



**AMBER
ALERT**

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Tips and Best Practices

During a missing child incident, information can move rapidly, get confused or change from one minute to the next. However, prompt, accurate information flowing to the public in these cases can aid the investigation by engaging the whole community in looking for the child. In these cases, crisis communication - rather than planned strategic communication - is impossible to avoid. In order to not fall into the major traps of crisis communication, law enforcement officers must plan ahead for how to handle crisis communication, build a trusting and cooperative relationship with the media, and make sound decisions under pressure.



Planning Ahead for Crisis Communication

The best way to stay on top and in control of a missing child incident when dealing with the media during a crisis is to plan ahead. Follow some of these simple steps before a crisis occurs to make sure everyone is on the same page:

- Create a clear plan within the agency for who handles communication with the media during a crisis. Make sure they have experience speaking on camera and answering questions with little preparation.
- Coordinate with media outlets to set standards for how information will be communicated during a missing child crisis. Make sure media outlets understand the difference between issuing an AMBER Alert and an Endangered Person Advisory if those are used by your agency. Define the difference between a “suspect” and a “person of interest” so that information is correctly communicated during the crisis.
- Build trust with media outlets when not in a crisis situation. The media will do their job either with the cooperation of law enforcement or without. Note that some reporters may enter a crisis situation with preconceived ideas based on past experiences with the agency.

Crisis Communication in a Crisis

Availability of Information

The Public Information Officer (PIO) should be available for regularly scheduled press conferences. Law enforcement should be the first to communicate to the public and should provide all of the information that they can share.

- Do not fail to act quickly with the media
- Do not say ‘no comment’



Communicating with the Family

During missing children cases, family members can feel confused, scared and like they should be doing something to help their child. Assign someone to serve as the primary communicator with the family so that they do not get frustrated with perceived inaction or the direction of the investigation. This person can also work with the family to provide as much information, photos and video of the child as the family is willing to share. The media will happily use additional photos and videos to keep the public's attention on the story. These additional visual images can also create a better profile of the child for someone to recognize.

Engage All Parties

Remember to communicate with telecommunicators on the details that have been released to the public so that they can help identify critical tips. Involving prosecutors early on can improve the process of drafting warrants quickly should the need arise.

Be Prepared for Something to Go Wrong

During crisis situations things rarely run smoothly. Handling crisis communication means managing fluid situations, making sound decisions in the midst of those situations and being vigilant for future developments.

Dealing with the Media During Crisis Communication

The public's perception of the missing child case and how it is being handled is formed by what they see through the media. Despite law enforcement's best efforts, they cannot control how the media reports a story. The media is unlikely to respond constructively if there is a perception that law enforcement is disrupting the flow of critical information. If members of the media feel that official spokespeople are being untruthful, they will seek out someone else, who may jump at the opportunity to be interviewed. At times, they may even try to dig up connections and issues to attach to the child jeopardy case to make it more appealing to the public. However, goodwill built up with media outlets during non-crisis times, regular briefings during the crisis, and after-action reviews between can help to ensure that the correct information is shared to help locate the missing child quickly.

Tips for Crisis Communication

- Provide the simplest answer possible with clear, straightforward language
- Admit any mistakes and provide a solution
- Do not assume that information that you have been provided is complete and factual
- Avoid blame, denials, stonewalling and being the last to share information
- Use as many channels of communication as possible to get out your message