

## Overview

After a sold-out Colorado Rockies baseball game and fireworks show on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003, an escalator failure throws more than 150 people to the bottom of the escalator and injures 30. Our team will develop and implement a crisis communications plan to manage communications, from the time of the incident to twelve hours after the event, making sure to strategically use both internal and external communications systems. We will take into consideration the reporting on major news media outlets, as well as images and video of the incident on social media platforms.

## 5Ws and an H

- **Who:**
  - **Rapid Response Team:** Individuals, such as the stadium and Club's communications teams, Club owners, and leaders who can make decisions quickly and efficiently.
  - **Informed and Involved:** First responders, such as police, fire, and EMTs, as well as ballpark operations, stadium security, and guest relations staff, who are responding and implementing on-the-ground crisis management.
  - **Impacted Persons:** Injured patrons and their families/friends, other attendees at the stadium, stadium employees, teams' players and staff, major media outlets, social media audiences.
- **What:**
  - The key issues in the case are: promptly and concisely communicate to all persons impacted by the situation, starting at the time of the incident and ongoing until the re-opening of the ballpark the following day; relay correct information to those still at the stadium, media outlets, and across social media channels, to mitigate reputation damage and reassure the public that the incident is being addressed.
- **When:** 10:20 pm on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003
- **Where:** Coors Stadium in Denver, Colorado
- **How:** We propose to solve the communications issues by determining a timeline of the event, and examining existing protocols from other, similar institutions and other communications theories, in order to construct a 12-hour response that utilizes present-day media concerns, and provides clear and concise information to all impacted parties, based on need.

## Define and Diagnosis the Problem

On July 3<sup>rd</sup> at 10:20 pm, a three-story escalator fails after a sold-out Colorado Rockies baseball game that is the first of two scheduled games. The majority of the 47,000 people in the stadium are exiting through all available concourses, steps, elevators, and escalators at the time of the incident. The escalator's sudden malfunction throws 150 people to the bottom, injuring 30. Guest relations and emergency personnel shut down the escalator as soon as possible and assess the situation. Injuries range from cuts and scrapes to fractures, head injuries, and major trauma to arms and legs. The injured are transported to area hospitals.

The problem is immediate and urgent. Key decision makers (we will refer to them as the Rapid Response Team) must convene and make decisions immediately, to ensure that all of the important persons are contacted in an appropriate timeframe, with clear information, to mitigate impact on all relevant persons.

Media and press are on site, reporting live, and need to be briefed on the important details of the incident. Cell phone communications are being impacted due to the sheer volume of users on the network, and calls out to loved ones cannot be completed. Assume that images of video of the incident will be on social media, either live or within in ten minutes of the incident. There are no deaths, but several of the injured are impacted in life-altering ways, including an eventual limb amputation. The entire ballpark is considered an accident crime scene and cannot be cleared until 2am.

The escalator malfunction has no immediately known cause; the escalator has passed regular inspections, but had numerous service calls for minor malfunctions over the past eight years. A similar escalator malfunctioned two months prior, resulting in minor injuries to several fans. Maintenance of the stadium's escalators is implemented by the manufacturing and installation company, Kone. Inspections of the equipment is managed by the City of Denver Building Inspectors.

Though they work through the night, the team owners, Club leadership, and ballpark operations make the decision to open the stadium the following evening for a second fireworks game. The ballpark will host another 47,000+ fans. All of the stadiums' escalators will be turned off for the following evening, and will be shut down indefinitely, until the malfunction is diagnosed, assessed, and corrected.

Communications must be immediate and ongoing, to mitigate panic and damage to the stadium's reputation, ensure that all impacted parties are informed, and ensure the public has a clear understanding of what's happening and what's being done to solve the issue.

If the stadium already has a basic crisis communications plan in place, the plan will be implemented according to the protocol outlined. The following timeline outlines the steps to be taken to manage the incident:

### **0 minutes**

- Incident occurs.
- Contact: Emergency officials.

### **5 minutes after accident**

- Stadium security, police, EMTs, and fire arrive
- Contact: Rapid Response Team
- Consider: Potential for live social media content on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

### **10 minutes**

- Police/stadium security/fire to secure area and injured are tended to by EMTs
- Contact: Victims' families
- Consider: Fan and attendees social media content posted, and possibility for topic to trend on Twitter.

### **15 minutes**

- Contact: Club leadership, Metro Baseball Authority, Kone Escalator Company, to inform of incident.

### **30 minutes**

- Rapid response team convenes virtually, to make decisions and implement pre-existing emergency communications plan.
- Designate Spokesperson(s).

### **40 Minutes**

- Preliminary communications through social media, stadium communications system, and other channels about emergency and to avoid area.
- Contact: Remaining game attendees in stadium, general social media audience.
- Consider: Local live news broadcasts already present at stadium.

### **2 hours**

- Clear “first response” statements with legal and families.
- Contact: Club’s leadership and Metro Baseball Authority to brief about communications plan, victims in hospital and their families with personalized messages.
- Concise and clear social media communications released on major social media platforms for baseball team.

### **4 hours**

- Stadium is cleared.

### **6 hours**

- Press conference for local tv, radio stations.
- Press release for print and online news outlets.
- Official statements made via major social media platforms.
- Consider: Potential to go viral on social media.

### **12 Hours**

- Communicate final decision to reopen stadium for tonight's game with announcements on social media and via press release.

## The Goals

- Develop a plan and steps needed to immediately manage the accident scene with Club leadership, ballpark staff, police, fire, officials, and media outlets.
- Define the communications protocol, including identification of Rapid Response Team, spokespersons, expert sources; media relations and crisis plan for immediate response, then for next day information sharing.

- Develop and implement a strategy to communicate with injured fans still hospitalized. Consider HIPAA factors.
- Develop a plan to communicate the decision to re-open the ballpark the following day: the rationale, safety issues, and communication plan.

## The Analysis

Models and research show that crisis communication plans require clear directions and a chain of command, to minimize damage and provide accurate information and assistance in an emergency. Organizations with immediate and transparent responses are better positioned to handle the situation and its aftermath.

Crisis models include defining roles, distributing strategy, determining spokespersons, and creating a media plan for release of information. With this plan, proactive and practiced measures are necessary to ensure the crisis plan puts people's safety first and covers essential roles and responsibilities.

Due to several interwoven factors and people needed to execute a crisis communications strategy, relaying information internally and externally creates a significant communication system issue. The plan must include clear lines of managing, reporting, and delegating tasks. For example, a team requires a role that monitors and responds to local and national media outlets for reputation management. In addition, the plan appoints spokesperson roles who will be the face of the event to the media and public; they need to be accessible, skilled in public speaking, and able to establish credibility.

Crisis communication plans also require current and specific details. Emergency contacts, facility information/maps, local emergency resources, and a communications log can help a crisis plan keep organized and efficient. All attention will be focused on how the Rapid Response team provides information, direction, and assurance in a time of crisis.

### **Communications Model:**

- Document, Prepare, and Distribute Plan
- Appoint Crisis Management Team
- Define Roles
- Determine Spokespeople
- Media Train
- Media Plan for Information Release
- Review and Update Crisis Communications Plan

## Ahead of the Emergency

The ultimate goal of crisis communications is to successfully disseminate information that helps people stay safe in dangerous situations. What happens in the first 60 minutes of a crisis can determine communications success or failure in how the public perceives the handling of the incident. Remain honest, clear, and responsive, because the absence of information in the earliest stages of an emergency increases the risk of rumors and inaccuracy.

That in mind, organizing communications activities *ahead of time* gets your resources into place and streamlines decisions when the emergency is upon you. Keep the general plan flexible, so you can meld it to the crisis at

hand, and focus on tasks that *need* to happen in the moment, without missing important items that could otherwise get lost in the fray.

- Make a list of who in the organization can fill the emergency roles; pull together all contact information in advance of a crisis and keep it updated, so it is available when you need it.
  - Communications Commander
    - ♣ Person in charge, responsible for all decisions/personnel assignments
  - Public Information Officer (PIO)
    - ♣ Person who speaks to the public/media, responsible for crafting messages for the review and approval of the Communications Commander
  - Liaison
    - ♣ The connection between the communications team and the incident command center
  - Listener/Monitor
    - ♣ Person who closely follows news media/social media, to determine how key messages are being reported/shared, watch for inaccurate coverage, and gather emergency info from other sources
  - Scribe
    - ♣ Keeps record of public statements (including time/method of release for each); maintains chronological log of major activities by the communications team during the emergency – arrival/departure of personnel, interactions with public/media, etc.
- Establish (and keep updated) contact lists for any anticipated sources:
  - Communications personnel
  - Hospitals, police stations, firehouses, etc.
  - Government contacts
  - Other key stakeholders
- Have avenues of communication already up and running, and media contacts firmly established – both for disseminating information during an emergency, and for monitoring what is being stated/shared during the crisis. Get comfortable with social media platforms in advance; an emergency is *not* the time to learn how to best utilize socmed.
  - Social media:
    - ♣ Facebook
    - ♣ Instagram
    - ♣ Twitter
    - ♣ Snapchat and TikTok, if you feel adventurous
  - News:
    - ♣ Local/national TV
    - ♣ Local/national newspaper
    - ♣ Radio (NPR, etc.)
- Run regular drills. Practice protocols, having people try out different roles, so everyone is ready to go in the event of an actual emergency. Also a golden opportunity to reinforce a vital focus on honesty, clarity, and brevity, when dealing with unfolding situations. Rehearsal is key.

## Actions Needed In Every Emergency

It is impossible to prepare for every specific emergency that could arise, but there are certain protocols that

must be in place for just about *any* crisis. Know them in advance, prepare for them, and be ready to implement those actions when the moment comes, melding them to whatever the event needs.

- **Organize the response.** As soon as possible after the initiation of the crisis, identify and contact those who will fill the essential communication roles outlined above.
- **Determine the scale of the emergency.** How broadly does the emergency impact the stadium, patrons, employees, etc.? Different crisis scales require different responses.
  - *Major emergency:* Completely interrupts the ordinary course of business for an extended period of time; “all hands on deck”
  - *Critical incident:* Some (possibly significant) interruption to course of business, but could get worse – monitor situation for escalation; organization/communication team needs to be alerted and put on standby
  - *Limited emergency:* Possible interruption to course of business, but not all-encompassing; only requires a few key personnel for response
- **Scale the response accordingly.** Once you conclude the scale of the emergency, you can focus on bringing in sufficient resources to manage it. Adjust scale throughout the incident, if needed.
- **Establish SOCO (*Single Overriding Communication Objective*).** Following the lead of the Centers for Disease Control, which established the Single Overriding Communication Objective for their own communications, it is vital to keep messaging focused in a crisis situation. The communications team should narrow down the SOCO for the specific situation before issuing statements, by asking the following questions:
  - What is your key message?
    - *The most important point for the audience to understand.*
  - Why is it important to convey this message?
    - *What do you want people to do after hearing your message? Why now?*
  - Who needs to hear this message?
    - *Identify the target audience.*
    - *Are there segments of the audience that need different types of attention (i.e., language or cultural factors)?*
  - What facts support your key message?
    - *Identify at least three convincing details that make your key message believable.*
    - *Use facts that the target audience will understand, accept, remember.*
  - Who are the spokespersons for this key message?
    - *Who has credibility with the target audience? Who will they listen to/speaks the right language?*

## Communicating with Fans, Media, and Injured Parties

The communications team will post to social media, maintain communication with news media. Postings on social media will be clear and concise. Do not leak personal information about injured parties, per HIPAA regulations. Craft messages that are precise, focused, and can be accurately understood. Clearly state the threat, who/what is at risk, and what the audience is to do. Be conscious of, and sensitive to, the needs of different groups.

When making immediate and long-term communications plans with the public, communications strategies for reaching out to affected patrons (*in this case, injured parties who are hospitalized*), and projecting ahead to next-day follow-up information sharing (*i.e., how to communicate the decision to reopen the ballpark the*

*following day*), it is important to determine the demographics of the audience, the languages spoken/read by the audience, cultural differences that may be significant to communications strategy, any special-needs or high-risk groups that need enhanced messaging, the sources of news that they follow, who in the community (and on social media) they trust and listen to, their relationship with the organization (are there any inherent trust issues?), and any issues or factors that could impact the ability to get urgent messages to the target audience/s. Use multiple channels – as many as can be consistently updated and managed.

## After-Crisis Analysis

Review how the situation unfolded, and how the protocol fit into the reality of the situation. What worked, and what didn't? What protocols can be bolstered, and which ones need to be added, adjusted, or eliminated?

In the case of the escalator malfunction, numerous representatives, from numerous agencies, updated on the incident. That is a lot of voices in the mix, so an after-crisis analysis should focus, in part, on the consistency and accuracy of messaging. Additionally, Rockies officials stated in briefings, early on in the incident, that they had not yet confirmed whether the escalator sped up, stopped suddenly, or was overloaded, nor did they know exactly what went wrong with the system. They did not engage in assumptions or blame during the incident, which is good practice and an example of a protocol that worked.

Additionally, in the after-crisis analysis, take stock of how the incident impact the organization's reputation. Which responses (if any) worked well, in maintaining reputation? Did anything transpire that now requires reputation repair?

## Reputation Maintenance/Repair

Whether one is maintaining the organization's reputation, or repairing reputation damage after the incident, it is important to remember that, underneath it all, it is critical that the communications team, and the organization in general, remain decent and empathetic. Emergencies happen, and they impact real human beings; how they are handled shows an organization's character, and can either create or destroy trust with the public and the media. Part of crisis communications training, and essential to all crisis drills, should be the reinforcement of decency in the handling of emergencies.

Some guidelines:

- Reach out to injured parties. Show empathy, both in briefings and in direct communication with those who have been injured. Send representatives to the hospital, to speak with them directly.
- Assist impacted parties whenever it is feasible to do so. Not just those physically injured, but employees and bystanders, as well. Be conscious of potential mental health impacts after a traumatic event, and make post-trauma resources available for anyone who may need them.
- Reassure the public of stadium safety, after the incident. Be honest, be accurate, and don't make promises you can't keep. Provide updates.
- If it turns out that the organization is at fault, *own it*. Admit the mistake, communicate the changes that will be enacted in the aftermath, and follow through on those changes.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, when it comes to crisis communications, you want to establish trust *before* the emergency, respond

rapidly, ensure accuracy, understand your audience, measure your results, and make both the message and the messenger accessible for the media and the public.