

# CRISIS MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY

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## 5 TIPS FOR MANAGING A LARGE FACEBOOK GROUP DURING A CRISIS

November 2019



# CASE STUDY

*The following case study is based on an event that occurred within a university parent group on Facebook. While the academic setting may or may not resemble your non-profit or industry in any way, the basic crisis management principles shared here can be easily applied to any organization.*



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# INTRODUCTION

*In addition to working as a healthcare marketing consultant and community building strategist, I volunteer as lead admin for the Virginia Tech Parents Facebook group, a highly engaged and fast-growing community of more than 16,400 members. In this case study, I share a look at how a crisis from last year played out over social media within a 48-hour period.*

*What happened?* Perhaps you will recall a national news story last year about a Virginia Tech freshman who was arrested for illegally possessing assault rifles. According to court records, he also tried to buy 5,000 rounds of ammunition, researched bullet proof vests and bought a former police car which he outfitted with special bumpers. In short, he is no longer a student – and numerous stories made the news from local to regional and national outlets, too.

As expected – and given Virginia Tech’s profoundly difficult chapter in history from 2007 – this event kept our university parent group of nearly 9,000 members at the time (now more than 16.4K) overwhelmingly engaged with deeply concerned parents. In addition, a large boost in member requests occurred because our group was referenced in the news. Those who were not aware of us most assuredly were now. To manage the disruption to “usual and customary” group behavior, we implemented several procedures, which may be helpful in any number of challenging scenarios. Cheers to never needing this case study:

## ***5 tips for managing a large Facebook group during a crisis***

*Dee Dee Becker  
Community Building Strategist  
Lead admin, Virginia Tech Parents Group*





# 5 tips for managing a large Facebook group during a crisis

1

## 1. Turn on Post Approval

If not already in use, turn on the Post Approval feature under settings. In a crisis, posts begin popping up like popcorn and it can be difficult to manage those conversations if you don't herd the cattle to one centralized post. Create a single post addressing your group and tell them this will be the official discussion thread for the situation. For members who try to create a new post on the topic, use the "decline and feedback" feature and share the permalink leading them to your official discussion thread where they can participate in or simply follow the conversation.



2

## 2. Manage group join requests

You will receive an abundance of requests to join during a crisis. You have two choices:

- Accept them all to broaden your audience for increased communications opportunity; or
- Temporarily cease this operation until peace and calm resume, and to prevent unintentionally adding those who would join under false pretenses (e.g. "bad actors" - journalists looking for a story, curiosity seekers - and even pot stirrers associated with who/what caused your crisis in the first place).

In our case, we chose to stop accepting members for the first 48 hours with exception of members of the campus police department who requested access and were properly vetted beforehand through a trusted source. Days and weeks later, as the investigation continues, you will still get numerous member requests. Be careful. If something seems off about certain profiles, don't allow them in. Be sure to utilize the Facebook screening feature which allows you to add up to three questions to help vet members.





# 5 tips for managing a large Facebook group during a crisis

3

## 3. Establish a direct line of communication with key administration

In this case it was with Student Affairs, University Relations and the police chief of our university police department. For you, it could be your organization's HR department, administration, Risk Management or – if a neighborhood community group – city government personnel from the Public Information Office to the police department. Reach out to them pronto, if they haven't already reached out to you. In fact, I recommend doing this now before you ever have a crisis, because fostering relationships and open communication with key members of your local community is mutually beneficial. It helps to have them feeding you timely information, including links to official company/organization statements as soon as they are released. They can also help quickly debunk any myths or untruths.



4

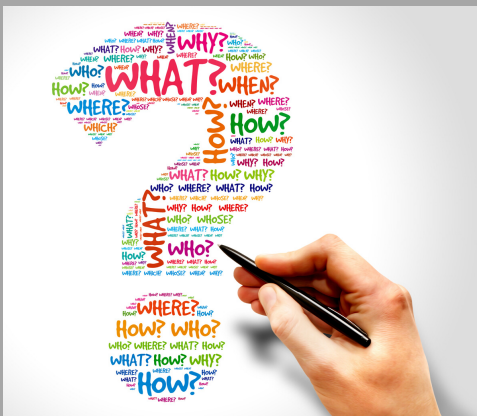
## 4. Create a Secret Group

While you may use a Facebook Messenger chat to communicate with your admin team, consider also creating a Private (Secret) Admin Group if you haven't already. Call it the (Name of your Group) Admin Team. This helps in organizing and sharing screenshots, creating photo albums and keeping track of different discussion themes. One post for problem members. Another thread for help with vetting member requests. Yet another for sharing new updates from key constituencies to your admin team - and more. My admin team uses this secret group regularly to manage our parent group, but it was especially helpful during the crisis. It's easier to see everything in a Facebook group format as opposed to doing a search and lengthy scroll back in a group chat to find something important.



# 5 tips for managing a large Facebook group during a crisis

## 5. Discussion management



- **Be transparent with your members.** Tell your group that you are in touch with university/company/city government staff but that you don't have all the answers right now – and that you may not ever have those answers, but you are keeping the lines of communication open. Ask your members to list their questions by replying to your post. This creates efficiencies for university/company/city government by keeping their phones lines from ringing as much. It also assists you in maintaining control of your group, because members feel heard, helped and grateful for the open discussion – even if they aren't getting all the answers they'd like to hear. It becomes a bonding experience that makes your group stronger. They mostly want a place to convene, discuss – and yes, vent. You may find the need to bend group rules a bit...here's why...
- **Implement “Admin Discretion” if necessary.** You have rules in your group, and for many groups one of those rules is “No Politics.” In our case, the issue ultimately evolved into discussions about gun control. Talking about gun control led to discussing State law/code – so the conversation automatically dipped into politics. Since the conversation was an important one, we implemented “Admin discretion” and allowed political discussion only within this official thread to help members better understand what happened and how and why the student was arrested. At times, pro and anti-gun enthusiasts would get heated with each other, so in monitoring the conversation, we inserted directives and closed off discussion on those sub-threads which served no value to the group. We reminded everyone that we appreciated the opportunities to share and discuss both sides of the coin, but that we were not going to solve gun control concerns in this group...but feel free to reach out to lawmakers to create change. Thankfully, everyone understood and followed every directive we gave.

# 5 tips for managing a large Facebook group during a crisis

5

*continued...*

## 5. Discussion management cont...

- *Delete comments that go against your rules* and/or further incite fear and anger. You're the admin so lead by example. Delete comments without warning. Just do it. You have no time to be chasing down or responding to members to explain why their comment was removed, especially in a crisis. Nuff said.



- *When it's time to turn off comments to the centralized discussion thread.* At the 48-hour mark, we recognized repeat questions, so the admin team determined the entire discussion had run full course. We inserted closing remarks and turned off commenting. The comment gave thanks to everyone for participating in the discussion, asked everyone to feel free to review the thread as many questions were already asked and answered, and told them that we would do our best to obtain answers to outstanding questions. We also acknowledged the likeliness that some questions would not be answered due to the ongoing investigation. Finally, we told them we were ready to get back to regular group operating procedures and to have a nice weekend because we'd all earned it! Members responded well.



# Conclusion



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Dee Dee Becker, President

*Friends,*

*When it comes to Facebook communities, a crisis is a unique and challenging time that requires leadership and intentional action to prevent group chaos and maintain trust with your members. I'm happy to report that everything we did in this case was successful, and I have since implemented the strategy again in another group. I also had the opportunity this year to share about my experience at Facebook's global headquarters in Menlo Park, CA and at their NYC offices. Learn more **here**.*

*Do you have a case study to share?  
I'd love to hear about it. Reach out any time!*

Cheers!

*Dee Dee*