

Case Study: Residential Explosion Crisis & Reputation Protection

Executing Crisis Communications in a Fatal Natural Gas Incident

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Executive Summary

Following a residential natural gas explosion in Ballantyne, NC, a prominent Charlotte community, Piedmont Natural Gas faced immediate public scrutiny, intense media attention, and a tragic loss of life. I led all external and crisis communications, activating a crisis communications playbook I had previously developed, standing up internal response teams, and engaging media immediately.

Through disciplined execution, strong relationships with local fire officials, and transparent communication, the situation was managed effectively. The root cause - customer interference with a natural gas meter - was confirmed by the Fire Chief, reinforcing critical safety messaging and preserving the company's reputation.

The Opportunity

- Protect public trust during a high-profile, emotionally charged incident
 - Provide clear, accurate information in the absence of immediate answers
 - Reinforce critical safety education around natural gas usage
 - Demonstrate leadership, transparency, and accountability
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The Challenge

- Fatal incident with significant media attention in a prominent neighborhood
 - Initial lack of confirmed cause
 - High emotional sensitivity involving loss of life and severe injury
 - Potential reputational risk for the company
 - Need for immediate, coordinated response across internal and external stakeholders
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My Role: Crisis Communications Leadership

I led all external and crisis communications for Piedmont Natural Gas.

Key responsibilities:

- Activated the crisis communications playbook I had developed
- Stood up internal crisis management and communications teams
- Served as lead spokesperson and media liaison
- Coordinated messaging across leadership, legal, and operations
- Leveraged established relationships with local fire officials and media

Strategic Approach

1. Immediate Activation of Crisis Playbook

- Implemented structured response protocols developed in advance
- Established clear roles, messaging processes, and escalation pathways
- Enabled rapid, coordinated action across teams

2. Proactive Media Engagement

- Engaged media immediately, even before all facts were known
- Maintained transparency while avoiding speculation
- Provided regular updates to ensure control of the narrative

3. Trusted Third-Party Validation

- Leveraged existing relationships with local fire leadership
- Ensured the Fire Chief communicated the confirmed cause
- Reinforced credibility through independent authority

4. Safety Messaging Reinforcement

- Aligned communications with longstanding customer safety education
- Emphasized the dangers of tampering with natural gas meters
- Positioned the incident within a broader public safety context

Execution Highlights

- Activated a fully developed crisis communications playbook in real time
- Established immediate media presence and narrative control
- Coordinated cross-functional response teams under high-pressure conditions
- Leveraged trusted relationships with fire officials to validate findings

Communications Impact

- Media coverage remained balanced and factual
- Fire Chief delivered key safety messaging, reinforcing company guidance
- Public understanding of the incident's cause was clear and accurate
- Company reputation remained strong despite the severity of the event

Strategic Business Impact

- Protected Piedmont Natural Gas's brand and public trust
- Reinforced the importance of customer safety education
- Validated the effectiveness of pre-established crisis communications systems
- Demonstrated the value of strong external relationships during crises

Key Takeaways

- Preparedness - crisis playbook enabled immediate, structured response
- Leadership - rapid activation of teams and communications strategy
- Credibility - trusted relationships with fire officials shaped outcomes
- Transparency - proactive media engagement to maintain trust
- Execution excellence - textbook response under high-stakes conditions