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An aerial photograph of a city, likely Washington D.C., featuring the U.S. Capitol building. A semi-transparent white rectangle is centered over the image. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a network diagram consisting of white circles of various sizes connected by thin white lines. Some of these circles contain blue icons: a single person, two people, or a group of three people. The background image is slightly faded to allow the text and graphics to stand out.

Communications During Crisis

*A Management Plan for
Government*





Introduction

Opportunity for Leadership

Communication is arguably the unsung hero of crisis response. Every text sent, email blasted, or social message posted needs to inspire constituents to take life-saving or constructive action.

Managing crisis communications is often an all-consuming task that overlays the government team's already-busy daily workload. During a crisis, daily tasks must stop, and everyone in the organization needs to turn their attention to communications to manage important outcomes such as saving lives. However, times of crisis offer an opportunity for the communicator to assert themselves as an invaluable bridge-builder between subject matter experts, department leadership, the media, and the citizens you serve.

Granicus' management plan aims to help communicators operate from a place of calm during a crisis and set up a strategy to tackle any crisis in a step-by-step fashion. While aiding you in uniquely noble purposes such as saving lives, rebuilding communities, and fostering trust in local government, our long-term approach can also translate into legislative and operational victories for your department.

Traits of a Crisis Leader

Armed with the guidance in this work plan, you can promote more robust and resilient communities that function at their best during good times and bad. As a calm and strategic communications leader, you can bring citizens and government closer together!



“ People want to know that you care before they care what you know. ”

– LCDR Scott McBride, Chief of Media Relations,
US Coast Guard



Our Goal

Credibility and Cohesion in a Multi-Crisis Environment

For many around the world, weather-related crisis events like hurricanes, flooding, tornadoes, and wildfires are regular occurrences. But what happens if a public health emergency is declared in the middle of your county's wildfire response? Or protests erupt as you are trying to manage a global health pandemic?

This crisis management plan provides the government leader, and members of the crisis response team, with an actionable, repeatable, step-by-step crisis communications plan for single or multi-crisis scenarios.

The goal of any crisis communications plan is to reach the right stakeholders and motivate them to take action. Our approach allows you to manage multiple stakeholder groups - all with different disciplines and motivations - at once, helping your department to ensure business continuity and safeguard its credibility as part of its overall response.

How to Use This Book

Carve out some time to go through the workbook.

Ideally, you can carve out time to use this workbook in the midst of business-as-usual to build your own plan, or as you see concerning trends that may indicate a crisis is emerging. You can also use this workbook immediately once a crisis has been declared to plan and continue building upon it as other crises arise or repeat.

Utilize the tools provided in this workbook.

Throughout this workbook, you will find tools to help you begin planning for any crisis. From prompts to brainstorm critical contacts, to advice on how to target your crisis messaging, this book should be your first step in planning. You will learn how to lead your community to better outcomes with preparation, confidence, and calm.

Use this book to prepare ahead of time for a crisis.

The more prepared you are ahead of time, the easier the response effort will be for you. There's enough to think about and to do in the middle of the crisis event as it is.

For our purposes, "crisis", "emergency", and "disaster" will be regarded interchangeably and referred to as "crisis." Our approach can be used for everything from a natural disaster to a government scandal, breakdown in public systems, or even a mass casualty event. We will also refer to "crisis" in its singular form for consistency and ease of reading.



Step-By-Step Crisis Communications Planning



STEP 1

Determine Operational Goals



STEP 2

Knowing Your Team, Allies, and Audiences



STEP 3

Develop Your Key Messages



STEP 4

Determine Which Channels to Use



STEP 5

Encourage Two-Way Feedback & Evaluate Your Communications Plan



STEP 6

Review, Refine and Repeat

Your Mindset: Flexibility is Key

The methodology of crisis communications is the same no matter the crisis type, no matter how many crises are impacting you at once, or if you begin planning before or during the crisis event. However, as no two crisis events are ever the same, your mindset must remain nimble so that you can triage and pivot your work to keep up with the fluid response required.







Let's Begin...

STEP 1

Determine Operational Goals

What does success look like?

In order to help you plan your communications most effectively, you need a general idea of what successful resolution looks like in each crisis event. Ideally, your crisis response goals should reflect the inputs of the entire crisis team, as well as subject matter experts (more in Step 2). Here are some examples to help you visualize:

	Health Crisis 	Prepare for Natural Disaster 	React to Natural Disaster 	Demonstrations 	Public Safety 	Government Scandal 
Goals	Flatten the curve	Protect lives & property	Recover & rebuild	Enable 1st amendment rights & encourage safety	Protect lives & Secure perpetrator(s)	Restore trust
Tactics	Get people tested Health guidance followed Social distance	Evacuate residents Consult NOAA Board up homes & stores Place sand bags	Care for those injured Assess damages Rebuild properties	Issue permits Work with local community nearby More police on-site	Shelter-in-place More police on-site Share information with the public	Address scandal Correct misinformation Offer a remedy
Risks	Misinformation Confusion Quarantine fatigue	Evacuation delay or avoidance Change in weather patterns	Other crisis event Funding delays	Protests turned violent	Accomplices joining the event	New details contradict statements meant to rebuild trust

For example, with a natural disaster that has already taken place versus one that is approaching, your goals would be different. More specifically, you would first want to focus on evacuations and preparedness when talking to the public before a hurricane, but after a tornado, your goal would be recovery and rebuilding. As events unfold, goals can and should shift and your tactics should change accordingly.

Ask Yourself

While planning, think about any operational risks or other considerations that may influence the effectiveness or timeliness of your team's communications response based upon your specific goals.

- ① Are there any activities or projects currently taking place within your department that would compete for attention during a crisis? What do you need to do to engage with internal and external stakeholders to let them know that this activity or project is on hold as you work through the crisis?
- ② Are there tasks that normally fall between one or two departments or individuals? Can you work with leadership to assign clear leads/roles to eliminate any ambiguity during crisis?
- ③ What is your current approval process for external content or messaging? Is there a way to expedite message approvals during a crisis?

While these hypothetical questions relate to time constraints and human resources, you may also find it useful to consider financial constraints that would pose operational risk.

Generally, the idea is to think about non-communications factors and limitations that will influence the communications planning that follows throughout this book.



Use this worksheet as a team, or by yourself, to write down operational goals for each crisis type common to your department.

Goals	
Tactics	
Risks	

STEP 2

Knowing Your Team, Allies, and Audiences

Stakeholder Mapping

So you've visualized and even codified what success looks like for each crisis type. Who are your key partners to help you reach your destination? Who do you need to inform or inspire?

Next in our step-by-step approach is mapping key stakeholders according to three categories:



**The Core Crisis Response Team
& Other Collaborators**



Allies: Experts & Contributors



Customers and Constituents



The Core Crisis Response Team & Other Collaborators

The core crisis team should be a multidisciplinary group whose time is wholly dedicated to managing all crisis scenarios. This generally includes your department leadership, IT, Legal, Emergency Response, and Operations: those who have an immediate role to play in crisis response and also have a direct chain of command within your department (for accountability purposes); however, of course, the team may also include Collaborators from other departments or organizations who have a day-to-day role to play in resolution. The team also includes the spokesperson, who will represent the department in front of the public.



Allies: Experts & Contributors

Third-party validators can lend credibility to your department's response, help to correct misinformation that may circulate from other sources, and reach audiences where you may not have in-roads just yet. This group is likely to be consulted behind the scenes and/or introduced to the public as part of the crisis team's response. Because they tend to be experts in a concentrated field, they will likely lend credence to a single crisis response, as opposed to multiple.

Examples of experts and contributors include media and social media influencers, university researchers, community activists, and meteorologists. These individuals may either have a platform with significant reach, may have a concentration or expertise in a field related to the crisis event that gives them more credibility with the public and/or may be able to comment from a neutral standpoint with compliments on the job your department is doing to respond to the crisis. (See the Engagement Matrix on page 12 for more examples).









Customers and Constituents

These are the direct beneficiaries of response team actions and messaging; simply put, they are who you are serving during the crisis. As a leader during any crisis, it will be your responsibility to determine how to reach the most people possible and keep them engaged with compelling messaging.

Prior to a crisis is the best time to consider how to build your audience and grow your list for maximum impact. What options do you have available to you including text subscriptions, pop-ups on web properties, sharing lists with other agencies, etc? While you are building your lists, you also need to consider their stated preferences. Certain crisis scenarios may override their preferences if loss of life is at stake.

Because we are balancing immediate response and the long-term, we’re also seeking to build or strengthen our relationships with members of each breakout group. When the next crisis inevitably hits, how handy would it be to have a ready-made network of allies and a constituency whose trust in us has been secured from our last crisis response?

Below is a summary of common audience groups according to the type of crisis you may be facing. You can use this chart to trigger your own thoughts as to who may be your collaborators, allies, and constituents.

	Health Crisis	Prepare for Natural Disaster	React to Natural Disaster	Demonstrations	Public Safety	Government Scandal
						
Team & Collaborators	Health authorities at state/federal level Local hospitals EMTs	Police EMTs/Firefighters Municipal services Housing authorities	State/Local police EMTs/Firefighters Municipal services Housing authorities	State/Local police Firefighters Security agencies Intelligence agencies	FBI State intelligence State/local police	Other Government Agencies
Allies	Local media Eminent doctors University researchers	NGOs like Red Cross NOAA Meteorologists	NGOs like Red Cross Construction companies Remediation companies	Advocacy groups Influencers	Experts in Safety Event (i.e. Bioterrorism or Weapons Experts)	Media Influencers
Customers & Constituents	Total population	Residents & business owners impacted	Residents & business owners impacted	Residents & business owners impacted	Residents & business owners impacted	Total population

Use the blank space provided to think about key stakeholders by group.

Team & Collaborators	
Allies	
Constituents	

Granicus' govDelivery email, text and social delivery platform has extensive audience building tools embedded as well as a subscriber network of 200 million citizens. In addition, govDelivery allows for specific targeting of messages based upon demographics, location, interests, and more.



STEP 3

Develop Your Key Messages

What You Need People to Know, Do, and Feel:

After you have listed key stakeholders and thought generally about what action you need them to take, the next step is to develop clear, concise messages. Crisis messages should provide timely, truthful, and actionable information to an audience in order for individuals to make informed decisions that are in their best interest.

One simple way to think about writing crisis messages is to think along the lines of “Know, Do and Feel.”



Know

what facts, figures or updates do you need audiences to be aware of?



Do

what actions or steps do you need audiences to take to help bring the crisis to resolution?



Feel

how do you want audiences to react or feel as a result of your messages?

In order to write an effective “Know, Do and Feel” message, also consider that strong messages in the time of crisis usually have the following elements:

They are simple.

Keep your language at an eighth-grade reading level to ensure a broad reach.

They have a clear call to action.

Use active verbs such as “Do, sign up, respond, evacuate,” so people understand clearly what you are asking them to do.

They avoid confusion and misinformation.

State and repeat what is known, and explicitly state what is not known to help avoid confusion or misinformation. You may wish to call on your Allies & Experts to help validate the information from a third-party perspective.

They are timely.

Tell the public what you know, when you know it. This may also mean being prepared to pivot, delay, or adjust messages (especially those planned ahead of time) in alignment with priorities and the rapid pace of information during a crisis.

They provide contact information.

Information such as URLs, phone numbers, and alert sign-ups keep the conversation going between you and your audience after the initial message is sent.

They get the message out on the correct channels.

Deliver where the crisis occurred to ensure you meet the audience where it is. Did the crisis begin over Twitter? Then start with Twitter and use more channels as needed (more on this in Step 4).

They tailor their messages.

Consider that messaging needs to be tailored so that all people can receive the intended message, taking different languages or disabilities into account. Does your content need to be translated into various languages? Is it ADA-compliant?

They are received by hard-to-reach populations.

How will you ensure you connect with communities that are not on traditional channels? What local community leaders will you need to contact to help you reach them?

This word cloud was built by the attendees of our Crisis Communications webinar on July 16th, 2020

You'll see here that attendees submitted words like "inform", "educate", "clear" and "trust", which all relate to knowing, doing and feeling in a time of crisis, as well as the overall response we must take as communicators to ensure effective resolution.









Listen to our [Crisis Communications: How to Build a Plan for Government](#) webinar recording.



Perhaps above all, effective messages in times of crisis are human and empathetic. While still containing facts and calls to action, messages should also acknowledge doubt or confusion, convey hope, and inspire confidence. They balance the cerebral “know and do” with the emotional “feel.”

Review the Engagement Matrix below for inspiration when writing your crisis messages:

	Health Crisis 	Prepare for Natural Disaster 	React to Natural Disaster 	Demonstrations 	Public Safety 	Government Scandal 
Moods	Fear Confusion Inconvenience	Fear Inconvenience Panic	Grief Devastated Insecure	Insecurity/ Caution Curiosity Inspiration	Fear Anxiety/Worry Panic	Mistrust Disappointment, Shock/ Disapproval
Motivators	Get/Seek (testing) Monitor (symptoms) Practice (handwashing, distancing)	Pack (essentials) Evacuate, Seek (other shelter) Protect/Board (your homes, items)	Know (worst is over) Assess (damages) Consult (source for aid)	Exercise (caution) Exercise (your rights) Be vigilant Refrain (from violence)	Shelter (in place) Secure (yourself, those around you) Take (the following steps)	Acknowledge (frustration, anger) Apologize Address (issue head-on)
Messages	Concern/Care Priority Wellbeing Help/Support	Mitigation Shelter Temporary Remedy	Aid Recovery Community Help/Support	Safety Constitutional Community Advocacy	Safety Management Containment Order	Apology Regret Understanding
Emotional Response	Empowered Secure/ Compliant Patient/ Understanding	Confident Prepared	Encouraged Cared For Remembered Attended To	Respected Heard Acknowledged	Safe Secure Protected	Satisfied Forgiving

govAccess and govDelivery have tools to ensure your content can be accessed by any browser, mobile phone, platform, and is ADA compliant.

Customers and Constituents

»» **Create your own crisis plan.**

Ready.gov has some great content to help families and individuals create their own crisis plan and consider all inputs, like finances, supplies, shelter, etc. Take advantage of their and other departments' existing content when it makes sense to save yourself the work and share these important messages with your audiences.

»» **Write and pre-approve messages.**

If you're planning for the crisis ahead of time, write and pre-approve messages and keep them on-the-shelf for when the crisis occurs. This will help you to avoid the often-lengthy approvals process during the crisis event when time is even more of the essence.

»» **Create clear, consistent, and well formatted messages.**

Formatting messages to be consistent and easily understood is key to ensure that a message gets through. During a time of stress, the average human brain can only hold three messages, versus seven without stress. It is critical to share information that is consistent in format, so citizens can find and understand what they need quickly.

»» **Use consistent visuals.**

Any visuals that you use on social media or as video footage should be consistent with your words. For example, if you are telling folks to stay calm, project images of calm and order.

»» **Don't forget allies and experts.**

Remember that Allies & Experts are also an audience who may need distinct calls to action depending upon your needs. Here are some examples:

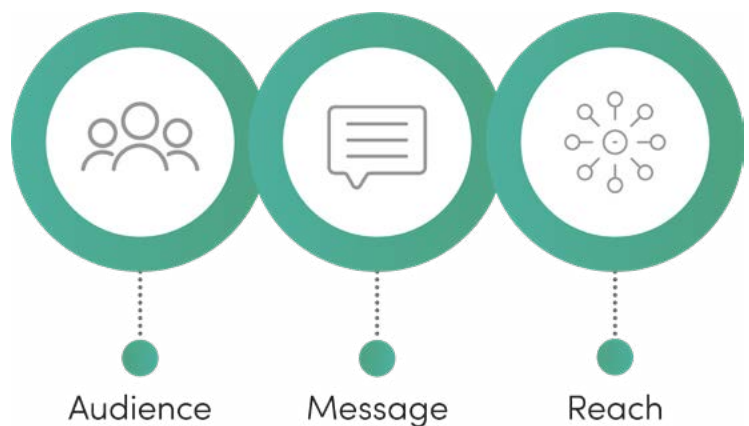
- "ABC department will be posting updates to Facebook every hour. Can you please share these updates with your networks to help us get the word out?"
- "Help us to communicate with the elderly by sharing news with your parents and loved ones."

STEP 4

Determine Which Channels to Use

Engaging Your Stakeholders:

Once audiences and messages have been determined, the next step is to consider the most effective ways of delivering your message to its intended audience. As communicators, we sometimes wrongly assume that a sent message is a received message. We should never make that assumption, nor rely on one channel only to reach our audiences.



This graphic above shows the ideal alignment of Audience - Message - Reach. This ensures that the “right” message of knowing, doing and feeling reaches its targeted audience on the platforms and channels where the audience is already going on a regular basis



Odds are, you are already engaging with groups of stakeholders as part of your day-to-day communications, but here are some things to consider for crisis planning:

» **Core Crisis Response Team**

Determine how and how often the team will share information with each other, especially as members are working independently to respond to different elements of a crisis.

In addition to ongoing meetings and email channels, consider creating a “Digital War Room” – an open video conference line – where members can jump on and off quickly as needed to share information.

» **Allies & Experts**

In a pinch, call or email these contacts to help you share messages and/or contribute facts or information.

Outside of crisis, keep up relationships with your Allies & Experts. Consider sending out a quarterly email or hosting a roundtable to keep this group abreast of your planning so that you don’t skip a beat when a crisis hits.

» **Customers & Constituents**

This group of stakeholders may change on an ongoing basis, but one thing remains the same: you must have a multi-channel approach to ensure you are reaching both customers and constituents. Strong communicators are always thinking about how to grow their various audiences so that when a crisis hits, they are prepared to reach as many people as possible. As your audience grows, so does the need for segmentation, or the ability to group audiences by what they care about most. This aligns with communications best practices that enable you to get more targeted over time, and deliver information that your audience wants and needs to hear.

Channels to Use in Crisis:



Email



Social/
Paid Ads



Billboard



Print



Phone/
SMS



Display Ads/
Pop-ups



Radio



Web



TV



Digital Portal/
Forms

Your department may not be using all of the channels in our infographic, so it is up to you to decide which ones make the most sense. You may even find that the crisis presents an opportunity to pilot a new channel - like SMS - given the availability of crisis-earmarked funds and/or the fact that you have the public's captive attention.

Use this blank space to brainstorm your top channels to use in a time of crisis, considering your goals and stakeholders.

With govDelivery’s SMS and interactive text capabilities, you can offer residents the opportunity to opt into text message communications – bringing information to them directly on their mobile device.

Ask Yourself

As you plan out your channel strategy, ask yourself:

- ② **How can I take advantage of existing channels during a crisis?**
What new channels or platforms do I need to utilize to reach “new” groups, such as millennials or those in remote areas, who may not be part of my regular audience but need vital information in crisis?
- ② **Can I ask my Allies & Experts to share messages on my behalf?**
Can they help me reach audiences where I may not have as much influence?
- ② **What channel will get my message out fastest?**
Social Media channels are very quick, but they may not reach everyone – weigh the pros and cons of speed versus reach.
- ② **Is my content mobile-optimized so that people can easily access it on their phones?**
- ② **How can I get extra life out of this one piece of content?**
On what other channels can I share it in order to cross-pollinate?
- ② **Can I repurpose messages?**
Do I have any canned messages – whether from my previous planning, or speeches or releases – that I can use to help avoid or shorten the approvals process? Identify an expedited approval process for communications that is three people or less.
- ② **Am I finding the right balance of “Know, Do, Feel” and action versus emotion?**



Ask Yourself (cont'd)

? Are the needs of my audience being met?

Am I considering the needs of all generations and preferences in my communications by including web, phone, email, and social? For example, over half of US adults get their news from social media, however a misquote or false data can go viral if not corrected in time. (Source: [Five Modern Principles for Covid-19 Response](#))

? Do I need new or revised forms?

In conjunction with my Operations experts, do I need new or revised inbound forms (i.e. to apply for flood insurance, to renew a license) for constituent services to help fast-track or control volumes?

govService delivers seamless digital services such as self-service forms, and pre-built services such as building permit procurement, licensing, etc.

? Can this be managed with a limited number of channels?

Do I want to limit the number of channels I'm using in scale with the severity of the crisis? Is the crisis really an "incident" that can be managed directly with key stakeholders and outside of full public view? This approach, of course, differs from a widespread public safety or health event, where you want to ensure maximum awareness.

Granicus' tools allow you to post across email, social media, and text with one button. With govDelivery, each post becomes a landing page that can be indexed by Google for even more reach. In addition, all posts are automatically optimized for mobile.



The importance of deliverability

After all the hard work and planning that goes into creating and delivering your messages, you want to ensure that they get through. Certain message transmissions options like email platforms have issues getting to your citizens. It is best to consider the likelihood of a message hitting SPAM or other filters as you select a channel.

govDelivery ensures a 99.8% delivery rate for email communications.



STEP 5

Encourage Two-Way Feedback & Evaluate Your Communications Plan

Monitoring Engagement & Sentiment

Arguably, evaluation is the hardest part of the communicator's job, and can sometimes be overlooked as we move from fighting one fire (literal or figurative) to another.

Taking time to evaluate the efficacy of your channels and messages against your operational goals from Step 1 is important to understanding where you and your department should focus your efforts inside and outside of the ongoing and future crisis, and to helping your department leadership invest in future crisis communications capability (See Step 6).

Effective communicators are continually revising their approach due to data and reporting. Below is a checklist on how to measure messaging engagement.

Data-Gathering Action Plan

Email

Review email messages with highest/lowest open rates.

Review email messages with highest/lowest click rates.

Review subscription rates and subscribers per topic.

Digital Properties

Review website analytics for pages with highest traffic.

When appropriate, optimize pages with the most traffic to UX and messaging.

Gather numbers of service requests, 311 account overviews.

Participate in 'social listening' on social accounts for complaints/questions.

Text Message

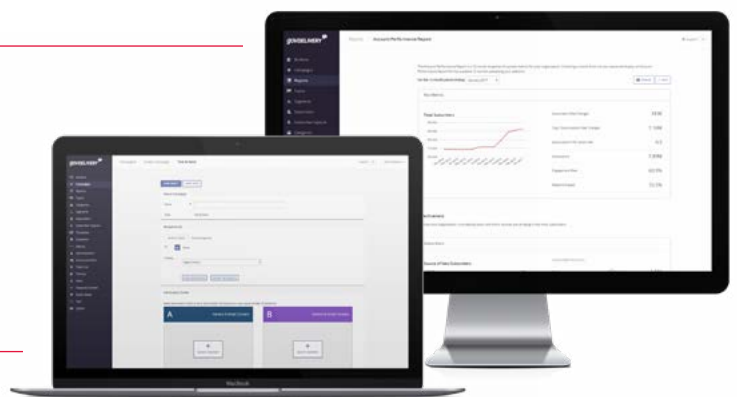
Get citizen feedback via a brief survey or poll.

Focus groups

Gather small cross-functional groups or individuals allowing for a more candid response.

Visit [Five Modern Principles for Covid-19 Response](#) to learn more.

govDelivery metrics tools can help you understand what contact is most impactful to your stakeholders and citizens.



Sentiment Analysis

To go one level deeper with your analysis, consider deploying some best practices in social listening. Data may show a spike in social engagement metrics, but if 75% of the shares have negative sentiment attached, then you need to know that. Consider the following methods to analyze sentiment:

>> **Comment Velocity**

Measures passion around a topic of conversation.

>> **Tone of Comments**

Pick a timeframe and count the percentage of positive and negative comments.

>> **Reactions**

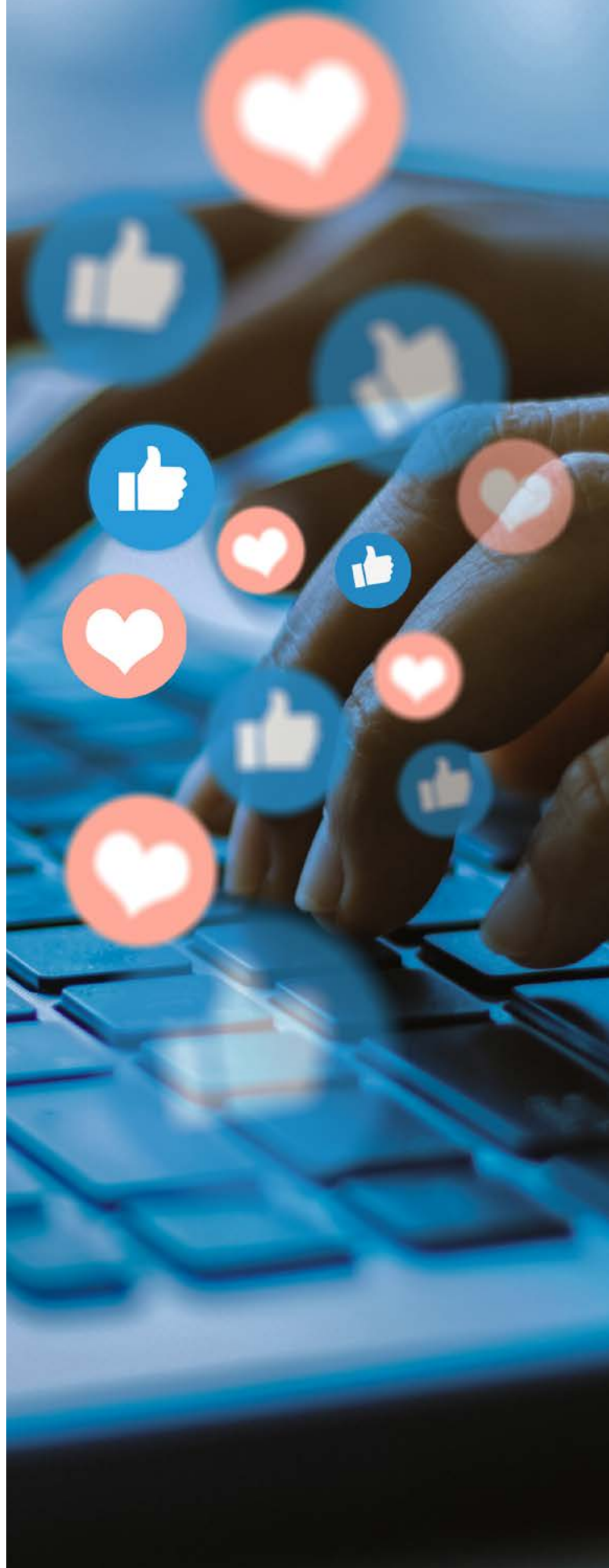
Certain social channels like Facebook give citizens the ability to pick a reaction outside of like (Like, Love, Anger, etc).

>> **Volume and Frequency of Mentions**

This information may show where some experts and allies connect more with your citizens than others.

>> **Net Promoter Score**

Governments can use pop up surveys on their websites to measure sentiment. Consider this sample question from the City of Centennial "How likely is it that you would recommend the service(s) provided to you by the City of Centennial to a friend or colleague?"





Once you have both data and subjective insights in hand, you will have a more complete picture of your impact. How did communications help the team's overall response to evacuate residents, respond to a damaging news article, save lives, etc.?

In the case of a damning sound bite or false statistic that went viral, from where did it originate and how did it spread? Are there any insights to glean that can help you to correct the misinformation or prevent a similar occurrence in the future?

You may also want to share good-news stories – kudos from constituents or significant metrics (i.e. “Our last tweet got over 2,000 retweets”) – with the crisis response team on a regular basis to keep up morale during the often grueling crisis response.

What analytical tools do you readily have at your disposal? What stats resonate with your leadership? Take a moment to gather your thoughts, considering the crisis types you’ve outlined.

By relying on iterative feedback, you can reverse course; and by noticing preference changes and then adjusting messaging, both priorities and messages can shift in real-time.



STEP 6

Review, Refine and Repeat

Perpetual Planning

Steps 1-5 can be revisited as often as necessary during the crisis to refine your approach.

It is assumed that once you've reached Step 6, you and your department have a respite of some kind that allows you to reflect on the recent crisis and use lessons learned to inform your next crisis response.

This starts with a formal Lessons Learned session, bringing together members of the core crisis team to discuss what went right, what could have benefited from more attention or a different approach, and what steps can be taken before the next crisis happens to capitalize upon the gains you've made in your crisis response as a team.



As a follow-on action, the team should incorporate its findings into its crisis management plans and archive materials. For you, the communicator, it means going back to this workbook to add and tweak as required. If your department finds that its crisis response requires a major overhaul, you may seek a more complete change management effort as opposed to minor tweaks to existing documents.

While we're at it: where are your crisis plans saved? Are they accessible to all members of the core response team?

Also, think about how to apply these Lessons Learned to "business as usual" at your department.

As an example: your post-crisis analysis shows that the public seemed to favor social media alerts over other media - like SMS and email - during the last crisis. Should you be doing more year-round to encourage sign-up to your social media platforms? It is important to continue to court them as followers for all-time, rather than to assume and accept they will leave you once the crisis abates. Consider driving this engagement as part of your non-crisis-communications planning that positions you to have more followers and engagement once the next crisis rolls around.

Which process improvements around crisis response would you like to highlight with your team?

Which key stakeholders would benefit from learning about your crisis response?

You and the team did a lot of work - share it!

Make sure that sister departments benefit from your lessons learned; consider hosting them for a quick webinar or roundtable.

Share your findings with your leadership, highlighting data and ROI when possible to make a case for continued or increased funding for crisis response.

Are you prepared for the next crisis? Granicus' tools and services have been supporting governments in all types of crisis scenarios.

**Get prepared with the right tools and team at
granicus.com/see-it-live**