

Issue

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What is Issue Management?

Issue management is core to the practice of strategic communications, though as a discipline, it's poorly understood.

An "issue" is a challenge or problem that threatens an organization's reputation or operations. The issue could be a minor incident or a full-blown crisis – the common denominator among issues is that they disrupt the perception or functioning of a corporation.

In essence, issue management is about closing the gap between an organization's actions and the expectations of its audiences and stakeholders. It's particularly vexing work, given the often insidious nature of issues – they bubble just under the surface, virtually imperceptible, until they boil over. At that point, executives are often left scrambling and find themselves in a reactive posture.

In my experience working with leaders and communicators over the last twenty years, I notice that responding to issues tends to be seen as the *opposite* of strategic communications planning. The pervasive view is that since issues can't be predicted or controlled, the only option is for organizations to simply wait and react when the time comes. In this model, implementing a communications plan

and responding to issues are consistently in tension with one another. Issue management is the domain of the feverish scramble and adrenaline rush to beat the clock, and is certainly no time to get bogged down in a burdensome plan.

I think it's time that this faulty assumption be turned on its head – what if the most valuable part of strategic communications planning is to build an organization's ability to respond to issues? What if responding to emerging issues is not an ad hoc, reactive exercise, but rather is intentionally part of effectively implementing a strategic communications plan?

Reconciling issue response with strategic communications planning is the first step to elevating an organization's state of readiness in issue management.

This Guide will introduce techniques and tools for effectively addressing issue management through the lens of strategic communications planning. I'll present a framework for thinking about issue management, including an exploration of some of the main challenges and fundamentals of the discipline. I'll also introduce some core tools, including an [Issue Management Worksheet](#) and [Issue Management Plan Template](#).

A Framework for Thinking About Issue Management

Given the inherently messy nature of issue management, it's helpful to clarify terms and establish a framework for understanding the inter-relations between concepts in the field.

Specifically, the terms issue management, risk communications and crisis communications are often conflated. The resulting confusion can slow down an organization's ability to respond effectively and efficiently.

Let's take a look at these concepts and clarify their meaning:

Issue Management: The intentional process of identifying and addressing a problem or challenge that may impact an organization's reputation or operations. Issue management is implicitly anticipatory in nature – the scope includes monitoring and tracking the public and/or internal environment for potential issues before they have an impact.

Examples include public criticism of a policy issue, growing labour unrest, or disruption in service caused by technology problems.

Risk Communications: The process of providing information on potential threats or hazards that may impact safety, well-being, operations and/or reputation. Risk communications is about conveying context and interpretation of the relative threat level of issues with a goal of enabling audiences to respond appropriately. From a timing perspective, the focus of risk communications is generally to deliver information and context before an incident or crisis takes place.

Examples include early indicators of a public health concern, a pattern of workplace safety incidents, or negative perceptions, which may lead to a loss of revenue or customers.

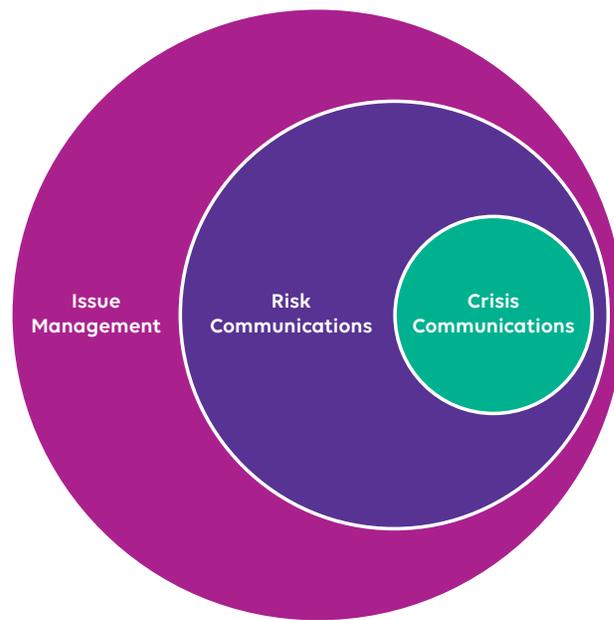
Crisis Communications: The deliberate response to a significant threat to safety, operations or reputation. Crisis communications is triggered when an incident with a high level of impact has occurred. It's about communicating information in order to help audiences or organizations protect themselves from harm, and working to restore reputation and trust.

Examples include a major transit system accident, a hurricane impacting a community, or a security threat to a public institution.

While not interchangeable, issue management, risk communications and crisis communications are inter-connected concepts. An incident may start off as an issue and then turn into a risk and/or crisis

in a dynamic environment. For instance, a hospital may identify an issue of increased infections, which over time may trigger the need to communicate risks to employees and patients. Should the number of patients infected aggravate the issue or the severity of illnesses, the incident may reach the threshold of becoming a crisis to which a crisis communications response is warranted.

The following chart presents a framework for thinking about inter-connections between the concepts:



As is illustrated in the above diagram, the notion of “issue management” is quite broad and the discipline scales to incidents that may become risks or crises. Put another way:

- All issues are *not* risks or crises
- Some risks escalate to being crises
- Issue management is relevant to issues, risks and crises