



**PR Leaders**  
The Association of PR Leaders & Innovators

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## FOR MEMBERS

### OVERVIEW

# Lessons Learned from Crisis Communication

by Patrick Holmes, Executive Director of Communications and Marketing,  
University of California, Berkeley.

**Patrick Holmes uses his own former experience at Oregon Science and Health University to share some emergency preparedness tips for communication. In an emergency communication is key, and Holmes suggests ways to communicate clearly and calmly during a crisis.**

Patrick Holmes is the Executive Director of Communications and Marketing for UC Berkeley. In this role, he oversees brand strategy, marketing, digital strategy and internal communications. In his first year and half at Berkeley, Patrick was charged with building an internal communications department from the ground up. Prior to Berkeley, Patrick worked at Oregon Science and Health University for over ten years, for five of which he directed internal communications. He obtained a bachelor's degree in social science from Portland State University, with an emphasis in communications.

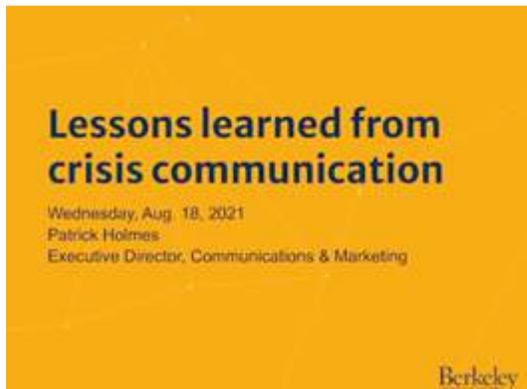
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*“There are certain things you can predict and plan for in a crisis.”*

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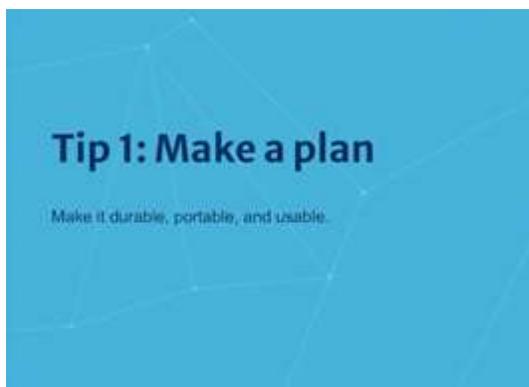
Holmes goes through tips that can be carried out *before* a crisis occurs to ensure that when it happens people know what's going on and what to do. He goes through how to make a crisis

plan, define terms, establish planning cycles, know who you need to contact, and make a list of all the things you need to do so that no time is lost once the emergency occurs.



### **Inclement weather as an example of a crisis communication issue**

- **Understand the problem and envision a successful communication outcome.**
  - Holmes says that Oregon gets snow just often enough not to be prepared for it, so it is a recurring problem. When he worked at OSHU, he needed to be prepared for the possibility of snow.
  - Snow often brings Portland to a halt so when it does occur it can be a real problem. Students and staff need to know what the plan is and how to carry it out.
  
- **Challenges Faced – consider what the contextual issues are. As an example, Holmes lists the challenges he faced**
  - High elevation
  - Limited road access
  - Snow zones
  - Oregon only has one academic health center. It's a level one trauma center with 24/7 operation.



## **1. Make a Plan**

- **There are things you can predict and plan for in a crisis. Include these in your plan and update as necessary.**
  - OSHU created a winter weather procedures guide to detail how to prepare for a snowstorm.
  - This document is produced each year with updated information.
  - The document is durable and portable enough for one season.



## 2. Define Your Terms

- **Create Definitions for operational status, roles, structures, systems, conditions, etc.**
  - Holmes uses an example from OSHU - color coded systems that meant different things in regard to weather. For example, green meant inclement weather had just started and wasn't as severe, but red meant severe inclement weather.
  - Holmes notes that it's important to have these kinds of things in place so that people are familiar with the system before inclement weather occurs.
  - He goes on to give standard definitions for roads, traction devices and coverage. Standardizing definitions is important for clarity.



## 3. Establish Planning Cycles

- **Determine How Often Communications are Needed**

- Holmes says it's very important to think about when you need to communicate during a crisis.
- How frequently do people (students, staff, workers, clients, etc.) need to be updated?
- What is the mean time to get those communications delivered?
- Generally, Holmes found that if people were communicated to about inclement weather two hours before they went to work, they were satisfied with that. Consider your own situation to decide the timing of crisis communications.



#### 4. Know the Players

- **Who are the stakeholders and how will you reach them?**
  - Know who you need to contact and how to get the message to them. Carefully consider who will be affected in a given crisis.
  - Holmes noted that OSHU had outlined a procedure of contact that noted who would be contacted, how and when.
  - In the hospital, staff were alerted by pagers if there was an emergency. Some constituents might need to be alerted differently or more quickly than others. This is important to keep in mind as you outline your own procedure of contact.
  - You should have a list of everyone's cell and office phones or any other pertinent contact information before a crisis occurs.



## 5. Make A List

- **What information is needed to communicate updates and what decisions need to be made?**
  - Holmes notes that it is important to be thorough and note all the things that need to be discussed. Make all these things part of the plan on the front end. It will be too late to consider these details during the crisis.
  - Holmes notes that that he has a communications document that is sent out at the time of an emergency, detailing what's to be done and who to contact. This is ready to go long before the crisis occurs.

## Conclusion

Holmes uses his ten years of experience in OSHU to offer some helpful tips on how to be prepared to communicate during a crisis. He lists a number of considerations to help form a communications plan, such as making a list of who needs to be contacted, what information they will need, and when they will need it. He also uses real world examples to illustrate his points and provides a template for crisis communications that can help any organization to plan for the future.



The executive summary above was written by staff from watching the presentation and many other ideas were presented. Members may watch the full presentation if wished by logging in.