

CASE STUDY · CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

A fatal residential gas explosion

Executing a pre-built crisis playbook in the first hours of a fatality, and using independent authority to establish cause.

A natural gas explosion in Ballantyne, an established Charlotte neighbourhood, killed one person and injured another. Media were on site within the hour. The cause was unknown, the community was frightened, and the utility had no confirmed facts to offer.

THE SITUATION

- A fatality on a residential distribution system, in a prominent neighbourhood, with immediate and sustained press attention.
- No confirmed cause in the critical first hours.
- High emotional sensitivity, and a community that lived on the same system.
- Material reputational exposure for the company if the narrative formed before the facts did.

The decision that mattered was engaging press before we had answers — and being visibly honest about not having them yet.

SECTOR

Natural gas distribution

TYPE

Fatality, active investigation

ROLE

Lead spokesperson and crisis lead

DURATION

Immediate response through investigation close

WHAT I DID

Activated a playbook written before it was needed

- Activated the crisis communications playbook I had developed in advance, with roles, message processes and escalation paths already defined.
- Stood up the internal crisis management and communications teams.
- Served as lead spokesperson and media liaison throughout.
- Coordinated messaging across leadership, legal and operations so that one account was given, consistently.
- Engaged media immediately, before all facts were known, maintaining transparency while refusing to speculate.

THE JUDGMENT CALL

Independent validation

When the investigation established the cause as customer interference with a gas meter, I did not have the company announce it. I had the Fire Chief deliver the finding. A utility clearing its own name is an argument; a fire official stating a fact is a fact. That single choice determined how the story was received.

Turning cause into safety

The finding was then aligned to the company's longstanding customer education on meter tampering, placing the incident inside a broader public safety context rather than treating it as an isolated event.

OUTCOME

COVERAGE	Media reporting remained balanced and factual throughout.
VALIDATION	The Fire Chief communicated the confirmed cause, reinforcing company safety guidance through independent authority.
PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING	The cause of the incident was clearly and accurately understood.
REPUTATION	Company standing held, despite the severity of the event.

WHAT THIS TRANSFERS TO

Every system has an incident it cannot predict. What is portable here is not the scale but the sequence: a playbook written in calm conditions, a single accountable voice, immediate engagement without speculation, and independent authority delivering the finding. A utility with four staff can run this. One without a plan cannot run it at any size.