

Crisis Management in a Social Media World

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Introduction: The Impact of Social Media on Crisis Management

Traditional crisis management follows the strategy of "owning your story"; that is, moving quickly to maintain control over how the story of an issue or incident is shared and interpreted and, by doing so, shape how external audiences assess the performance of the organization.

In a social media world, it is very difficult to retain control of your own story and attempts to do so via traditional methods (controlling information access, deliberate and formal response protocols, etc.) can be counter-productive.

Social media has created a communication context where the most effective and valued communications characteristics are:

- Authenticity
- Accessibility, Dialogue and Engagement
- Human-ness
- Speed

A new approach to crisis communications is required.

What Has Changed?

1. What Constitutes a Crisis Has Changed

The once-trivial is important. A single irate customer can get a large audience quickly.

For example, e.g., [David Carroll's complaint](#) about United Airlines' handling of his luggage ("United breaks guitars") became an Internet and traditional news sensation.

2. How People Express Dissatisfaction Has Changed

Web and social media provide consumers, activists, pranksters, competitors and others with many options for venting complaints or concerns. Some examples:

- Twitter – easy and rapid dissemination of commentary or information; hash tags can link a problem to your brand instantly, e.g., #dellfail.
- Facebook – in 2008, Ontario teens staged a massive and almost overnight Facebook-based protest against proposed changes to driver's license laws that forced the government to abandon its proposals.
- Web sites and blogs – an individual or organization can post a web site or blog or Facebook page that is as accessible as your official web site or blog(s). With effective search strategies they can ensure people searching for your organization or relevant topics get pointed to their site first.
- Fake Sites – opposition groups or individuals can create web sites that appear to be an official site of your organization by copying graphics, using cleverly selected links, and so forth.
- Discussion groups – there are many thousands of discussion groups and forums online. They can be fan sites (generally positive about your organization), critical sites (coalescing complaints and criticism), or neutral (such as a general topic discussion forums).
- Official commentary and discussion channels – if your organization has channels for the public to comment or interact with your organization (e.g., Facebook page) they can easily become channels for complaint or criticism.

3. How People Obtain Information Has Changed

Stories can break from many directions well before traditional media engage or are able to assess and report. Traditional media also respond to stories or ideas that are moving quickly in interest in the social media world in order to capitalize on their popularity.

Search tools, especially Google, define how the majority of people, including journalists, begin to find news and information.

Third-party sources have emerged as go-to sources for information in specific categories, e.g., TripAdvisor for real-people commentary on travel experiences.

4. The Speed of Information Has Changed

With Internet and social media channels, information – truth, rumor and speculation – moves far more rapidly, in hours and minutes, not days.

Consider the example of the bed bugs and the 2010 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF.) Just a few weeks in advance of the Festival, a patron tweeted she thought she was bitten by bed bugs at the theatre that would host all TIFF press screenings. Her post was retweeted by hundreds and stories ran in influential outlets like Movieline.com and The Hollywood Reporter.

Even though both Cineplex, the theatre owner, and TIFF organizers responded almost immediately to her posting, the story spread like wildfire.

In a crisis, organizations must move to a response strategy immediately and be diligent in chasing down and responding to spreading stories.

5. Who People Trust Has Changed

Real people are able to talk about organizations, brands, services, experiences and products with other real people in discussion groups, in comment feeds, on Facebook, on Twitter, and other social media platforms. These connections have authenticity and therefore are often afforded high trust levels even if the content is inaccurate or subjective.

In addition, new "experts" have emerged as a result of social media, e.g., popular mommy bloggers dispense and aggregate advice on child-raising, health, food and myriad other issues.

6. Social Media and Traditional Media are Co-Dependents

Traditional media (i.e., professional journalists) turn to social media for story ideas, background information and commentary.

Social media content producers use traditional media to provide credibility to their content and to spread the story, e.g., Wikileaks provided leaked U.S. military documents to traditional media outlets around the world in advance under embargo to ensure high-impact, reach and credibility.

7. Response Expectations Have Changed

Consumers, social media and traditional media now expect immediate responses from organizations. Today's news cycle is measured in minutes, not hours.

Social media vehicles facilitate rapid amplification of a message. You can see the grassfire effect on channels like Twitter when an item is repeatedly retweeted. Even as you are responding to the initial posting, hundreds of others could be spreading the original post to their networks.

8. *Access Has Changed*

Where once confidential memos, draft proposals, and off-the-cuff comments were generally protected from public exposure, now such items can be made public with the single click of the Send button. Leaked internal e-mails have become a particularly devastating source of embarrassment or worse for organizations.

Where once investigative reporters needed to dig through the garbage for incriminating materials, they can now "digitally dumpster dive" through searches for comments, memos, documents and messages that have been put in the digital domain.

9. *The Spotlight is On How You Handle the Crisis*

As noted in a story by *The New York Times Magazine* ([The Back Story, Upfront](#), July 25, 2010), the public and media are increasingly interested in the behind-the-scenes aspects of news and developments, e.g., the orgy of interest in the Conan O'Brien/NBC/Jay Leno tussle over "The Tonight Show" that included debates about compensation packages, contracts terms, etc.; and during the BP Gulf Oil Crisis, interest in Tony Hayward's effectiveness as a spokesperson rivalled or exceeded interest in the clean-up strategy.

Organizations need to recognize that media and others will not only be engaged in the content of the crisis, but will also be monitoring and assessing how the crisis is being handled – is the response appropriate? Are spokespeople compelling? Are the communications working?

It is typical now for the media to run stories rating the effectiveness of an organization's crisis response, often by comparing it to past crises (e.g., Johnson & Johnson and Tylenol), and including commentary from third-party experts.

The New Crisis Management Principles

Many of the core principles of crisis management remain valid:

- Accept responsibility for problems you have created.
- Express concern and show you care.
- Put a human face on the organization.
- Don't inflame a crisis by over-responding. Keep your response in scale to the spread of the story, e.g., don't take your story to the media if they are not aware of it.
- Have clear internal processes and accountabilities in place for crisis response so there is no confusion or hesitation within the organization.
- Prepare by identifying most likely crisis scenarios and pre-determining core elements of a response strategy.
- Ensure senior management engagement.
- Track impact on business performance and reputation during and after a crisis.

But the advent of social media, adds additional principles:

- You need a social media crisis response infrastructure established prior to any crisis breaking.
- Ongoing monitoring is essential to become familiar with key voices that have influence, detect an emerging crisis, track its progress, identify channels for engagement, and gauge the effectiveness of response efforts.

- Your crisis management team needs social media-fluent communicators as key members.
- Legal counsellors need to have a clear and realistic understanding of social media dynamics and protocols.
- Your appearance of engagement and accessibility is equally important to what you say and do;
- Crisis response has to be a cross-functional task involving executive, communications, customer service, regulatory/legal, and other functions.
- Social media abhors a content vacuum.

Planning Considerations

Preparing Management

The social media context forces changes in crisis management behaviour and senior management and legal counsellors need to be committed to these new requirements in advance of any incident, by accepting:

- Need for rapid response even before the facts are known — acknowledgements, interim statements and mid-crises updates are expected.
- Recognition that some social media content is as valid, important and influential as traditional media.
- Lack of journalism training of some content producers.
- Preparation for the unvarnished tone of some social media comment including abuse, inaccuracy, vitriol.
- If you've already committed to social media for marketing, you can't retreat during a crisis.

Channels and Networks

The organization needs to have existing social media channels and engagement activity underway in order to be able to leverage them when a crisis arises by:

- Seeking support from fans/engaged consumers
- Responding to incoming inquiries
- Engaging with media
- Engaging commentators/experts in field
- Addressing misinformation
- Providing information and comment

These channels could include:

- Corporate web sites
- Corporate blogs
- Search marketing
- Facebook page(s)
- Twitter feed(s)
- YouTube channel

Management of Social Media Content

The content managers of the organization's social media channels need to be trained with the possibility of a crisis in mind. Many organizations use social media for marketing. But those same platforms become magnets for critical comment during a crisis.

Content managers need to be able to:

- Detect and diffuse a budding problem
- Recognize an emerging issue
- Shift to crisis management orientation

- Suspend marketing messaging and activity that is counter productive to crisis management.

In addition, content managers need to establish a corporate voice that can accommodate a switch in tone in a crisis.

At the same time, social media demands a human voice. Crisis-related communications can't be overly formal or legal when posted through these channels.

Monitoring & Key Conversation Influencers

Every organization needs ongoing social media content monitoring to detect developing problems as early as possible. Escalation is rapid so it is critical to spot a problem early.

A regular social media landscape analysis can help to define the ever-changing social media conversation landscape for your organization and brand including:

- Clusters of topics and conversations
- Frequent and influential bloggers and commentators

This insight will be very valuable at the time of a crisis as Key Conversation Influencers (KCI) can be leveraged to communicate your message.

In addition, it is important to know your critics:

- Know in advance organizations and individuals who are regular detractors
- Determine how/if you will engage/ reach them if needed
- Monitor for copy-cat sites using your logo or brand; be proactive in protecting intellectual property

Rapid Monitoring Capacity

In addition to ongoing landscape monitoring, it is critical to pre-determine how the organization will put in place more comprehensive crisis monitoring rapidly. Online and social media comments can start within minutes of a crisis occurring and it is critical to get on top of what is being said.

Content Production

Content is the life-blood of social media and critical in crisis management response. If you allow a content vacuum to form by holding back content or comment, others will fill the vacuum with potentially inaccurate, speculative or negative content.

An organization needs to have ready the strategic and technical ability to produce content in multiple formats:

- Postings, written content
- Fact sheets and FAQs
- Video statements from senior executives
- Pictures, graphics, diagrams or other explanatory material

Rapid Content Posting Capacity

Crises always demand rapid responses but social media pushes this need even higher. Advance preparatory work can enhance your ability to push out content quickly:

- Organizational web sites
 - News section that can be up-dated rapidly
 - Ability to post urgent information on the opening or interstitial page
- Dark site
 - Establishment of a dark web site that be populated and "lit up" in the event of a crisis

- URL ownership
 - Owning web addresses that are variations on your name or brand; for your own use and to block others from using
- Email
 - Keeping up-dated contact lists for stakeholder groups
 - Securing special email accounts that can be activated to manage inquiries on dedicated issue, e.g., info@abccompany.com; questions@abccompany.com

Search

Organizations should secure search engine marketing terms for words and phrases related to its business or that could be used if a problem arises.

In the event of a crisis, you should monitor and test your search marketing to ensure its effectiveness. For example, during the early days of the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill crisis, BP had no presence when key words and phrases pertaining to the problem, leaving the organization absent when those concerned searched for information and updates.

Internal Social Media Guidelines

Prior to any crisis, it is critical to ensure consistency and clarity around company social media activities. If there are multiple content managers, they need to understand how to identify a potentially negative situation, escalate it appropriately, and co-ordinate with a communications strategy.

If you're part of a global organization, processes need to be in place to facilitate co-ordination with global branches. Social media and web content is not restrained by geographic borders.

Clear policies regarding employees' use of social media should be established and clearly communicated to all staff.

Response Considerations

Rapid Initial Comment

You will need to acknowledge and demonstrate engagement immediately, which means occasionally acting before all the facts are known. Set the tone early of being engaged, concerned, and committed to addressing the issue.

Responding at Point of Outbreak

If problem emerges via a Twitter post, you need to respond via Twitter vs. issuing only a traditional press release.

Content and Conversation

Social media exists on content. It's important to provide new content, comment, references, ongoing rather than making a lone initial statement. One clarification statement isn't enough; you need to repeat and rephrase.

In addition, you have to prepare for the conversation and have the staffing capacity in place and strategic focus to continue the clear and honest dialogue.

Engaging in conversation includes correcting misinformation and requesting clarification, revision and, at times, retraction.

Using Multiple Channels

You need many channels to contain or respond to widespread comment, which means preparing content in multiple formats:

- Statements
- Twitter-appropriate content
- Video
- Pictures or graphics
- Dialogue

Promote Content Sharing

Content must be attractive for sharing:

- Tight, accessible language
- Tips and lists, e.g., Three things you need to know about . . .
- Light on jargon and legalese
- Explicitly asking people to retweet or repost and share

Multiple Voices

Using multiple streams of content can help to maintain, or rapidly contain, an issue. If appropriate, consider non-traditional commentary from technical experts and front-line staff, e.g., perspective of on-site staff.

Phrases, terms, hash tags

Monitoring will identify key phrases and tags being used. Using these phrases in corporate communications can improve pick-up. Tagging comments with hash tags can help engaged Twitter users to track the discussion.

Links

Links embedded in responses can direct people to statements, videos, fact sheets and off-line feedback channels.

Off-Line Engagement

When possible, shift difficult exchanges out of the public sphere. If a customer posts a negative comment in a public discussion form, contact him/her openly through the forum and offer to go off-line to discuss his/her situation in more detail.

Use a Direct Message in Twitter to move a conversation offline.

24/7 Capacity

Social media activity happens around the clock. During a crisis, organizations need the capacity to monitor and respond to content ongoing.

Organizations need to determine in advance how they can provide that coverage by identifying suppliers that specialize in tracking content.

Gauging the Appropriate Level of Response

The greatest challenge in crisis communications is determining what scale of response is appropriate. What is inadequate and what is overkill?

Example: Chicago renter Amanda Bonnen was sued by her landlord, Horizon Group Management, when she posted on Twitter, "*Who said sleeping in a mouldy apartment was bad for you? Horizon Realty thinks it's okay.*" After disputes with the company. Horizon sued her. The company insisted that Bonnen's tweet damaged

Horizon's reputation. Bonnen had only 22 followers on Twitter at the time of her post. But Horizon's law suit generated covered by major traditional and online media.

Thorough monitoring will provide the critical information for gauging response:

- How widespread are conversations?
- What is the tone?

- Who is posting comment or content? How influential are they? What is their reach? What is the history of their postings?
- Have traditional media begun to engage?
- How is the story evolving? Is the issue enduring or is interest fading?

Post-Crisis Assessment

It is essential to do a post-crisis analysis after the heat of an issue has faded to determine the effectiveness of the response and derive any key learnings including changes that should be made to crisis strategies for future.

In addition, you need to gauge what if any enduring harm the organization or brand reputation has suffered, and then work to correct the damage.

Conclusion

The advent of social media only underscores the critical importance of advance crisis management planning for every organization.

Environics Communications works with organizations to audit and assess current process, build crisis management strategies, establish monitoring programs, and assist in the management of a crisis.

To discuss crisis management in greater detail, [contact the team at Environics Communications](#).

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