



WHITE PAPER

# CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

A Guide to Integrating Social Media in Your  
Crisis Communications Strategy



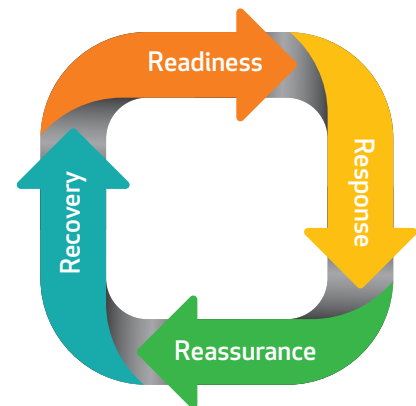
With more than one billion active Facebook users, and an average of more than 400 million tweets sent per day, there is no doubt that social media has transformed the ways in which people share and consume information. For communications professionals, social media has offered a host of new platforms to disseminate content, build relationships, foster engagement and better understand the needs of target audiences. However, while social media has dissolved traditional boundaries, creating a sense of proximity between brands and consumers, it has also made companies more susceptible to potentially damaging situations.

From lewd photos of senior management on Facebook and Instagram to proprietary information leaks posted on Twitter and LinkedIn, in the age of social media, the number of potential crisis scenarios has increased exponentially. What's more, because social media happens in real time, it takes just minutes for a crisis to spread and reach the masses.

In spite of this increased vulnerability, social media engagement need not be a source of anxiety for the C-suite. In fact, it can also be a vehicle to stop a crisis in its tracks. In this article, we break down best practices for integrating social media into your crisis communications strategy, and focus on how to leverage social media tools to mitigate harmful events that could have long-term consequences for the health of your organization.

### **Core Concepts: The Four Phases of Crisis Communications**

Regardless of the industry, every company faces its own set of risks. Being able to anticipate potential threats is crucial to ensuring that your organization is well positioned to manage crisis situations. The following four phases are the cornerstones of any successful crisis communications strategy.



- **Readiness** – A sound crisis management strategy starts with preparation long before the onset of an actual crisis. While it's impossible to plan for every future scenario, examine your company, facilities, people, products and environment to assess areas of significant risk and identify the potential threats that are both most likely to happen and most likely to cause harm. When a crisis breaks, things are going to accelerate and you need a solid response plan in advance in order for your organization to react quickly.
- **Response** – Crisis moments rupture normal day-to-day operations. As a result, they demand an immediate response. This means it's often necessary to respond before your organization has had a chance to assess all of the facts. Begin by acknowledging the situation, as well as its impact on all affected parties, and commit to a full investigation. Remember, acknowledging a crisis is not synonymous with accepting responsibility. However, by responding immediately, you demonstrate to the public that you're taking the incident seriously, and ensure that your company's message is a part of the narrative right from the start.



- **Reassurance** – Following the initial response, effective crisis management requires conducting an investigation and developing an action plan that seeks to rectify the situation at hand. From the implementation phase to the plan's intended outcomes, reassure the public that their needs are being adequately addressed by communicating all of the pertinent details. Demonstrate your commitment to transparency and let the public know that your organization intends to share the results of its investigation as well as take corrective action.
- **Recovery** – Ultimately, managing a crisis is about more than just stopping the bleeding in the short term; it's also about restoring a company's long-term health and reputation and preventing reoccurrence. Reestablishing public trust and consumer loyalty often require going above and beyond immediate action. Operational and cultural changes may be necessary to ensure that history does not repeat itself. Ongoing communication regarding company-wide changes is an important part of demonstrating your organization's responsiveness and continued commitment to making things right.

## Social Media Crisis Communications – 10 Things You Should Know

Though the four phases discussed above are foundational to a strong crisis strategy, best practices that integrate social media into the traditional crisis communications framework are essential. Below we break down 10 things you need to know in order to leverage social media to manage and even prevent crises:

### 1. Implement Policies to Address Potential Vulnerabilities

The ubiquity of social media has blurred traditional boundaries between the personal and the professional. As a quick Google search of any employee reveals, the days of maintaining a strict separation between life inside and outside of the office are long gone. Developing a company-wide social media policy that outlines permitted and prohibited conduct will help prevent potential crises from ever taking root by establishing clear guidelines for employee use of social media.



### 2. Use Social Media as a Tool for Crisis Monitoring

Social media has long been touted as a space in which listening is as important for brands as talking. With consumers increasingly using social media as a forum to express their dissatisfaction with brands directly, be on the lookout for sensitive issues before they become full-blown crises. In addition, with a greater number of traditional media outlets relying on social platforms to report breaking news, monitoring social media channels is one of the most effective ways to spot a crisis at its earliest stage.



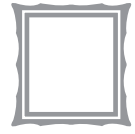
### 3. Understand the Response-ability of Social Media

By significantly altering the rate at which information is exchanged and consumed, social media has substantially reduced the window organizations have to respond in moments of crisis. While Facebook has cut down crisis response times to around 12 hours, a crisis on Twitter can take only minutes to spread. Given this new normal, organizational preparedness is crucial. It also means that companies operating within traditional Monday-to-Friday, 9-to-5 schedules need a plan in place to respond if incidents occur after normal business hours.



#### 4. Establish a Framework for Response

Given the level of contingency that accompanies a crisis, what your organization needs most is a framework for response. Establish in advance who will be in the “war room” as well as which individuals will be making decisions and communicating directives to teams tasked with responding to events on the ground. Most importantly, make sure that all passwords to your social media accounts are readily accessible to the crisis team and in the hands of the responsible parties.



#### 5. Build a Social Media Crisis Toolkit

From press releases to prepared statements, an effective crisis response toolkit contains communications templates that organizations can use to instantly shift messaging in the face of a crisis. Make social media a core part of your toolkit with the inclusion of standardized, pre-approved templates for blog posts, tweets, and other social media platforms that are in synch with the rest of your company’s crisis response efforts.



#### 6. Know Where to Respond

Just as it’s important to know how and when to respond to a crisis, it’s imperative to know where to respond. Responding to a crisis in the format where it first breaks – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn - is an important step to ensuring that your message reaches your constituents directly. It also demonstrates your company’s willingness to engage with its audiences in those forums where they are most active. Following your initial response, expand your efforts to include all additional communications channels.



#### 7. Prepare Your Employees in Advance

In traditional crisis communications, making certain that all of your employees, from sales to customer service, are prepared to respond to queries is essential to maintaining a consistent message. In the age of social media, this is more important than ever. With friends and relatives requesting information from employees on their personal social media accounts, all company personnel must be equipped with the proper policies and response procedures well in advance.



#### 8. Establish the Proper Tone

Since its inception, social media has long been a space to cultivate an authentic, and at times, more informal voice. However, in the wake of a crisis, it’s easy for informality to be mistaken as insensitivity. Depending on the type of crisis, its impact may be felt in very real ways not only by your core constituents but also by members of the public that extend beyond your customer base. With this in mind, tone of voice should always be developed in relation to the context and situation at hand.



#### 9. Hit the Automation Kill Switch

Most social media efforts are multi-channel. In order to keep track of and maintain multiple accounts, many companies rely on social media dashboards to automate or schedule their posts. In the event of a crisis, it is absolutely crucial to make sure that all of your social platforms are locked down and brought under the umbrella of crisis communications. Maintaining automated posts that are upbeat or off topic during a crisis will be perceived as insensitive to the needs of your consumers and all affected parties.



## 10. Be Honest, Be Transparent

A recent article from The Guardian made the following claim about social media during a crisis: "There is no such thing as too much information. During a disaster or crisis, Twitter and other social media can provide an instant view of conditions on the ground." Continued transparency and communication will help keep the public informed and updated throughout the duration of a crisis. Even sharing bad news in these moments will be appreciated for its honesty and will help reestablish long-term trust once the crisis abates.



The days of maintaining a strict separation between crisis communications and social media are long gone. Given the ways in which social media has fundamentally altered the communications landscape, maintaining a robust crisis management strategy demands the complete integration of social media into the fold. Armed with these 10 best practices, your company will be prepared to anticipate threats and mitigate risks across any communications platform.

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