

PLAN TO BE CRISIS READY IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Crisis management has become even more complex with the rise of social media and the constant addition of new channels, which can rapidly accelerate the spread of a crisis. In today's hyper-connected world of competing opinions and high expectations, organizations need to know how to weather the storm of a crisis as news can spread like wildfire on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Messages can be misconstrued in a matter of minutes while being viewed by millions of people around the world, even before a brand is aware there is an issue brewing. The sheer speed of unpredictability surrounding a crisis means preparation and early detection is now more important than ever before.



Consumer Affairs professionals are often on the front lines of a crisis and are responsible for interacting with consumers and customers to address their questions and concerns. Consumer Affairs also has the responsibility of escalating to other functions throughout the organization to inform them of situations that are beginning to intensify. To support a seamless process when a crisis such as a recall occurs organizations should have a documented plan in place, which is required for food and beverage manufacturers who are FDA regulated per the [Code of Federal Regulations 21, Part 117.139](#). Crisis Management and Recall Plans should be reviewed on a regular basis, outlining critical steps required to manage consumer and customer feedback as issues are emerging. In addition to a documented plan, standard response templates and customer hold letters should be drafted, reviewed by Legal / Corporate Relations and be ready. Companies should consider the top three to five issues that have the potential to lead to a crisis or recall and have this information readily available so they may simply complete “plug and play” templates with relevant facts. It’s also important for Consumer Affairs to collaborate and stay engaged with other cross functional teams to identify hot topics that are trending to ensure appropriate response, such as:

- Negative feedback from food or product influencers impacting brand reputation, including demanding removal of product from shelf and/or redesigning product to reduce risk and harm to consumers.
- Investigations of economically motivated fraud due to the organization’s inability to source products from approved suppliers, and the call center’s ability to properly manage this type of contact. [FSMA’s Final Rule for Mitigation Strategies to Protect Food Against Intentional Adulteration](#) outlines the need for robust procedures in the event a product tampering or extortion threat is received by an FDA regulated manufacturer.
- Properly managing communication of threats or the reality of an insider attacker purposely contaminating the supply chain with the intent of committing public harm.
- New regulatory requirements impacting the organization’s products, such as the addition of [sesame as the ninth food identified as a major allergen](#) in the United States.

Organizations that are most successful when managing a crisis are proactive in leveraging CRM capabilities and automation to monitor, listen and detect feedback in the marketplace. Products subject/reason codes, and lot codes, in addition to threshold and key action words enable Consumer Affairs professionals to stay in front of trends and keep stakeholders informed of evolving situations to support decision making.

Once a situation has escalated and has the potential to lead to a crisis, organizations should have a contingency plan established to handle the increase in contact volume. Options include, but are not limited to, hiring temporary labor, utilizing other departments such as Sales, Marketing, Customer Services, etc. or leveraging an outsourced provider that has been previously vetted, to handle the influx of contacts related to the crisis.

In the event the crisis is a product recall, full lot codes including time stamps must be confirmed, consumer complaint retrievals, chain of custody processes and store checks at retail must be considered, and inspections at distribution centers should be established to ensure safe and effective removal of product from market. This is currently top of mind for FDA regulated food industry as the [final rule](#) on food traceability designed to facilitate faster identification and rapid removal of potentially contaminated food from the market has been issued by the agency. Foods subject to the final rule requirements appear on the [Food Traceability List \(FTL\)](#) which includes fresh cut fruits and vegetables, shell eggs, and nut butters, as well as certain fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, ready-to-eat deli salads, cheeses, and seafood products.

Whether the FDA, USDA, CPSC, NHTSA or other regulatory agency governs your industry, a rapid and targeted response to a crisis is key, and the way it's managed can make or break a brand and organizational reputation. Regardless of the nature of the crisis, it is vital that organizations set up channels of communication, through a hotline or on the organization's social media feed, where consumers and customers can ask questions and the organization can provide information and regular updates. Online communication responsibilities during a crisis continue to be a grey area among some organizations and can lead to challenges. At times, functions with positive intent want to support, however, may not be the best suited to manage escalation and response. As part of this process, it's important to ensure key messaging, and its delivery, is consistent.

Organizations should put forward the same messaging and spokesperson for all updates to the general public about the crisis, whether it's the CEO or another senior executive; they should convey a sense of calm, empathy and personal connection to consumers and customers.



A solid crisis and communication plan includes working through online communication roles and responsibilities in advance and ensuring the plan is practiced on a defined basis, including identifying designated backups. Other online considerations during a crisis include:

- Pausing or reviewing the organizational social media calendar; cancel or postpone content until the time is right.
- Listening and responding selectively to feedback.

- Providing updates on social media sites and linking to credible sources to obtain trust.
- Developing a Social Media Communication Policy for employees to ensure appropriate use of social media best practices, differentiating between personal and professional response.
- Keeping the lines of communication with employees open, honest and frequent; employees can be an advocate of dispelling misinformation and share truth, which helps with brand recovery.

After a crisis has passed, Consumer Affairs professionals should evaluate their response using post incident debriefs and identify ways to improve their crisis management plans. This may involve updating plans, training staff, or making changes to policies or procedures.

If a crisis is not addressed quickly and effectively it may go viral and cause considerable damage to a company's brand and reputation. Since prevention of a crisis is the best approach, being prepared in advance and leveraging CRM and social media tools can prevent an issue from becoming a crisis. Escalation words, thresholds and other monitoring schemes can help brands spot mentions and manage a potential threat before it has the chance to do any serious damage; in fact, it may even turn into a positive brand building exercise.



<https://www.reputationmanagement.com/blog/crisis-management>

With planning and preparation, communicating effectively, acting quickly, showing empathy, and learning from past experiences, Consumer Affairs can help minimize the impact of a crisis and maintain the trust of consumers, customers, and stakeholders.

How RQA can help?

Whether you need to develop internal programs and train your team on recall and crisis readiness or even execute a product recall, RQA can help. Our team can support the end to end process including identifying where your recall and crisis management programs may have gaps, refining



program materials, team member training and practice via simulations. Then we can help by evaluation of product on shelf and retrieve and analysis of consumer complaints. As a potential problem area emerges we can visit the store, supplier, or manufacture to gain insight into causes and scope of the issue. In the event of a recall, we can help by supporting the recall team with determining a recall strategy, hazard analysis, communications, and completion of in market response such as removing and destroying product. After the recall or crisis RQA can support team learning through facilitation of post recall assessments and developing and supporting proactive plans to reduce likelihood of recurrence.

- ✓ Consumer Care Management Consulting: Program Review & Refinement, Complaint & Incident Management Workshops, SOP Development & Review, Maturity Matrix Planning, Crisis Management)
- ✓ Consumer complaint sample retrieval, store investigations and sealed sample purchase
- ✓ Expert consulting and laboratory analysis to support complaint investigation
- ✓ Product Recall, Market Withdrawal and Effectiveness Checks including Product Recovery from Retail and DC, Returned Goods Programs, Online Self-Service Portals, Customer Support, Destruction)

For more information contact Melanie Whitman at m.whitman@rqa-inc.com or 906.373.6016
www.rqa-inc.com

