

Communicators should address failures, be transparent during crisis recovery, research finds

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Crisis communicators play a vital role in how the public views a business immediately after an unexpected and disruptive situation. According to a recent University of Georgia study, it is essential that these professionals address failures that led to the crisis, be transparent and honest and provide symbolic and concrete damage repair.

The study, published recently in the journal *Public Relations Review*, was co-authored by Yan Jin, an associate professor of [public relations](#) in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication and associate director of the UGA Center for Health and Risk Communication.

Jin, an active researcher of [crisis communication](#) and strategic conflict management, seeks the answers to better prepare public relations practitioners for crises.

"As communicators, we need to know how to support the needs of the publics," she said. "My goal is to make a difference in how we communicate in times of crises."

In the study, Jin and her colleagues conducted 20 in-depth interviews of senior-level crisis communicators at communication agencies across the U.S. The communicators had varying management and communication experience, which they shared in their individual, open-ended phone interviews.

Participants of the study shared four key roles that organizations should implement during crisis recovery: symbolic damage repair, positive framing, future focus and acceptance of crisis messages. Communicators must engage in honest and transparent discussion with the public during this period. They must rebuild and repair the damage that's been done.

"After a crisis, the public looks at an organization closely," Jin said. "Communicators must consider the audience's view on the issue. The content, and overall delivery, of the message is extremely important."

In order to move forward, the senior communicators said they needed to address and correct the mistakes made during the crisis. This includes acknowledging the issue early and offering aid to those who were affected—steps that would help rebuild trust and loyalty between the organization and the public.

The interviewees also shared that organizational values and ethical communication were of great importance during the recovery period. Communicators need to be proactive and empathetic with their audience after a crisis.

Although the senior communicators agreed on a number of key goals, each crisis is unique and depends on the circumstances.

"There is no perfect answer. Every organization is different and has their own way of responding to crises," Jin said. "With this in mind, communicators should still prepare extensively and look at business objectives when handling a crisis. They need to train and prepare in the event of uncertainty."

Co-authors of the study include Lucinda Austin, assistant professor of communication at Elon University, and Brooke Fisher Liu, associate professor of [communication](#) at the University of Maryland.

More information: Lucinda L. Austin, Brooke Fisher Liu, Yan Jin, "Examining signs of recovery: How senior crisis communicators define organizational crisis recovery," *Public Relations Review*, Available online 22 July 2014, ISSN 0363-8111, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.06.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.06.003).

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