

Study Plan 2026/27 (fall semester)

Course Description/Syllabus

Fall 2026	Crisis Communication
Course director	Prof. Dr. Diana Ingenhoff , University of Fribourg diana.ingenhoff@unifr.ch
Lecturer	Prof. Dr. Philipp Bachmann , Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, philipp.bachmann.01@hslu.ch
Assistant	Josef Demling , University of Fribourg, josef.demling@unifr.ch
Prerequisites	When registering to the course you will be assigned to one out of six topics . This topic must be prepared before the course starts (<i>ppt-presentation</i>). Also, a case study has to be solved during the course. For more details, please see learning methods below.
Objectives	By the end of the course, students will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define and relate the core concepts of reputation, issues and crisis management (identity, image, reputation, issue life cycle, crisis, stakeholders, public sphere) within a strategic communication framework.• Explain and compare the key crisis communication theories (SCCT, Contingency, Rhetorical Arena, stakeholder, Internet Contagion) and assess their scope and limits.• Analyse how social media, digital publics and digital collectives drive the emergence and escalation of issues and crises.• Assess how culture, (internal) activism and business ethics/CSR shape an organization's crisis vulnerability and response.• Design and justify an evidence-based crisis communication strategy — response strategies, priority stakeholders, key messages and channels — for a given case.• Apply it under time pressure in a crisis simulation.
Description / Program	Organizations today face a growing number of (digital) publics ready to mobilize around issues for which they hold companies and institutions accountable. As social, economic, and technological systems become more complex, so does the range of crises that can harm a firm, an industry, or even a nation. Active reputation management and well-prepared crisis communication have consequently become standard tools of professional management. This course treats reputation, issues and crisis management as both theory and practice. Drawing on crisis communication theory, empirical research and real-world case studies, students analyze stakeholder expectations and the structures, policies and tools organizations use to anticipate and respond to crises — including the dynamics of social media and digital collectives. In a full-day simulation, students then apply and deepen these strategies under realistic, time-pressured conditions.
Time schedule	
Block 1:	
Sept 25 (Fri)	09.15–10.45 (Intro); 11.00–12.30 (Topic 1 presented) 13.30–15.00 (Topic 2 presented) 15.15–16.45 (Topic 3 presented)
Sept 26 (Sat)	09.15–12.15 (Case studies)
Block 2:	
Oct 2 (Fri)	09.15–10.45 (Topic 4 presented); 11.00–12.30 (Topic 5 presented); 13.30–15.00 (Topic 6 presented)
Oct 3 (Sat)	09.15–17.00 Crisis simulation exercise, Summary

September 25 (Friday): 09:15-16:45		Key texts
09:15–10:45	<p>Crisis and Reputation management: What it's all about?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Key terms (stakeholder, identity, image, reputation, issues, issue life cycle, crisis) ▪ Fundamentals of crisis and issues management 	Ingenhoff (2018): <i>Monitoring</i> . Lawrence & Weber (2014): <i>Chapters 1 and 2</i> . Griffin (2014): <i>Chapters 9 and 10</i> . Mitchell et al. (1997): <i>Stakeholder Identification</i>
	<p>Reputation Management Corporate and country reputation as an attitudinal construct</p>	Ingenhoff (2018): <i>Reputation</i> Thiessen, Ingenhoff (2011): <i>Safeguarding Reputation</i>
11:00–12:30 (Topic 1 presented)	<p>Crisis Communication Theory I: SCCT and Contingency Theory</p> <p>Please explain key concepts of a) <i>Situational Crisis Communication Theory</i> (T. Coombs) and the foundation of attribution theory (B. Weiner), and b) <i>Contingency Theory</i> (G.T. Cameron); give examples/cases for each approach</p>	Coombs (2021): <i>Crisis PR</i> . Coombs (2007): <i>Protecting Organization Reputations during a Crisis</i> Coombs & Tachkova (2023): <i>Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT</i> Frandsen & Johansen (2017): <i>Chapter 6 (Strategic and Context-oriented approaches)</i>
13:30–15.00 (Topic 2 presented)	<p>Crisis Comm. Theory II: The Rhetorical Arena</p> <p>Please focus on the framework of the “Rhetorical Arena”, fundamentals of arena theory and present the consumers and citizens as examples of voices; illustrate the theory with cases, e.g. VW as in Raupp (2019) or Ebola as in Rodin et al. (2019)</p>	Frandsen & Johansen (2022): The rhetorical arena revisited Frandsen & Johansen (2017) Chapt. 9: Emotions and social media Raupp (2019) Crisis Comm RAT OR Rodin et al. (2019): <i>Disentangling rhetorical subarenas</i>
15:15–16:45 (Topic 3 presented)	<p>Internet Contagion Theory, Social Media, Digital Collectives and Crises</p> <p>Please focus on how to evaluate online issue threats, explain ICT dimensions for issue prioritization, give basic insights into social network theory, and explain how Internet contagions can increase stakeholder power. Please also consider latest developments like digital collectives and digital issues management.</p>	Coombs & Holladay (2017): <i>Internet Contagion Theory</i> Coombs (2002): <i>Assessing online issue threats</i> Illia & Colleoni (2023): <i>Digital Issues Management</i> OR Liu, Kim, & Pennington-Gray, (2015): <i>Bed bug crisis</i>

September 26 (Saturday) 09:15-12:15		Key texts
09:15–12:15	<p>Crisis Communication Case Studies (Group work)</p>	<p>Case 1: Steering Princess Cruises through the Covid-19 Crisis</p> <p>Case 2: Game of Thrones -Tourism in Dubrovnik, Croatia</p>

October 2 (Fri): 09:15-15:00		Key texts
09:15–10:45 (Topic 4 presented)	<p>International Crisis Communication across Cultures</p> <p>Please present theoretical approaches and insights on how to cope with cultures in crisis, also explaining the cultural dimensions by Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004). Find examples of crisis communication where culture played a major role and apply the basic concepts. Discuss briefly what we can learn with respect to resilience from firms coping with Covid.</p>	<p>Frandsen & Johansen (2017): Chapter 7 (<i>Crisis communication across cultures</i>)</p> <p>Dhanesh & Sriramesh (2017): <i>Culture and crisis communication</i></p> <p>Alonso et al., (2020): <i>Covid-19, aftermath, impacts, and hospitality firms: An international perspective</i>.</p> <p>You may also consult http://globeproject.com https://geerthofstede.com</p>
11:00–12:30 (Topic 5 presented)	<p>The Role of (Internal) Activism and Internal Crisis Communication</p> <p>Please explain the key terms, the 5 stages of activism, how to cope with activists, and find positive/negative cases to apply the insights. Also, please explain with reference to Lee & Rim how a partnership with an NGO could lead to spillover effects, and which would be an effective response strategy. Also consider internal activism.</p>	<p>Ferguson (2018): <i>NGO Communication</i></p> <p>Lee & Rim (2017): <i>Company-non profit partnerships, negative spillover, and response strategies</i></p> <p>Lee, Y. (2021): <i>The rise of internal activism</i></p>
13:30–15.00 (Topic 6 presented)	<p>The Role of Business Ethics and CSR during Crises</p> <p>Please explain the role of business ethics and CSR during a crisis, referring also to the key terms and concepts (e.g., Carroll's pyramid). Discuss how a crisis like Covid-19 pandemic can influence the developments of CSR, and how strategic marketing approaches might change (He & Harris). You may also add other examples to show the link between CSR and crisis communication.</p>	<p>Tench, R. (2021): <i>Community and Society: Corporate Social Responsibility</i></p> <p>Lawrence & Weber (2017): Chapter 3: <i>Corporation's Responsibilities</i></p> <p>He, H. & Harris, L. (2020): <i>Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on CSR</i></p>
	Summary and outlook on crisis simulation	

October 3 (Sat): Crisis Simulation Day 9:15-17.00	
09:15–13.00	<p>Crisis Communication Simulation</p> <p>You work on a given crisis case scenario in your group. You are members of a corporate communication department. You will be given several tasks at different points in time. You have to solve these tasks within a limited period of time and send the deliverables to us at a precisely specified time (e.g., press release).</p>
14.00–15.30	<p>Analysis & final discussion of cases</p> <p>We will analyze your performance during the crisis simulation, give ideas for improving, and will discuss your experiences in the class forum.</p>
15.30–17.00	<p>Summing up of learnings, final discussion of the overall course and briefing for final exam.</p>

**Learning Method /
Style of Lessons**

We will combine presentations, discussions, case studies, and a whole-day crisis simulation exercise. For further details, please also see below “exam style/grading”.

When registering for the course, you will be assigned to one of six topics. You prepare your topic before the course starts and solve a case study during the course.

1. Text work/PPT presentation: Examine your assigned topic in detail before the course (e.g., Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Contingency Theory; see list below) and present it in a PPT presentation of about 30 minutes, including a short discussion. Present the topic coherently rather than text by text; you may integrate additional relevant texts (e.g. by the authors of the model presented). Where useful, draw connections to the other five core topics. Illustrate the topic with a current, real-world example from Switzerland or abroad that is *not* drawn from the literature and that you research yourself. (Note: all participants must read all literature, including the other groups'.)

Deadline: upload your PPT to iCorsi **one day before your presentation, by 8:00 a.m.**

2. Case study: A time slot is reserved on September 26th, 9:15–12:15 a.m., but you may also work on the case individually or as a group at another time. The case texts are on iCorsi; read your group's case before the course starts. Summarize your results in a PowerPoint file (max. 5–6 slides). **Deadline: September 29th, 8 a.m.** (at the latest!).

Then review your partner group's results (same case) and provide peer feedback: write a short paragraph (half a page) evaluating their case study. **Deadline: October 1st, 8 a.m.**

Case 1: Steering Princess Cruises through the Covid-19 Crisis

Case 2: Game of Thrones – Tourism in Dubrovnik, Croatia

Each group is expected to address the following five questions.

- What were the causes leading to the situation? What were the consequences?
- Analyze the type of crisis and reputation threat. Which crisis communication strategy would you recommend according to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (see T. Coombs)? Compare your strategy with the one chosen in the case.
- Which immediate actions were taken? What were the short- and long-term communication goals? Evaluate and explain what you would have done differently.
- Which are the most important stakeholders, and which key messages did they receive? Which key messages would you suggest? With which instruments would you distribute them?

**Exam Style /
Grading**

Participants' overall evaluation for this course will be based on the framework depicted in the table below:

Power Point presentation	Participants prepare and present a ppt presentation (see above). There are six different topics (see time schedule). Please study the relevant literature before the course begins and upload a PPT file.	40%
Case study (Group work)	Participants work in groups on a crisis management & communication case. They analyze a given case and upload a PowerPoint file	
Exam	The final exam (60 minutes) is based on the required readings of each group and the presented topics as well as all course contents given by the lecturer. The exam may include	60%

		multiple choice as well as open questions and case studies.	
	Participation (sessions)	Each participant is expected to attend all sessions (with a maximum of 4 hours of absence with a valid excuse), complete the readings, and participate in the discussions and group work during class. Class participation may result in an up- or downgrade of 0.25 points, missing more than 4 hours of all sessions will result in an extra task or exclusion from the final exam.	+/- 0.25
	Participation (crisis simulation)	Each student is expected to participate into the crisis simulation study to gain first insights into crisis communication. Active participation may result in an up- or downgrade of 0.25 points.	+/- 0.25

Readings / Literature

Crisis Communication Theory I: SCCT and Contingency Theory

- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.
- Coombs, W. T., & Tachkova, E. R. (2023). Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 37(4), 798-820. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189221151177>
- Coombs, W. T. (2021): Crisis public relations management. In R. Tench, & L. Yeomans, L. (Eds.): *Exploring public relations. Global strategic communication* (5th ed., p. 344-364). Harlow, England: Pearson.
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). *Organizational crisis communication*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE. Chapter 6: Crisis communication: Strategic and context-oriented approaches, pp. 106-120.

Topic 1

Crisis Communication Theory II: The Rhetorical Arena

- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2022). Rhetorical arena theory: Revisited and expanded. In T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *The handbook of crisis communication* (2nd ed., pp. 169–181). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119678953.ch12>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). *Organizational crisis communication*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE. Chapter 9: Consumer and citizens: Emotions and social media, pp. 159-176.
- Raupp, J. (2019). Crisis communication in the rhetorical arena. *Public Relations Review*, 45(4). **OR**
- Rodin, P.; Ghersetti, M.; & Odén, T. (2019). Disentangling rhetorical subarenas of public health crisis communication: A study of the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak in the news media and social media in Sweden. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*. 27(3), pp. 237-246.

Topic 2

Internet Contagion Theory, Social Media, Digital Collectives and Crises

- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2017). Consumer empowerment through the web: How Internet contagions can increase stakeholder power. In S. Duhé (Ed.), *New Media and Public Relations* (3rd ed., pp. 175-188). New York: Peter Lang.
- Coombs, W. T. (2002). Assessing online issue threats: Issue contagions and their effect on issue prioritization. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2(4), 215-229.
- Illia, L. & Colleoni, E. (2023). Digital Corporate Communication & Issues Management: Monitoring digital collectives and tipping points of refraction around issues. In Luhoma V., and Badham, M. (Eds.) *Handbook of Digital Corporate Communication*. Edward Elgar Publishing. **OR**
- Liu, B., Kim, H., & Pennington-Gray, L. (2015): Responding to the bed bug crisis in social media. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 47, 76–84.

Topic 3

International Crisis Communication across Cultures

- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). *Organizational crisis communication*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE. Chapter 7: Crisis Communication across Cultures, pp. 121-136.
- Dhanesh, G. S., & Sriramesh, K. (2018). Culture and crisis communication: Nestle India's Maggi noodles case. *Journal of International Management*, 24(3), 204-214.
- Alonso, A.D., Kok, S.K., Bressan, A. et al. (2020): COVID-19, aftermath, impacts, and hospitality firms: An international perspective: *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 91, (2020) 102654.

Topic 4

The Role of (Internal) Activism and Internal Crisis Communication

- Ferguson, D. P. (2018). *Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Communication*. The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication.
- Lee, S.Y. & Rim, H (2017). Company-nonprofit partnerships, negative spillover, and response strategies. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11 (3), 194-208.
- Lee, Y. (2021). The rise of internal activism: motivations of employees' responses to organizational crisis, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 33(5), 387-406.

Topic 5

The Role of Business Ethics and CSR during Crises

- Tench, R. (2021): Community and Society: corporate social responsibility (CSR). In R. Tench & L. Yeomans (Eds). *Exploring public relations. Global Strategic Communication* (5th ed., pp. 66-93.). Harlow, England: Pearson.
- Lawrence A. T., & Weber, J. (2017). *Business and society. Stakeholders, ethics, public policy* (15th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill. Chapter 3: The Corporation's Social Responsibilities, pp. 45-67.
- He, H. & Harris, L. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on corporate social responsibility and marketing philosophy. *Journal of Business Research*, 116, pp. 176-182.

Topic 6
