Build a Plan For Managing a Crisis in a Multi-Channel, Technology-Driven World

By Bobbie Wasserman

Companies and their brands live in a multi-channel selling environment. Their reputations reside in these channels, whether they directly sell in them or not. False information, speculation and rumors can spread quickly, and getting the communication right, especially during a crisis, is imperative.

For communication professionals, this is old news. Yet, company executives repeatedly fail to recognize and reconcile issues prior to a full-fledged crisis. It's more than likely that we all have experienced this firsthand. It's easy to dismiss questions about product safety, supplier conduct, financial disclosure or management behavior… until the issue is made public. The investment in crisis planning is often a tough sell to most corporate executives. It takes time and resources (whether it's done in-house or with an agency partner) and a tolerance for considering tough questions.

Here's a practical guide in no-nonsense language that harnesses the power of current technology platforms. For both seasoned practitioners and junior staff, embracing new communication platforms demonstrates an understanding of the business application and ROI of a robust social media program.

Building the Case for Effective Crisis Planning

Identifying the public issues through social media channels can open executives' eyes. For the flexible and savvy organization, engaging consumers online also offers a directive for issue management materials and crisis response plans.

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This elevates the typical role of social media from a marketing presence to a global planning tool that can help protect a company's reputation.

Capturing social media conversations and questions from customers, investors and influencers is a great way to gauge brand and company perceptions. It affords communicators the opportunity to identify real-world strengths and weaknesses along with other possible "pain points" such as safety, manufacturing, environmental and human rights issues.

Those pain points can easily justify time in developing specific messaging that can be extrapolated to form the basis of a crisis response plan. Additionally, a comprehensive list of company FAQs can be acquired through social media engagement.

Plan Development

Prior to wide use of the Internet, corporate crisis plans were very expensive and voluminous. As the world of communications has grown more

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complex, the crisis plan (at least for non-regulated companies) has become simplified. The following are key factors to consider when developing a corporate crisis plan today.

Understand issues and audiences, and create a tool kit. While public comments tend to grab the attention of executives, the issues that remain internal to the organization need to be identified. Make sure to work with company department heads to understand operations and processes. These executives will know how department weaknesses negatively impact other areas of the business. Follow up on that information, as it will strengthen the crisis response.

The information gathered forms the basis of the tool kit—FAQs, fact sheets, positive images and video with some recommended holding statements. The communications infrastructure also needs to be secure, especially in the case of natural disasters. Does your company have a crisis facility or, less formally, are executives geographically dispersed so, if one area is impacted, executives in another area can step in to execute a crisis plan?

A word about "dark" websites: A "dark" site is a website that is developed and ready to be launched in a crisis. It can be a critical tool, yet often a very hard sell to an executive team. Today, there are new technological avenues that can substitute for a dark site and be just as effective—a dedicated blog, Twitter hashtags and Facebook pages are just a few platforms that might be considered.

Identify a core team and assign responsibilities. Starting with a small core team of senior executives is ideal. The CEO, chief legal counsel and the public relations/corporate communications executive are primary advisors. Include additional division/function executives based on the specific situation at hand. Understand the issues, know your options, and encourage candid dialogue.

It might sound a bit simplistic, but ensure that all senior executives have a current executive contact list that includes multiple ways of reaching each other. The team will most likely have personal contact information for each other, but usually not centralized for easy access. Setting up a pre-determined group in a contact list on mobile devices is helpful, and a paper backup can prove a lifesaver if there is a problem with accessing your phone or tablet.

While all executives need to be media-trained, a primary spokesperson from the executive team needs to be identified based on the issue and target audience. The CEO needs to be visible during a crisis but should be used as spokesperson

Vulnerability Checklist

The most unexpected areas of a business can be vulnerable to a crisis. Below is a general list of operational vulnerability points.

- Activism
- Environmental issues
- Natural disasters
- Animal rights
- Hostile takeover
- Product quality
- Criminal and violent acts
- Human rights
- Security (cyber, plant, physical)
- Economic factors
- Litigation succession
- Employee issues
- Management misconduct
- Technology

What Makes an Effective Spokesperson?

A good spokesperson will deliver corporate messages correctly. A great spokesperson will earn the public's trust. During a crisis, which is usually where corporate spokespeople are unveiled, being a great spokesperson is a tremendous advantage. Here are key attributes of a great spokesperson:

- **They look sincere.** They care about the situation and are invested in the company doing the right thing. They speak with a genuineness that garners trust.
- **They appear helpful and human.** Being a spokesperson is more than delivering a message. It's answering questions on message in a conversational tone. It's the ability to say, "I don't know, let me find out and get back to you," and follow through. They set realistic expectations publicly, and if they make a mistake, they own it and correct themselves.
- **They are presentable and real.** A spokesperson must present him/herself well, be groomed and dressed properly for the part and the issue at hand. A too-polished and "slick" look might question credibility whereas a disheveled appearance will not garner any credibility.
- **They are trained.** Looking like natural spokesperson takes training and practice. The nuances learned in media training are critical to surviving tough questions in a public setting.

selectively depending on the issue at hand. **British Petroleum**'s chief executive went yachting during the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill and was skewered in the press. He was replaced three months later.

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An important note: It's critical that legal and PR collaborate on appropriate messaging. The court of public opinion renders quick and often unforgiving judgments compared to the slow wheels of the justice system. In today's world, "no comment" or lack of credible comment translates to "we're guilty."

Establish a process. Start with a consensus on the most efficient way to notify the team. Today's technology offers numerous contact options, and people tend to have their personal favorites. The goal is to assemble the team quickly.

Aim before you shoot. Understand the issue at hand before taking public action. Once an action is taken, it cannot be undone. The situation may not exactly mirror the vulnerability scenarios discussed prior, but it is likely to contain similar elements. Use the prepared holding statements as a starting point while the team is preparing a specific response.

Remember internal stakeholders. Employees are a company's greatest ambassadors, and they need to be treated as such. Delivering the holding statement and communications process to them prior to the public will bank goodwill while providing necessary guidelines.

Different Platforms, Different Uses

Technology represents a double-edged sword for communications professionals trying to control the message through various platforms and messengers. Categorizing communications tools by text, image and video provides a planning framework for digitally communicating to key stakeholders. Ensure that the different platforms convey the same message.

Text is the "old school" of new media and remains the cornerstone of digital

communications. Primary social networks are globally established with networks of millions. It remains, at least for now, the primary platform for crisis communications, as messages are easily accessed and distributed across online channels and platforms. Ensure the tone of the statement(s) coincides with the images that are attached to the crisis.

Distributing **images** that validate company messaging is critical to maintaining credibility during a crisis. As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Visual storytelling is more than the latest digital communications trend—it's a global phenomenon. Cameras are now standard applications in mobile devices, and images are quick and easy to share, conveying a lot with little effort. Negative pictures can spread online almost instantaneously, another proof point for crisis planning.

If the solution involves a process, include a gallery of images in real time. Have people involved in the solution process add the authorized pictures to their Facebook pages, along with Tweets via designated hashtags. Communicate progress with employees and encourage them to share that progress (with a click) through social media channels.

Video offers a variety of communication options for companies dealing with a crisis situation. It is a safe venue for statements (as opposed to a question-and-answer forum like a press conference) and updates that can be distributed, as appropriate, to media, shareholders, advocates and influencers. It can also provide a diary of solution progression. Similar to still images, video popularity is skyrocketing, and technology advances are making them easier to shoot, upload and share. Understand the viewing habits of your stakeholders to produce videos that will tell the story and maximizes the message.

Post-Crisis Internal Communications and Analysis

All crisis situations need internal closure. The specific situation will determine the method and can range from an email expressing gratitude to a more formal meeting explaining the situation and the solution. With closure comes examination. Drilling down into specifics, companies need to understand how the crisis occurred, how to prevent it in the future and what general process changes could leave other corporate functions vulnerable. Did the crisis team perform? Was the plan executed as needed? Where is there room for improvement?

The nature of crisis communications is reactive, and being prepared gauges the effectiveness of that reaction. In the end, your plan is successful if the reputation of the company remains intact. PRN

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