



PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Charity sector 'aware but unprepared' for communications crises, new research finds

- **Just 7% say they are fully prepared for a communications crisis**
- **More than half have no crisis comms plan or one that is out of date**
- **Charities and other mission-led organisations left particularly exposed to disinformation, hostile attacks and political disruption**

Charities and other mission-led organisations risk being caught unprepared by fast-moving communications crises, despite widespread awareness of the threats they face, according to new research from communications consultancy Agenda.

The *Aware but unprepared* report found that just 7% of communications leaders and CEOs consider their organisation fully prepared for a communications crisis. The vast majority, 79%, say they are only partially prepared, while 10% say they are not prepared at all.

The findings point to a significant gap between organisations understanding the risks they face and having the practical systems needed to respond when a crisis hits.

While 72% have a current risk register or scenario planning document, this falls to 41% with a current incident-monitoring process and just 24% with a current crisis communications plan. More than half - 55% - have either no crisis communications plan or one they know is out of date.

Communications threats leave organisations particularly exposed

The research suggests organisations are generally better prepared for traditional operational risks than for communications crises that can escalate rapidly in public.

Planning is strongest around areas including legal and compliance issues, where 66% actively plan, and IT and cyber security, at 62%. But no communications-specific risk examined in the survey has an active planning rate above 52%.

Disinformation and misinformation present a particularly striking gap. Some 59% of respondents recognise disinformation and misinformation as a risk but have no plan to

address it. Just 17% actively prepare for coordinated attacks and harassment, despite the speed at which online pile-ons can develop into wider reputational crises.

Confidence is also substantially lower for communications threats. Across the five communications risks examined, only 14% to 31% of respondents say they are very confident in their organisation's ability to respond. Just 14% are very confident about handling an inappropriate communications incident or spokesperson error.

Political and social crises are another preparedness blind spot

The report also identifies political and social disruption as one of the least prepared-for categories of risk. While organisations may have limited control over events such as government change, negative regulatory action or major disruption to external systems, Agenda argues this should not prevent them from preparing for how they will communicate if those events affect their organisation, beneficiaries, supporters or reputation.

Major external systems collapse - such as fuel shortages or widespread IT or energy outages - is the least actively planned-for risk in the survey. Just 10% actively plan for it, while 72% recognise the risk but have no plan. It is also the risk organisations feel least equipped to handle: 45% are not confident at all in their ability to respond.

Becky Slack, co-director at Agenda, said:

“The recent RNLI story of volunteers being branded as traitors just for doing their jobs is a powerful example of why charities need to prepare for communications crises that can escalate quickly online.

“This is exactly the kind of situation organisations can't afford to start planning for once it is already happening. Disinformation, politically charged narratives and coordinated online attacks can move rapidly from a communications issue to a very real reputational, operational and even personal security problem. Yet our research found that while many people recognise it as a risk, very few have planned for it.

“You cannot predict exactly where the next crisis will come from, but you can prepare for how you will respond: who makes decisions, how you monitor what is being said, how you correct false information, how you protect staff and volunteers, and how you communicate quickly with supporters and the public. The RNLI has handled the situation very well, staying focused on its mission and values and putting the safety of its volunteers at the heart of its response. However, its experience shows why preparation is no longer a nice-to-have for charities.”

Plans are not being put to the test

Even where crisis plans exist, the research raises questions about whether organisations know they will work under pressure. Only 17% of respondents have tested their crisis communications plan in the past 12 months, while just 24% say roles and responsibilities during a crisis are clearly defined and documented. Almost half - 48% - say responsibilities are mostly clear but still contain gaps.

The report finds that organisations which have recently tested their plans are significantly more likely to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, suggesting rehearsal is critical to turning a written plan into a workable crisis response.

Respondents also highlighted structural barriers to preparedness, including small communications teams, limited budgets, a lack of out-of-hours capacity, slow senior-level decision making and reliance on individual experienced communicators.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- *Aware but unprepared: A snapshot of crisis comms readiness within mission-led organisations* can be downloaded here:
- Agenda is a strategic communications agency for organisations working to make a difference. We help organisations use communications more strategically to achieve their goals - whether that means building trust, strengthening relationships, protecting their reputation, growing their community, influencing decisions or inspiring people to act.
- The research received 29 responses from senior communications practitioners working in mission-led organisations. Around 80% of respondents were CEOs, senior leaders or heads of communications. Agenda notes that the sample is modest but says the results strongly align with its experience of crisis communications work across the sector.
- Interviews are available with Becky Slack and/or Victoria Barlow, co-directors of Agenda.
- Media enquiries: Lisa Harris at lisa.harris@your-agenda.com