

# Nine Proven Tips for Using Twitter During a Media Crisis

By PR News Editors

**W**e all know that conversations on Twitter can create crises for brands, but Twitter also happens to be a great tool for tackling a PR crisis head-on and making it go away as quickly as possible. As bad news circulates and rumors spread, brands can do themselves a great service by using Twitter effectively.

A crisis is one of the few times PR actually gets to set policy, says Dallas Lawrence, chief global digital strategist at **Burson-Marsteller**. He would know—he was part of the **Nuclear Energy Institute** and Burson-Marsteller team that won *PR News*' 2011 Digital PR Award for the best digital crisis management for its work during Japan's nuclear crisis.

Developing a social media response can help humanize a company, engage consumers and provide updates to key stakeholders and the general public. Below, Lawrence provides nine tips for using Twitter during a crisis:

## **1. Develop a social media crisis plan that integrates Twitter from the beginning:**

A driving fear about a crisis is that no one is in charge, and a lack of clear ownership makes crises more dangerous, says Lawrence. “Only 25% of companies encourage their employees to use social media channels to share messages about the company—but I believe your employees are your single greatest asset in a crisis scenario,” says Lawrence, who recommends giving employees a

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how-to list for social media instead of a what-not-to-do list.

## **2. Know and engage your key drivers early and often:**

Twitter is a conversation tool and not just a one-way medium. “There might be 100 million people on Twitter, but in times of crisis we need to think about the key influencers following the issue and engage with them to get them information as well,” says Lawrence.

## **3. People want to hear from people, not logos:**

Figure out right now who is going to be communicating for you in a crisis, and make your Twitter picture something other than just your logo in order to humanize your brand.

## **4. Ensure cross-platform integration from the beginning:**

This includes videos, fact sheets and other content. “Video integration is key, and you have to think about how it fits into the overall communication strategy. Perhaps your response can be best told through a tweetable video,” says Lawrence.

During Japan's nuclear energy crisis, Lawrence's team also launched a YouTube channel. They got a hold of nuclear scientists and made 60-to-90-second videos and addressed concerns about nuclear energy. "We knew sometimes 140 characters isn't enough, so we made a blog account, which we used to expand upon topics and place videos, and then pumped out the posts through Twitter," Lawrence says.

**5. Be sure you know what you are talking about: Adopt the physician's creed:** "First, do no harm," says Lawrence. Yes, you must move quickly during a time of crisis, but that doesn't give you a reprieve from fact-checking anything you plan to tell the public. Also, keep your lawyers close, says Lawrence. "The biggest mistake you can make is not engaging the legal department from the beginning."

**6. When you blow it, own up to it:** "When Ashton Kutcher tweeted his outrage after Joe Paterno got fired, he had to admit that he really knew nothing about the subject. Lawrence says that, "while that was an avoidable scenario, he did properly tweet after, 'As of immediately I will stop tweeting until I find a way to properly manage this feed. I feel awful about this error. Won't happen again.'"

**7. Integrate paid and earned:** Twitter's paid sponsored followers is one of the best crisis resources. "It's an effective way to go from

1,000 to 10,000 followers who can help amplify your messages with Twitter's targeted follower acquisition strategy."

**8. If you build it on Twitter, they may not come.** While 46% of journalists use Twitter for sources, neither them nor anyone would follow you just because you're on Twitter. "We must be thinking strategically as PR professionals and storytellers," says Lawrence.

**9. Listen with the intent to engage:** It's important to be listening, but what's more important is listening as a prelude to engaging. "Here's the difference: In a crisis, the PR agency says we're monitoring Twitter and 95% of tweets are negative. Great, that does nothing," says Lawrence. "But if you listen to engage, and find the entry points of what you can talk about and then pump out information, the community will know that you're listening and will then help you get your voice out."

**10. Lighten the mood:** If appropriate, lighten the mood with humor and try turning it into something positive. This strategy helped the **Red Cross** after an employee accidentally used the Red Cross Twitter account to send a tweet about a night of drinking. They replied with a humorous tweet, blogged about the error and partnered with **Dogfish Head** beer for a fundraiser on Twitter. **PRN**