



Spring 2022
COMM 499 Special Topics:
Crisis Communication and Management
Mon/Wed 2:00-3:20PM
Location: ANN 406

Instructor: [Karen North, Ph.D.](#)

Office: ANN 414B

Office Hours: By Appointment via Zoom or on campus

Due to covid, most office hours will not be indoors.

Contact Info: knorth@usc.edu

Zoom ID: Meeting ID: 917 4864 1941

<https://usc.zoom.us/j/917486419>

Course Description

Welcome to Crisis Communication and Management. In this class, we will explore both how problems grow into crises and how to respond, as communication professionals, to crises that emerge. We will spend time learning to identify and understand the human dynamics, social science, and psychological principles and theories that underlie the development of crises and of our reactions to crises. More importantly, we will focus our primary attention on the role of communicators in crisis communication, with an eye toward crisis analysis, crisis prevention, and crisis management. Communication professionals work in most business sectors and have the responsibility to create and convey narratives for their brands, companies, or organizations, during times of routine business, times of difficulty, times of crisis, and times of reputation management and recovery. Thus, we will explore the timeline of development and of intervention/management in crises, starting with prevention and preparation, then strategies to deal with emergent problems, crisis management, and of course, how to communicate with various stakeholders (including the media) at each of these stages especially when faced with a public or private crisis.

Note that this class requires participation, including role playing and simulation. You are required to attend and participate in this class.

Course Objectives

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Define and explain terms, concepts, practices, and strategies used in Crisis Communication and Management
- Understand basic team building and team management strategies used by communication professionals

- Understand fundamental communication strategies used by Communication professionals (such as Chief Communication Officers) to communicate on behalf of brands, companies, individuals, or groups generally and when problems arise
- Understand the roles of communication professionals in communicating before, during, and after a crisis
- Understand and explain the underlying human dynamics involved in spurring and furthering crises, and those that take difficult situations and turn them into crises
- Understand and explain the factors contributing to crisis situations
- Produce a strategy and plan for avoiding and for addressing crises
- Produce properly formatted professional documents such as memos and press releases

Textbooks

1. Coombs, Timothy (2019). Ongoing Crisis Communication (5th Edition). SAGE
ISBN 9781544331959
2. Barker, Barker, Bormann, Roberts, & Zahay (2017). Social Media Marketing: A Strategic Approach (2nd Edition). Cengage Learning
ISBN: 978-1305502758

Policies and Procedures

- a. **PANDEMIC NOTIFICATIONS (PLEASE READ):** I am very serious about health and safety. This class will follow the university, city, county, state, and federal guidelines to protect ourselves, each other, and our loved ones. It appears that we are back to campus and I hope that this is sustainable throughout the semester. We will meet in person
 - This course has been designed with the flexibility necessary to transition to fully online should the need arise due to local, state, or federal response to changes in pandemic guidelines and orders. In the event that the delivery method is altered, the learning goals and outcomes of the course remain consistent, while activities and learning modalities might change.
 - While it is expected that students will make every effort to attend classes, it is recognized that personal circumstances can arise which preclude class attendance. In such circumstances, you are responsible for obtaining the materials presented in missed classes and for making up missed tests and other assignments. Please identify other students who are willing and able to share information and materials in the event that you need to miss class.
 - It is expected that students attend class in person unless alternative arrangements have been made due to illness, or the need to isolate or quarantine due to COVID-19.

- In the event that you find yourself experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms, and/or if you are exposed to someone with or carrying COVID-19, in keeping with university recommendations, **STAY HOME**. This is the best way to prevent spreading COVID-19; Please do not come to an in-person class if you are feeling ill, particularly if you are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.
- Similarly, if I experience symptoms or have been exposed, in keeping with the recommendations, I will not come to campus. In such an event, I will notify the class via Blackboard and class will meet via Zoom.
- If class ever moves to online/Zoom, please turn on your video when possible. It is helpful to be able to see each other, just as in an in-person class.
- USC's current mandate is that **everyone will be required to wear a face mask** in university buildings, including classrooms. You **MUST** wear a mask appropriately (i.e., covering both your mouth and nose) the entire time you are in class. No eating is allowed but masks may be removed for individual sips of a drink.
- Class will not begin (or continue) if anyone is unmasked. Anyone attending class in-person without a mask will be asked to put one on or leave and will be subject to disciplinary action.

b. Blackboard and Turn It In:

- **Please** note that this class will use Blackboard and TurnItIn for assignments and for some activities, such as discussion boards, quizzes, and tests. Some graded exams, experiences, and activities will be conducted in the classroom. This class will include lecture, readings, videos, guest lectures from industry professionals, as well as other modalities of teaching and learning.

c. Respectful conversation:

- Please respect the opinions and comments of others. We may touch on sensitive during the semester. Remember that we value the opinions of others, the perspective and world view of others, and the opportunity to discuss complex issues in class so that you will develop understanding, analytic abilities, and professional skills that should prove valuable in your academic, personal, and professional futures. If you find yourself having an emotional response to comments or discussions, please ask or comment in class, or you may reach out to me privately.
- We are also expected to be considerate and respectful of all members of our learning community and of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. It is understood that each of us may not understand the backgrounds and experiences of our colleagues, but it is also understood that we are all expected to be open to

learning more about these factors and, while doing so, we will be empathic and understanding of these differences.

- I make every effort to address difficult and controversial topics so that you can learn about them in the safety of a classroom setting (rather than confronting them for the first time in a setting that may be less forgiving). Know that I truly want everyone to feel comfortable engaging in open, productive, discussions, and I feel that we will all learn more if we are willing to explore diverse and differing perspectives. This means that, ideally, we need to discuss difficult topics and listen openly to new perspectives, even when we disagree. Please come to class ready and willing to grapple with complex topics, including some that might be controversial. If you disagree with me or with others, you are encouraged to voice your opposition or concerns so that we can explore issues and perspectives that I may not have considered and that may shed new light on topics for all of us. If you are upset by any topics or comments, and do not feel comfortable saying so in class, please reach out to me personally. Human nature and human behavior are complex, as are our individual perspectives and experiences, and our personal interpretations of human events. If I misinterpret or misspeak, I would love to hear from you so that I can address the issue with you, reconsider my own perspective, and share new insights with the class.

d. Participation:

Participation is part of your grade, and this class involves weekly synchronous in-class presentations. In the beginning of each class session, students will raise issues and share information. This participatory aspect of the class is vital to your learning. Please be aware that being present and participating in this discussion is a mandatory part of this class. If you are planning to be unavailable during class time, please contact me immediately so that we can work out an alternative plan, or consider enrolling in another class. This class is designed to be synchronous and interactive.

• **Attendance policy:**

As this is a participation based class, attendance is necessary. If you anticipate any difficulty with attendance, please contact me immediately so that we can work out an alternative plan, or consider enrolling in another class.

Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	% of Grade
Class Participation including:	10%
Weekly Short assignments: Tell Me Something I Don't Know weekly online forum	10% (total)

3 Short papers (10% each)	30% (total)
Midterms: Midterm 1 10% Midterm 2 10%	20%
Final Exam/Paper	30%
TOTAL	100%

Grading Scale

94 to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 93%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

Grading Standards

Grade	Description
A	Excellent; demonstrates extraordinarily high achievement; comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subject matter; all expectations met and exceeded.
B	Good; moderately broad knowledge and understanding of subject matter; explicitly or implicitly demonstrates good, if not thorough understanding; only minor substantive shortcomings.
C	Satisfactory/Fair; reasonable knowledge and understanding of subject matter; most expectations are met; despite any shortcomings, demonstrates basic level of understanding.
D	Marginal; minimal knowledge and understanding of subject matter; more than one significant shortcoming; deficiencies indicate only the most rudimentary level of understanding.
F	Failing; unacceptably low level of knowledge and understanding of subject matter; deficiencies indicate lack of understanding.

Grading Timeline

Grading Timeframe and Missing or Inaccurate Score Inquiries/Disputes

For effective learning, students should receive timely feedback on assignments and exams. Therefore, every attempt will be made to grade assignments/exams and post grades within two weeks. Scores for all assignments and exams are regularly updated on Blackboard. You are responsible for notifying the Instructor **within one (1) week** of a score posting if you think a score is missing or inaccurate. Moreover, you only have this period of time to contest a score on an assignment/exam. If you fail to inquire/notify us of any discrepancy, missing score, or contest a score within one week of the date the score is posted, no further changes will be made.

Assignment Submission Policy

- A. All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will automatically be given a grade of F.
- B. Assignments must be submitted via Blackboard unless otherwise stated.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Important note to students: *Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.*

NOTE: THERE WILL BE A REFLECTION PAPER AFTER EACH GUEST LECTURER

MODULE 1:

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN DYNAMICS AND UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Note that this class requires participation, including role playing and simulation. You are required to attend and participate in this class.

Week 1: January 10-12

WELCOME AND COURSE OVERVIEW

WHAT IS A CRISIS

WHY DO PROBLEMS BECOME CRISES

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS

The Psychology of Human Dynamics: Let's understand human psychology

READINGS: Read the following short online articles

SimplyPsychology.org:

Conformity

Stereotypes

Solomon Asch – Conformity Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment

Social Influence

The Milgram Shock Experiment

Social Identity Theory (us vs. them)

Cognitive Dissonance

Bystander Effect and Diffusion of Responsibility neuroleadership.com

How JFK Inspired the Term Groupthink

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: None

Week 2: January 17-19 (MLK DAY 1/17)

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA (TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA) AS TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATING MEDIA: PAID, EARNED, AND OWNED Media, the Purchase Funnel, and strategies for traditional and new media

READINGS: Barker Chapters 1 Role of Social Media Marketing
Barker Chapter 3 Identifying Target Audiences

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 3: January 24-26

UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONS AND BRANDS: BRANDING and "LISTENING"
Defining your brand: What is "on-brand" and "off-brand." Being aware of risks and context:
Listening about your brand, the competition, and the industry
How staying on-brand is a strategy to avoid uncertainty and avoid problems internally and with your audience/market,
SWOT Analyses

READINGS: Barker Chapter 2: Goals and Strategies

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 4: January 31-February 2

UNDERSTANDING AND TARGETING AUDIENCES: Before, during, and after a crisis, which audiences and stakeholders are important to the organization.
Looking at Target Markets, TAM, SAM, and SOM, and Product-Market Fit, Hypothesis testing, Push and Pull economies, and the long tail, and the lifetime value of the customer

WRITING SKILL: **How to write professional memos**
How to write a Holding Statement

READINGS:

Wired: The Long Tail: <https://www.wired.com/2004/10/tail>

Start Up Dev Kit: <https://startupdevkit.com/guide-to-product-market-fit-with-everything-you-need-to-know/>

ASSIGNMENT DUE: **MIDTERM 1**

MODULE 2: CRISIS ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Week 5: February 7-9

BEFORE A CRISIS: PREPARATION INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION:
WORKING WITH TEAMS,
ESTABLISHING TEAM COHESIVENESS,
RUNNING MEETINGS: SCRUM AND STAND-UP STYLE OF MEETINGS
CREATING AN ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE AND NARRATIVE (before a crisis)

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 1: A Need for More Crisis Management Knowledge

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 6: February 14-16

BEFORE A CRISIS: PREPARATION FOR CRISES
Assessing Do The Right Thing, Live Well, Do No Harm, Be Prepared, Have a Team
GROUP THINK and how to protect against it

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 2: Risks as the Foundation for Crisis Management and Crisis Communication

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 7: February 21-23 (Feb. 21 President's Day)

BEFORE A CRISIS: ASSESSING RISKS

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 2: Risks as the Foundation for Crisis Management and Crisis Communication

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 8: February 28-March 2

BEFORE A CRISIS: UNDERSTANDING RED FLAGS, THREAT REDUCTION, AND PREVENTATIVE MESSAGING

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 3: The Crisis Mitigation Process: Building Crisis Resistant Organizations

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

PAPER 1: Memo on Analysis of Organizational Risks

PLUS HOLDING STATEMENT

Week 9: March 7-9

PREPARING FOR CRISES: PREPARATION AND STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY
DESIGNATING AND TRAINING SPOKESPEOPLE
SELECTING AND TRAINING CRISIS TEAM
MANAGING CRISIS TEAMS AND WAR ROOMS

WRITING SKILL: **How to write a Press Release**

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 4: Crisis Preparing Part I

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

MARCH 13-20 SPRING BREAK

Week 10: March 21-23

PREPARING FOR CRISES:
DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATION PLAN
CONSIDERING STAKEHOLDERS AND AUDIENCES

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 5: Crisis Preparing Part II

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 11: March 28-30

DURING THE CRISIS:
RECOGNIZING SIGNS
FRAMING THE CRISIS AND FRAMING THE NARRATIVE
INFORMATION NEEDS, ANALYSIS, AND USES

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 6: Recognizing Crises

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Paper 2: Memo: Analysis of a Crisis

Week 12: April 4-6

DURING THE CRISIS:
RESPONDING STRATEGICALLY IN REAL TIME
FORMING THE RESPONSE

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 7: Crisis Responding

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Week 13: April 11-13

DURING THE CRISIS:

REPUTATION ANALYSIS, REPUTATION MANAGEMENT
"CHANGING THE CONVERSATION"

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 7: Crisis Responding

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

MODULE 3:

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT AND CREATING AN ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVE

Week 14: April 18-20

CORPORATE CRISES, RESPONSIBILITIES FOR LEADERS

Behavior of Employees: The value of strategic HR and training strategies

Leadership and the message of leaders

Whistle Blowers

Cases that made a difference: Tylenol and Dominos (apology videos),

Starbucks (actions speak louder than words)

Facebook/Instagram

READINGS: Coombs Chapter 8: Crisis Responding

ASSIGNMENT DUE: **MIDTERM 2**

Week 15: April 25-27

ACTIONS OF EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS

CUSTOMER SERVICE and the impact on reputation

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE AMPLIFICATION OF CRISES

United Breaks Guitars, Silent Bob and social media rage, Billy on the Street and social media rage. vs. proactive corporate strategies (Costco employee strategy, Starbucks "partners"), and corporate actions and accountability

READINGS: Articles to be assigned

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Paper 3: Press Release: Controlling the narrative by creating a message

FINALS WEEK: FINAL EXAM THURSDAY April

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

a. Academic Conduct

Plagiarism

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “[Behavior Violating University Standards](#).” Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

The School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication. There are no exceptions to the school’s policy.

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course, without approval of the instructor.

b. Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical

condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776

osas.usc.edu/

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710

uscsa.usc.edu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Annenberg Student Success Fund

<https://annenbergscholarships.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenbergscholarships-and-awards>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.