



CRISIS COMMUNICATION & MANAGEMENT PLAN

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Background

This document is created for the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (GFVGA). In preparing the document, Sahlman Williams interviewed Georgia fruit and vegetable growers (via in person meetings and by phone) in order to understand the state of the industry and its crisis preparedness level.

Here are the key grower learnings that went into this plan: Growers are very thoughtful about their operations and realize they are vulnerable to a food crisis situation of some type whether it is food safety, weather or labor related. The growers indicate the three Georgian-grown crops that are most susceptible to a food safety issue include tomatoes, melons and leafy greens.

All growers interviewed belong to an association or commodity group of some sort, which indicates a willingness to turn to industry for support in the event of a crisis. All growers interviewed had some type of food safety certification program in place. Most growers said in the event of a food crisis situation, their first call would be to the GFVGA. Most growers indicated they had not had any media training nor did they want to take on that role/responsibility in the event of a crisis.

Overview of Crisis Management

Few things are as important to an industry's success as its reputation, which can be significantly threatened when confronted with a crisis. Every industry is susceptible to crises because they result from a wide variety of factors.

Definition of a Crisis

A crisis is a situation that:

- Is unexpected
- Has elements of the unknown and escalating intensity
- Interrupts normal business operations
- Impacts an organization's external reputation and/or
- Impacts an industry's (as well as individual company) financial performance

In the food industry, these events take on additional importance because food has a daily impact on people's lives.

The difficulty in managing through a crisis is that effective crisis response is about both action and perception. An industry does not decide by itself whether the event in which it is embroiled is a crisis. The perceptions and reactions of outside influencers and key stakeholders, such as retailers, wholesalers, growers/shippers, regulatory agencies, other industry associations and the media, determine the impact on the reputation of the Association and the Georgia produce industry overall.

Identifying a Crisis

It is difficult to anticipate and prepare for a communication crisis; however, it is possible to establish a structure and process for information gathering, decision-making and communications, thereby building a culture of crisis preparedness.

Internal and external communications play a crucial role in controlling issues with key stakeholders before they develop into crises.

Following are scenarios that provide the potential for negative exposure for the GFVGA and its members:

- Contamination
- Product recall
- Consumer illness
- Labor issues
- Weather related crop failure

Warning signs that a potential crisis is developing include:

- Contact from another industry association
- Consumer complaints
- Notification of a legal issue
- Contact from a news media outlet
- Contact from a regulatory agency
- Contact from a customer (i.e. retailer, wholesaler, grower/shipper)
- Publication or broadcast of a negative news report
- Internet discussions online

The following primary crisis communication objectives can help GFVGA maintain the industry's reputation:

- 1) Identify roles and responsibilities of a crisis management team
- 2) Centralize the control and flow of information
- 3) Act quickly and consistently at the onset of a potential crisis in a forthcoming, honest manner
- 4) Protect the industry's market in the short- and long-term

Key Stakeholders and their Needs

Just as the GFVGA management team must have a clear understanding of GFVGA's overall objectives and guiding principles in the event of a crisis, GFVGA's key stakeholder audiences must have a clear understanding as well. During a crisis, the organization must disseminate its messages and, in return, listen for important feedback. The organization will approach this through direct communications with key stakeholder audiences, and also through trickle-down information provided by working with the media.

The media often "shapes" the issue/crisis and may sensationalize the situation. Therefore, the media must be viewed as an audience and as an "information venue" for important issue/crisis situation messages. **It is important to note that the GFVGA communicates through the media, not to the media.**

However, the media cannot be the only channel used to deliver messages. The GFVGA must communicate directly with other key stakeholder audiences affected by the issue at hand such as retailers, other industry associations, consumers, etc. Following are a listing of GFVGA's key stakeholders and the needs that must be met in order to ensure a successful crisis resolution:

Growers/Shippers – Growers/shippers can be a powerful resource in helping control a crisis because they have the strongest relationships and highest credibility with two of the external audiences (retailers and consumers). For grower/shipper representatives to be most effective, they will need to be fully briefed on the situation and have information at hand to answer difficult questions from their contacts. Quickly disseminating information from a credible source may significantly lower the long-term risk to the industry overall.

Industry Associations – Key affiliated industry-related associations should receive all external communications on an FYI basis. If it is helpful to have the association take a position on the issue, they should be approached to participate in the communications process. They can provide a third-party perspective, or they might be able to recommend experts who would be willing to speak on behalf of the Georgia produce industry in addition to the GFVFA.

Retailers – In the event of a crisis, retailers will play as important a role as advocates in disseminating proper information, providing guidance and support to consumers and ensuring the strength of the Georgia produce industry. Retailers (at the vice president of perishables, consumer affairs director level) should be provided with information to answer difficult questions and the means/materials to share within their organization.

Media – It is important to be both proactive and conservative with the media. A crisis is best contained when the media receives a timely, forthright explanation of the issue from GFVGA rather than other sources; however, the information must be concise and reiterated constantly to ensure that there is a shared, clear understanding of the situation.

Also, great care must be taken to place the situation in the appropriate context. There is a possibility that many reporters covering the story will not have food industry background. Communications must provide them with this information so that they can accurately present the scope of the problem. Any information given to the media will be widely disseminated (particularly if it runs on syndicated newswires) so there must be great attention placed on its accuracy and the implications of its distribution.

Consumers – Because they are the intended end audience, communications to consumers should be a top priority. All distributed information should place the situation in its proper context, provide clear, concise information on the steps consumers should take, provide a contact to answer additional questions and provide a sense of concern regarding consumers' overall well being. Consumer questions should be centrally and continually monitored and evaluated to determine if there is rampant misinformation that needs to be corrected, or if follow-up communication is required.

Regulatory Agencies – It is important to communicate with relevant regulatory agencies such as USDA, FDA and state entities, early in the external notification process to meet any legal requirement and because they are likely to get contacted by journalists if a story reaches critical mass. In addition to receiving all required notification, these agencies should receive all media statements prior to broad distribution and contact should be made with the media spokesperson so that they have a personal contact at the GFVGA.

Wholesalers – Depending on the nature of the crisis, wholesalers may not need extensive communication. However, if they are involved in the crisis, they should be part of the development of the messaging and, if necessary, speak publicly regarding their role in the situation. They should also receive all media and relevant external communications due to their ability to disseminate information throughout the industry.

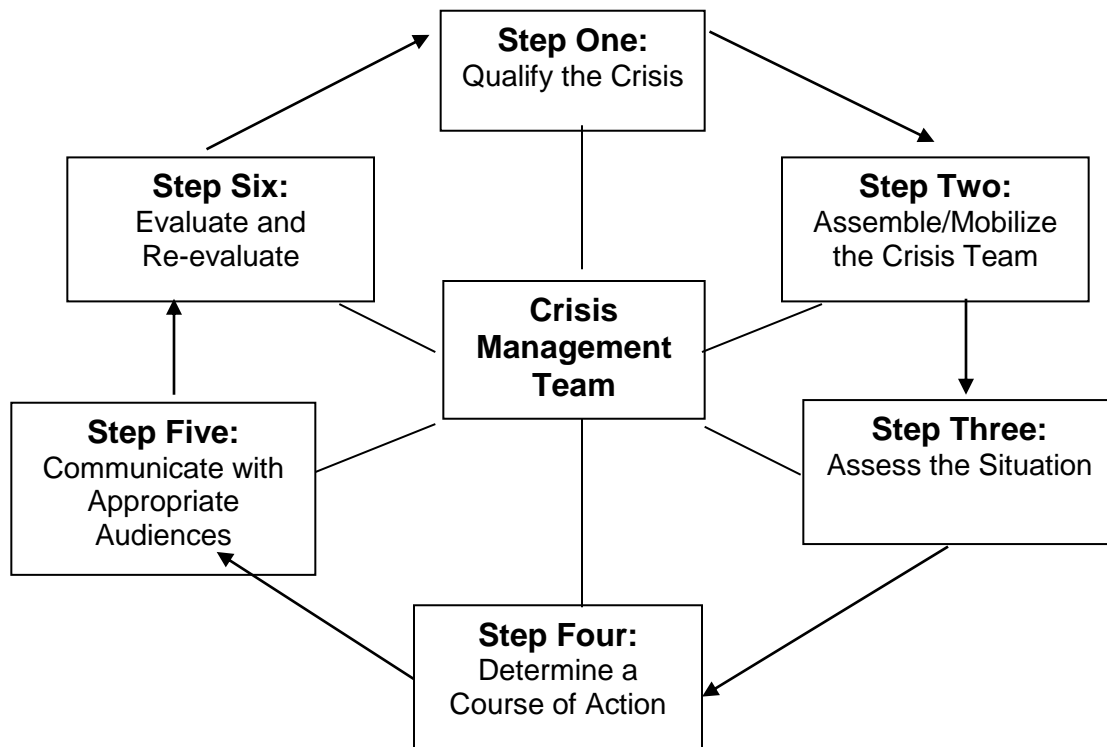
The Four Rs of Crisis Communication

Every situation is different; however, a successful crisis communications initiative relays specific key messages to all key stakeholder audiences. These messages are referred to as “The Four Rs” of crisis communications and all four may not be applicable in every situation.

Regret:	The first thing GFVGA should do is express regret that a problem has developed — even if it was not the industry’s fault.
Responsibility:	Whether the cause of the problem was the industry’s fault or not, the organization should be prepared to take responsibility for solving the problem. GFVGA’s actions will reinforce its words and provide a credible demonstration of the industry’s commitment to doing the right thing.
Reform:	GFVGA’s various stakeholder audiences must know the organization is taking steps to ensure the problem will not happen again.
Restitution:	If appropriate, detail how GFVGA and the industry will help those who have been affected by the problem.

Crisis Communications Process

Following the six-phased approach to crisis management (below) will enable the GFVGA to communicate during a crisis situation in a proactive, rapid manner. In addition, once GFVGA's crisis management program is started, it is important to revisit the six-step cycle on an ongoing basis. The evaluation phase will often provide new information that will change the scope of the crisis and the course of action.



Step One: Qualify the Crisis

When any situation arises that has the potential to cause harm or promote negative perceptions about the Georgia produce industry or its products, the GFVGA must act swiftly to initiate the crisis management plan. When a concern begins to take shape, the management team must evaluate conditions and determine what action needs to be taken.

Step Two: Assemble and Mobilize a Crisis Management Team

This step sets the tone for the entire process and is a key step in successfully resolving a crisis. Getting all appropriate parties involved in the planning process will prevent problems down the road.

Step Three: Assess the Situation

The next step to gather an accurate overview of the events that have taken place to date, assess the situation, and separate facts from rumors and speculation.

- Pinpoint and qualify the source of all information
- Confirm information from reliable sources
- Identify what information has been made public or is general knowledge within the organization, whether rumor or truth
- Determine if the crisis will affect more than one commodity
- Determine the potential for media coverage and when it might occur
- Determine if a government or agency response is expected
- Determine if the crisis will involve special interest groups or other third parties

The team must focus on the facts and fully assess what caused the event and the potential impact of the situation, including worst-case scenario and worst-possible outcome, what the best solution would be, and what action or component of the crisis event does the GFVGA have the best opportunity to influence.

Step Four: Determine a Course of Action

This step is important in that it ensures the industry appears united: One clear message coming from one credible voice in a timely manner.

- Remove the source of the crisis: The source and substance of the issue must be dealt with.
- Contain the problem: In the best scenario, the situation is contained locally, avoiding damage to the industry's overall credibility or reputation as well as maintaining its financial stability.
- Communicate honestly and factually: Keep key stakeholder audiences informed of GFVGA's actions. Also, correct factual errors or misinformation immediately. Use the information gathered to this point, to develop messages tailored to each stakeholder audience.

Step Five: Communicate with Key Stakeholder Audiences

The next step is to talk to the key stakeholders honestly, openly and in a timely fashion. It is important not only to speak, but also to listen to rumors, perceptions and misinformation that might be circulating among key stakeholders, and respond quickly and appropriately. At this time, determine *which* stakeholder audience to consider targeting, *who* should be in charge of communicating with each stakeholder (spokesperson/s) and "threshold questions" to consider when determining *when* to target each stakeholder audience group.

Stakeholder	Potential Communications Vehicles	Threshold Questions
Retailers and Growers/Shippers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information packet and/or letter • Personal contact • E-mail or e-newsletter • 800 number • Web site • Advisory board meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do they need to know about the source of the problem? • What actions to they need to take to resolve the situation? • What information will they provide to their consumers, customers and/or employees?
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial response statement • News release • Web site • External Q&A • Select interviews • News conference/ briefings • Advertising • Third-party groups • By-lined editorial • E-mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the news media get information on the situation whether GFVGA gives it to them or not? • Will the industry's reputation be affected unless information is aggressively released through the news media? • Is there are a broader, national industry group that can more appropriately handle the situation? • Can this become an industry issue rather than a Georgia issue?
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web site • 800 number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will buying consumers react? • To whom will they direct their questions? • What (mis)information have they already received?
Industry Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference calls • Personal meetings • Faxed statements • E-mail • Web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could the association be an ambassador for GFVGA? • Will the association help solicit testimony from experts on the issue?
Wholesalers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 800 number • Phone calls • Web site • Electronic communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the incident involve a wholesaler? • Are there other companies that could have been impacted by the wholesaler? • Is the wholesaler prepared to communicate? • Does the situation create uncertainty in other wholesalers' minds about Georgia-grown produce?

Another key component of step five is to track all communication efforts and monitor the impact of those communications.

Step Six: Evaluate and Re-evaluate

In this step, the parameters of the crisis should be re-evaluated on an ongoing basis, with frequency determined by the situation at hand. New information will emerge on a regular basis and the overall crisis plan should reflect the latest learnings. Messaging and stakeholder outreach will continue to evolve until the crisis is resolved.

Crisis Response and Communication Tools

It is important to release information about the situation as quickly as possible – corporate reputations can be significantly damaged in one news cycle if the industry’s voice is not represented. There are great benefits in being the first to comment on a crisis situation because it empowers the GFVGA to set the tone of the coverage. In addition, a response should take into account the questions that are likely to be asked regarding GFVGA’s role in the situation and address as many of these questions proactively as possible. Including this information will streamline the communications process and reduce the potential for negative exposure.

An initial statement for all stakeholder audience groups should include:

- Statement of problem, its cause, and, if possible, solution
- Regret over incident
- Date and time of problem (if applicable)
- Magnitude of problem/response to problem
- Involvement of regulatory agencies (if appropriate)
- Explanation how the organization will make restitution (if appropriate)
- Actions taken to contain problem (recall, etc.)
- Actions underway to prevent recurrence

As the situation unfolds, a variety of factors will influence the tone and content of the messaging. GFVGA’s communications must be continually evaluated to ensure that it is consistent with the latest information and external concerns. GFVGA will most certainly face the following questions immediately:

- Who first learned of the problem?
- When did you know about this problem, and what did you do about it at the time?
- Will the industry change or stop what has led to the crisis, and if not, why not?
- Has anyone fallen ill or died?

At various points throughout the crisis it will be necessary to revise written statements and/or news releases and media alerts on the situation.

The GFVGA should be as open as possible with the media and totally accessible to reporters during a crisis. In addition, stakeholder audiences must be kept informed of decisions and plans, as well as have the opportunity to follow newsworthy activities. Equally important is to avoid communicating inaccurate and/or conflicting information.

Communication Tools

There are several communication tools that are useful in a crisis situation, such as a dedicated phone line for information. The following list should be tailored to fit the GFVGA’s specific needs.

Crisis Contact Card –The GFVGA should create a small card with the management team’s phone numbers, cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. This card should be laminated and provided to all grower members as part of any annual membership update packet. The card could also potentially include the number for an outside public relations firm. The reverse side of the card should contain a top 10 list of “What to do in the event of crisis.”

What to do in a crisis:

1. Nothing is “off the record.”
2. Never say “no comment.”
3. Avoid jargon; speak in personal terms.
4. Don’t speculate; deal in facts, not rumors.
5. Don’t repeat negative questions or phrases.
6. If you don’t know the answer, say so.
7. Make sure you understand the question before answering.
8. Don’t argue; maintain your poise.
9. Speak only for your organization or company.
10. Maintain control and stick to your agenda.

Crisis Contact List – For GFVGA managers, a larger crisis contact sheet (potentially an 8.5x11” sheet) should be created with the same contact information as well as relevant regulatory agencies (state and federal) and other industry associations. Duplicate copies should be kept in multiple locations.

Crisis Section of Web Site – The GFVGA can also create a section of its existing Web site that would be activated only in times of crisis. The section could contain one area of information/ answers for media and another with “how to” information and interviewing tips for grower members.

Issue Team – The GFVGA should assemble a risks and issues team prior to a crisis that would help it identify potential threats to the industry. The team, made up of commission/association group presidents, would meet bi-annually to anticipate potential threats to the industry as well as discuss and agree upon industry response.

Potential Crisis Scenarios

Food Safety Outbreak

Situation

There are a number of situations that could compromise fresh produce quality. Product tampering incidents most often are serious, yet isolated, events. However, if tampering is deemed to be widespread or the consequences are serious, a recall may be necessary. More common would be some type of contamination issue from a food safety outbreak that would result in a recall.

The team should be notified of all food safety incidents immediately. Provide all the details you have collected (e.g., time incident reported to retailer/grower-shipper, name of reporting person, name of person who discovered the issue if not reporting person, where, when, and how product was found, etc.). If possible, quantify the magnitude of the problem.

Initial Response Statement

It is crucial for GFVGA to provide an initial response that is honest and accurate, even if all the facts have not been determined. An immediate stand-by message should contain the following information:

- A value statement
 - Example: *The industry's foremost concern is for the lives and safety of consumers*
- Commitment to stopping whatever has led to the crisis
- Compassion for those who have been negatively influenced by the situation
- Cooperation with all involved parties to reach a resolution

As soon as possible, the statement should include a factual account of what took place and what the GFVGA and the industry is doing to resolve the situation. Additional language could include:

- *Our sympathies are with the (affected individuals) and their families and friends who have been affected by this.*
- *At this time, it is premature to discuss possible sources or causes. We are working with (agencies involved) to facilitate the investigation.*

Potential Stakeholder Audiences

- Retailers
- Industry associations
- Consumers
- USDA, FDA, other appropriate state regulatory agencies
- Wholesalers/distributors
- News media

Potential Vulnerabilities Requiring Communication

- Retailers and foodservice organizations stop stocking Georgia-grown produce
- Consumers stop buying Georgia-grown produce
- Sales drop significantly in the short term

Potential Questions

- How many shipments of Georgia-grown produce are involved?
- Where was the product grown?
- How much product is involved?
- How can the affected product be identified?
- Has GFVGA notified the FDA?
- Is GFVGA /Grower/Shipper/FDA going to issue a recall and at what level?
- What federal, state and/or local agencies have been notified?
- If not a recall, but a product withdrawal, what arrangements is GFVGA making to recover the affected product? (from distributors, wholesalers, retailers, consumers)
- What should consumers do with the product they have at home? (discard, return to retailer, return to grower/shipper)
- Will the industry refund the cost of the product?
- Is it safe for consumers to eat the product they have on hand?
- What would the medical/health consequences be if the product were consumed?
- Has this item ever had a quality problem before?
- What exactly is the nature of the problem?
- How long will it take to correct the problem?
- What are the financial implications?

Labor Shortage

Situation

A lack of labor could be disruptive to the industry in many ways, including the ability to get product safely to market.

Initial Response Statement

The GFVGA should be prepared to respond to inquiries from media and other key stakeholders about the situation. It is crucial for GFVGA to provide an initial response that is honest and accurate.

Potential Stakeholders to be Notified

- Retailers
- Growers/shippers
- Consumers
- Industry associations
- News media

Potential Vulnerabilities Requiring Communication

- Lack of labor significantly affects harvest or packing of Georgia-grown produce

Potential Question

- What is the industry's position on labor (particularly the H2a program)?
- How will the crops be harvested?
- How large is the size of a particular commodity (farm gate value)?
- What is the industry going to do?

GFVGA Crisis Management Team Leadership

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