

Guidelines for Media Crisis Management

The Federal Board of Revenue



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Registered offices
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Support to Good Governance in Pakistan Programme
Tax Reform Component
F 7/2, Street 11, House 6
Khosar Road, Islamabad, Pakistan
T +92 51 2608 988/989/990
F +92 51 2608 987
www.giz.de

Responsible
Catherine Isabel Froehling, Head of Support to Good Governance in Pakistan Programme
Dr. Amna Khalifa, Component Leader, Tax Reform Component, Support to Good Governance in Pakistan Programme

Authors
Guardian Management , Suite No. 8, Mezzanine Floor, 80 East, Malik Complex, Islamabad, Pakistan
Janine Baudach, Communications Advisor, Tax Reform Component, Support to Good Governance in Pakistan Programme
Humaira Zahid, Advisor, Tax Reform Component, Support to Good Governance in Pakistan Programme

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Mr. Tariq Bashir

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Introduction

Whether the story concerns a tax evasion scandal, controversial taxation, leak of information regarding forthcoming taxation policy, a case of poor services or issues relating to personal safety or integrity of employees, puts FBR negatively in the headlines. At such times, FBR leadership should not only be ready to respond to media inquiries but should have a proactive media policy in place which will control the damage or turn events in favour of FBR.

Identifying a Crisis

- Tax gap issues
- Media hype on tax defaulters/ avoidance
- Controversial decisions
- Inappropriate communication
- Inappropriate online comments
- Early disclosure of vital information
- Criminal activity by an FBR employee
- Corruption cases
- Death/accident
- Fire/natural disaster
- Act of terrorism
- System flaws
- Bad customer service
- Hacked website
- Negative reviews
- What else?

Preparatory Measures

The following should be implemented before any incident occurs and the media barrage begins:

Establish a Crisis Management Task Force/Team (CMT)

The team comprising members from various wings, departments and representing various specialties such as administration, media relations, security, risk management and legal should be formulated. This team should be responsible for anticipating worse-case scenarios, development and implementing the crisis management plan, and reviewing emergency protocols on an annual basis. In addition to identifying major risks and conducting simulations, this team's preparatory duties include:

- **Creating crisis management and communication policies and procedures** that enhance access to senior FBR leaders and reinforce the chain of command.
- **Developing an emergency database of contacts and resources**, such as media persons and outlets, government offices, non-profit agencies and crisis management consultants.

The Crisis Management Team should also be tasked to handle the media during crisis in collaboration with the FBR Public Relations Office.

Appoint a Capable Spokesperson

The crisis management team should also designate a primary media contact and an emergency backup, both of whom should be authorized by the senior management to speak on behalf of FBR. To properly execute this responsibility, the spokesperson should be:

- of sufficient rank in the organisation to serve as authoritative a credible source
- accessible on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis during the entire crisis period
- knowledgeable about FBR and legal issues, with ready access to in-house and outside experts, including a FBR Member
- verbally adept, with strong listening and extemporaneous speaking skills
- temperamentally suitable, with a confident and professional demeanour and ability to face difficult questions calmly

Draft a General Media Response

By drafting a template for media messages, the team can ensure that responses consistently reflect the four key phases of a crisis action plan:

1. Full investigation of events
2. Thorough review of established facts
3. Accurate and timely communication of findings
4. Prompt and decisive action to address issues that have come to light



Such a strategy conveys to reporters that organisational leaders remain in control, even during challenging circumstances.

Media crisis management encompasses two sets of issues: firstly how to engage with the media during a crisis; and secondly how to deal with the media after negative reporting took place.

Educate Staff

Employees, volunteers and contracted personnel should be conversant with FBR's media-related policies, procedures and protocols. Instruct staff and volunteers to respectfully but firmly direct all media inquiries to the authorized spokesperson or an organizational website. Explain that this policy protects affected persons and staff members from harassment and distraction. In addition, remind employees that indiscreet comments may breed rumours or compromise FBR's standing.

During the Crisis

Identify Critical Points

Once the crisis occurs, the team must agree upon the essential information to communicate, as well as issues that have not been fully resolved and thus cannot be discussed with the media. The team must also be prepared to respond when media outlets uncover investigative findings prematurely.

Focus on Primary Audience

Determine which groups (such as affected persons, staff members, public, or others) are most affected by the situation, and direct core messages to their questions and concerns. In the event of injury, ensure that the injured/family members receive information first-hand from the organisation, not the media. If a lawsuit filing brings media attention, consult with legal staff prior to disclosure of any information.

Anticipate Media Questions

Thorough preparation is integral to sound communication. Before addressing the media, the spokesperson should work with the team to formulate anticipated questions and appropriate answers. Answers should be brief, factual and to the point.

A repeated "no comment" to reporters' queries during a crisis forces them to go elsewhere for answers. By cooperating with the media representatives and providing a flow of reliable and timely information, organizations can protect their credibility and reputation, and prevent adverse situations from spinning out of control.

Be Forthcoming

An emphasis on accountability and transparency can help restore organisational credibility following a systems failure or error. Reluctance to divulge relevant facts will generate rumours and intensify media scrutiny, potentially turning a manageable incident into a full-blown media crisis. All information shared with the public should be thoroughly reviewed for accuracy, completeness and compliance with confidentiality safeguards. If apologies are necessary, they should be delivered in a sincere and straightforward fashion.

Maintain Ongoing Communication With Staff

Ensure that staff members understand what has occurred and the steps that have been taken to address the crisis. Inform them that reporters may present themselves as a relative or other trusted person in order to engage an employee in improperly discussions of the event.

Emphasize the Positive

When managing sensitive topics such as organisational error or integrity of the employees of FBR, accentuate the organisation's commitment to learn from the experience and prevent similar incidents in the future. If possible, provide journalists with examples of outstanding performance by FBR or its staff in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Make Full use of the Internet

The internet is an efficient and proactive method of disseminating information. The established Web site can be used to respond to media inquiries, deliver background information and post ongoing updates. In extreme conditions, when the volume of traffic might overwhelm the main site, consider activating a separate crisis management Web platform and directing reporters and the wider public to this location.

After the Crisis

Summarize the Outcome

To achieve closure after a newsworthy event, offer the media a written summary of the investigation outcome and any corrective actions taken. This will strengthen accountability and demonstrate that the organisation accepts with utmost seriousness its duties.

Review Performance

Hold post-crisis debriefings to assess whether media encounters were managed effectively. At the minimum the CMT should discuss the following issues:

1. Were protocols implemented according to plan?
2. How was FBR portrayed in the various media?
3. What was the public response to the event?
4. What lessons can be learned from the experience, and what changes should be made?

Utilize the findings to modify and improve education/training programs and simulations for staff and administrators.

Additional Tips

Features of Media Crisis

Surprise

A media crisis is usually unexpected. You may learn of the situation only when a reporter calls for comment. Don't feel pressured to give a quote immediately. Instead, find out what the reporter wants, assure him or her that you will respond, and then get off the phone. Seek advice before making a statement or answering a critical question. Contact your superiors if needed, but don't hide from the media.

Insufficient Information

Rumours may fly. Avoid reacting or commenting on something that hasn't been substantiated. Also avoid saying "no comment," which could be used to insinuate guilt. Instead, say that you will investigate the issue and get back to the journalist.

Escalating Events

The crisis broadens. Additional media pick up the story or the situation becomes more complicated. Remain calm and keep the long-term picture in mind. As much as possible, tell the full story and tell it promptly. Too long of a delay could put your organization in a negative light.

Increased Scrutiny

The public feeds on rumours. Others may make observations that complicate the situation. Channel all FBR comments through one spokesperson and ask other officers to refrain from speaking about the incident and to refer journalists to the designated spokesperson.

Siege Mentality

When an organisation feels attacked, it tends to immediately shut down to defend itself. Resist the natural impulse to protect yourself. Seek legal and public relations counsel when necessary, but remain as open to the media and the public as possible. FBR is not a secret organisation and should not be portrayed as such.

Panic

Nerves start to wear thin when the possibility of negative publicity arises. Remain calm, seek counsel, tell the truth, and position FBR as an open organisation. This will help to stem further eruptions and most effectively communicate FBR's message.

When a difficult situation has been resolved, contact the press and let them know immediately.

Media Handling During Crisis – Final Word

During a crisis, preparation for the media should be done in exactly the same manner as you would prepare for any other media interview. Everything is the same, except that everything is different.

Everything is the same in that you need to have identified your top three messages. You need to have good sound bites. And you need to answer questions in a tight, focused manner.

However, everything is different in that, unlike a normal non-crisis media interview, you have no margin for error. In a normal interview, if you occasionally go off message or utter a sound bite that isn't 100% right, there is usually little damage. But in a media crisis, you can be perfectly on message for a solid hour and then have one 5 second aside that is off message and that is the quote that is blown up in headlines that will serve to identify you for the next decade in a damning manner.

In short, pretty good isn't good enough during a crisis. Near perfect isn't perfect; it is a disaster. The only preparation that you can do is to practice and rehearse.

Staying on message during a media crisis takes tremendous discipline and the ability to ignore normal formats of acceptable conversation. Staying on message means you have to be ruthlessly narrow minded and single focused. And it is the only thing that will let you get through a major media crisis with your reputation, dignity and stock price intact.

An effective media crisis plan is based, first and foremost, on the principles of truth, transparency, and sincerity. Nothing in the FBR media crisis plan should compromise, or appear to compromise these key principles.

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