

Eseosa Imade | DOES ULL HAVE A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN? | 09-07-2021

Every organization should have an effective communication plan in preparation for a crisis. According to Coombs (2014), Crisis is “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” A crisis can be hard to spot, especially in cases involving group conflict, other times it is evident; It puts an organization’s crisis preparation plan to the test (Coombs, 2014). A crisis represents three major characteristics — Surprise, Threat, Short response time (Ulmer *et al.*, 2017). With the right crisis management plan, organisations have the power to communicate the right message to the public, and this is no different at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (UL Lafayette).

Garnett & Kouzmin (2009) observed four perspectives to understand crisis communication: interpersonal influence, media relations, technology showcase, and inter-organizational networking. The interpersonal influence focuses on the actions of the key players in the organizations while media relations involves the role of the mass media at the different stages of crisis communications (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2009). On the other hand, technology showcase consists of advanced technology to communicate during a crisis and inter-organizational networking involves the leaders and agencies in charge of the disbursement of funds and approving actions during a crisis (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2009).

UL Lafayette has shown its crisis communication plan directly and indirectly in response to various recent crises. For the purpose of this critique, the emphasis would be laid on the Covid-19 pandemic and Hurricane Ida. On March 09, 2020, Louisiana recorded its first case of Covid-19; in two weeks, Louisiana was one of the states with the fastest increase in Covid-19 cases (KC *et al.*, 2020). In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, UL Lafayette immediately

adopted the online class mode of teaching instead of in-person classes. Communication across departments, faculty, and institutions became an immediate need — this was done through the moodle forums, social media channels, website, internal groups, and email newsletters. UL Lafayette also adopted Centre for Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) guidelines, ensuring students kept 6 feet distance (social distancing), avoided crowded environments, canceled all parties, and provided accessible sanitizing stands for faculty, staff, and students. Importantly, with the availability of the Covid-19 vaccine, UL Lafayette started a campaign, “Don’t wait, vaccinate” — a program to enable the increase in vaccinated students so that the institution can return to its usual way of operation. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed many organizations’ crisis communication plans, and UL Lafayette was not an exception.

The recent Hurricane Ida is also a good means to understand if the UL Lafayette has a crisis communication plan. Hurricane Ida was a natural disaster that occurred midday on Sunday 29th of August. The institution announced its closure on Monday 30th August through emails, social media, and website in preparation for this disaster. It also provided the necessary steps for students living on-campus by providing food, hurricane-safe materials, and technical assistance for students to monitor the weather changes. Instant updates were sent periodically through the mediated channels to keep stakeholders aware of the situation. All these actions are signs that UL Lafayette has a communication plan.

Following the four perspectives stated earlier, it could be argued that UL Lafayette has created a sustainable response to crises while still maintaining its reputation. The UL Lafayette crisis communication plan may not be perfect, but it has taken steps towards crisis management.

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