



## SOCIAL MEDIA TRANSFORMS CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

As the immediacy of the Internet has grown, so has the speed with which businesses must react to an unexpected crisis. From disgruntled employees to promotions gone bad to celebrity Tweeters, the ability for social media to create or manifest a crisis are substantial. Consider just a few of these recent examples:

- Two Dominos employees are shown on YouTube "tampering" with food;
- KFC issues coupons for free grilled chicken meals, only to rescind the offer due to overwhelming response creating an online uproar;
- Ashton Kutcher, the celebrity Tweeter with 1+ million followers, tells his followers not to fly on Airbus until the composite tail is declared safe; and
- Moms use social media to boycott Motrin after ads are seen as condescending to mothers.

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Countless other stories abound where life-and-death crises were first reported by average, everyday citizens with access to the Internet:

- Janis Krums posts a photo on Twitter moments after US Airways Flight 1549 crash-landed in the Hudson River, well before coverage by traditional media;
- Following the major Chinese earthquake in 2008, World Wide Help started liveblogging it; and
- Twitter users have reported on natural disasters like wildfires, hurricanes and floods in real time.

These examples demonstrate the pressing need for brands to have a crisis communication plan in place that not only deals with a catastrophic event like an earthquake or an accident, but also human-made crises that arise or expand online. "Social media have magnified the urgency of crisis communication,"

contends well-known business communication author Shel Holtz. He says seemingly small incidents can quickly spread into bigger PR problems via the Web. (1)

Today, a crisis must be managed across all media including online, print and broadcast. Fortunately, the principles of crisis communication management still apply, but now with more importance than ever.

### CRISIS MANAGEMENT REVISITED

For the purposes of this discussion, let's define what we mean by a crisis, because it includes much more than major disasters.

A crisis is an event that occurs suddenly, often unexpectedly, and demands a quick response. A crisis interferes with normal routines and creates uncertainty and stress. A crisis can be a natural event, such as an earthquake or a hurricane, or it can be man-made, such as an explosion, a scandal or a conflict.

Ultimately, it can threaten the reputation of any individual, company or brand. A well-managed crisis, however, cannot only preserve reputations and credibility but can also enhance them. An organization's reputation is its most valuable asset. So, how do you keep your brand intact during a business crisis?

As a quick refresher, let's take a quick look at the two key components of any successful crisis communications plan. These elements are integral to preserving the reputation and credibility of any company facing a crisis situation.

#### Preparation

The most important element for effective crisis communication is having a plan prepared in advance of the crisis. Once a crisis is upon you, there is little time



to think, much less plan. The crisis communication plan should dictate how 1) your company will communicate about the crisis and 2) how your company will deal with the crisis. From a communications standpoint, the plan will include basic positioning for a variety of potential crises, media policies and procedures, designated spokespeople, target audiences, target media contacts (both traditional and social) and standard company information.

### Communicate

A simple way to approach a crisis situation is to be forthcoming and honest, while ensuring information shared is timely and accurate. Information will be disseminated, whether by traditional media or social media, with or without your help. It's in your best interest to participate in a story — even a negative one — in order to have your brand position represented correctly. Answering “no comment” is worse than not communicating as it increases the potential for the media and public to label you as “guilty” of some wrongdoing simply by refusing to comment. Additionally, communicating to your internal audiences in a timely matter is equally important as employees, board members and shareholders are frontline communicators and need to be reassured that the crisis will be overcome.

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### WEB 2.0 CRISIS MANAGEMENT

While the foundation for effective crisis management remains, the advent of Web 2.0 creates a number of additional challenges for managing a crisis. Velocity, interaction and transparency now drive how well a company is able to manage a crisis.

#### Velocity

Two factors have greatly impacted the velocity at which news is reported. First, social media applications like Twitter and blogs provide the platform for nearly immediate and global news coverage. Second, time-pressured traditional media are more competitive (and are also using Web 2.0 methods) in their attempts to break a story. In the past, an organization would

most likely have had some time to pull the crisis communication plan off the shelf, assemble the crisis response team, prepare a press release and hold a news conference after the crisis unfolded. Today, social media may have created a crisis (like the Dominos YouTube video) or reported the crisis before you were aware it had happened.

Businesses and public relations practitioners must now be prepared to act at a moment's notice, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Unlike traditional media, Web 2.0 technologies aren't subject to time constraints — blogs and Twitter posts go up at a moment's notice at all times of the day. If a business isn't prepared to act immediately, the issue can manifest itself online, going from perhaps a minor issue to a major crisis in a matter of minutes.

#### Interaction

The new rules of social media increase the need for companies to proactively communicate with their internal and external audiences in order to mitigate or neutralize negative exposure. These efforts must be proactive, not reactive. This makes it even more important to establish and maintain good relationships with members

of the media, industry bloggers and other key online influencers and employees.

At the same time, Web 2.0 technologies have created opportunities to directly engage and interact with your key constituents. No longer does a story have to be filtered through the mainstream media. Businesses can now communicate directly with the public. After the Dominos incident, the company's CEO used YouTube to respond to the incident and reassure customers. In another recent example, Ford had 1,000 complaints overnight when its lawyers tried to shut down a fan Website, TheRangerStation.com, due to its suspicions that counterfeit goods with the Ford logo were being sold via the site. The head of social media for Ford used Twitter to mitigate what had the potential to be a very ugly situation. (1) Social media allows a company to tell its story on its own terms.

## Transparency

While direct interaction helps establish trust and credibility, it should be done with full transparency, honesty, authenticity and accuracy. Social media users are keenly aware when it appears companies are only using these communication platforms to spin or cover-up a news story. According to a recent article, the slightest indication of spinning, dissimulation or delay is treated with hostility and loss of credibility. (2)

So how can transparency be created? The best approach is to start building conversations before a crisis situation happens. If a company has online (and offline) relationships with its customers and online influencers, they can help tell your side of the story and, if nothing else, give you the benefit of the doubt. If a company waits until after an unfortunate incident occurs, it oftentimes feels forced, disingenuous and impersonal. Well-respected companies like Pepsi, Coke, Southwest, Ford and Best Buy are investing the resources to establish and build these networks. Regardless of what size your business is, you can follow their lead and join the social media discussion.

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## SO WHAT NOW?

There are a few basic things you or your company can do to integrate social media into your crisis communication planning.

1. Establish and build networks on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media applications now.
2. Educate the senior leaders in your organization on the importance of social media, not just in crisis situations but in all corporate communications.

3. Establish a social media team responsible for monitoring the Websphere for potential issues that could become full-blown crises. This team can also help establish your company’s social media community.
4. Work with your IT department or Web developer to create a “hidden” microsite that can be launched if a crisis situation arises.
5. Establish social media guidelines for employees so they understand what can and can’t be shared publicly. Provide training for employees, if necessary.

A crisis situation creates chaos, uncertainty and urgency. With proper planning, your company’s brand can survive – and even prevent – a potential crisis.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Lybarger is Vice President of Public Relations for Cohn Marketing in Denver, Colo. She has been in the marketing and public relations fields for more than 15 years, working on offline and online public relations campaigns rooted in brand for clients in emerging business-to-business categories, sustainability, food and beverage, real estate, retail and tourism. To learn more about Cohn Marketing and its integrated services, please visit [CohnMarketing.com](http://CohnMarketing.com). You can also follow Cohn Marketing at [Twitter.com/cohnmarketing](https://twitter.com/cohnmarketing), become a fan on Facebook or view our profile on LinkedIn.

## Sources

- 1: Sarah E. Needleman, “For Companies, a Tweet Can Avert a PR Mess”, Wall Street Journal, (August 3, 2009).
- 2: Gerald Baron, “Rescuing Your Reputation: Building Trust to Survive a Media Meltdown”, Public Relations Tactics, (March 2009).