messaging as the situation unfolds.



After your brand has hopefully mitigated the crisis, you'll also be able to report on the lifecycle of the situation and how your brand's response changed the tone of the conversation. These insights will give your crisis communications team information to improve or build on your plan for the future. Just in case.

Manage the aftermath

Whether you just went through a small hiccup or a major snafu, you should analyze your wholesale response and the reaction over time on social. A [comprehensive report](#) that shows you impressions, shares, comments and sentiment, as well as internal metrics like average response time to critical questions, will enable you to measure your success and outline areas for improvement moving forward.

Ideally, you will want to set the dates for what you measure so that you can see your brand's baseline performance at a normal time, then how data points changed at the beginning, middle and end of a problem.

The big signs of how a crisis was handled might not show up until much later in the form of decreased revenue or customer loss. But a social savvy organization can track customer sentiment in real time and leverage analytics to show how well a situation was handled. Remember that your success isn't just about the numbers—it's how well you connected with your audience.

Breathe easy

Crises may be overwhelming and worrying. But just as the best offense is a good defense, taking the time to prepare for emergencies can alleviate a good portion of the mental strain. With sound strategies in place and the right tools at your side, you are ready to fight any battle that comes your way.

If you'd like a PDF version of this guide, you can download one here.

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If you're ready to try social media management software that will help your team more effectively manage any kind of crisis, start a [free 30-day trial of Sprout Social](#) today.

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