

## Crisis Communication in the Age of Social Media

With around **2.77 billion** people using social media channels, its influence cannot be overstated. 42% of the world's population is online; Facebook alone has over 2.19 billion monthly users and over 500 million tweets are dispatched from Twitter accounts every day.

Social media has unequivocally transformed the communication landscape and how information is transmitted and consumed. Its facility for direct engagement and dialogue with consumers is a boon for companies, creating unprecedented opportunity to build customer affinity and relationships.

On the flip side, it has made organizations more vulnerable to reputation damaging scenarios. The online population is overwhelmingly interactive and prone to information-sharing. As such, an organizational crisis has the potential to be transmitted around the world, in a matter of minutes.

Multiple channels and multiple users imply that organizations no longer have control over their messages - they get carried, amplified, and invariably distorted, as news travels at lightning speed along consumer networks.

Social media, by its very nature, has complicated **crisis communication** management. Be that as it may, communication managers cannot afford to ignore the powerful platform. Prudence lies in integrating social media into the overall crisis communication plan.

The fact is whether organizations choose to participate or not, consumers will talk about them online - particularly when the news is bad. Therefore, it is best to be a part of the conversation and stay in control of your message and reputation.

Social media is a critical lever of crisis communication management in the digital age. The online tribe is more educated and more vocal than its offline brethren. Therefore, it is highly likely that news of a corporate crisis will first break online.

Despite the potency of social media, only 30% of organizations around the world have

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an effective crisis management plan, according to global communications firm **Burson Marstellar**.

The time to start thinking about crisis communication planning is not during a crisis. Stay invested in social media channels and nurture online customer relationships on an ongoing basis. The role of social media during a crisis is to defend your organizational reputation. Having already built online relationships, leverage these associations, and draw upon the goodwill during a crisis.

Good crisis management requires planning. The plan should anticipate crises that your organization may encounter and develop appropriate responses. In general, a good crisis response would acknowledge the situation, express concern for those affected, commit to a fair investigation, and regular updates.

Many organizations are wary of 'acknowledging' the situation due to its legal ramifications. To be clear, acknowledgment does not mean accepting culpability, it simply means acting responsibly and humanely.

To minimize confusion, outline roles, and responsibilities in your crisis management plan. Appraise key personnel such as spokespersons, social media managers, and customer service staff of the information they can legitimately share. Brief them on your communication strategy and messaging plan. Give social media managers and customer service staff an up-to-date contact list of spokespersons and subject matter experts to whom they can turn for information.

Train **organizational spokespersons** for crises, so that they are not pressured into answering questions by persistent media reporters. Body language and tone of delivery, are important, yet often overlooked, aspects of crisis communication training.

Set crisis thresholds for social media channels - defining the volume and frequency of comments that warrant escalation. Past trends would serve as the guidepost in setting thresholds. For example, less than five negative comments per day may be 'business as

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usual', requiring no more than compiling a report for management review. But an increased frequency may warrant an alert to the Corporate Communication department.

Create a crisis communication 'tool-kit' including contact details of spokespersons, PR agency staff, key journalists, online opinion leaders, etc. Process and lines of authority for approval of messages. Pre-approved messages and images for media dispatch. Communication templates for specific channels such as press releases, website, blogs, etc., so that information can be disseminated quickly.

Draft an **employee social media policy** if you do not have one. These days, it is passé' for organizations to restrict employee access to social media. Provide guidelines for employee online communication and reiterate the policy during crises, so that your employees are clear on how to conduct themselves online.

Response time is hugely critical once a crisis strikes. Organizations no longer have the luxury of issuing a press release within 24 hours of a crisis. Social media has accelerated the speed and complexity of communication. If you do not respond quickly, multiple social media channels will likely carry and distort your message. The speed with which news travels on social media has necessitated that organizations issue a preliminary statement within one hour of a crisis.

Before responding, assess the situation and gauge online sentiment. Analyzing public opinion, good and bad, should be a regular part of online reputation management.

Task your social media managers with monitoring online conversations at critical outposts. Tools such as **Hootsuite, Tweetreach, Tweetdeck, Google Alerts, Social Mention, Klout**, etc., enable seamless monitoring online.

Track conversations related to your company, brands, customers, competitors, industry, key personnel such as CEO, senior management, and organizational spokespersons.

Train your social media managers not to respond impulsively when a crisis breaks.

Take stock of the situation and respond according to your company's crisis

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communication guidelines. While your response must be quick, it must also be measured.

That said, speed is all-important. Post a 'first-response' on your social media channels within one hour of the crisis outbreak. Your message should acknowledge the crisis, express concern for those affected, commit to a full investigation, and regular updates.

Important as messaging is, so too is the response medium. As a rule of thumb, you should post the initial response on the channel where the crisis first broke, and thereafter, to the other communication channels. For example, if the crisis broke on Twitter, respond on that channel, and then carry the message to other channels. Update all channels with pertinent information and integrate messages across channels.

Direct people to a central location, such as your company website, where they can find periodic crisis related updates. Make press releases, senior management statements, and video links available here. Proactivity and transparency will mitigate speculation and help restore organizational credibility.

An important part of crisis communication management is keeping stakeholders in the loop. These include employees, customer service staff, PR agency team, customers, business associates, investors, etc. Stakeholders are your **brand ambassadors** during a crisis – appraise them of the situation, including how you are dealing with it.

Reach out directly to employees via email or face-to-face meetings, depending on the magnitude of the crisis. Reinforce and circulate your social media policy, via email and the **employee intranet**. Equip organizational spokespersons, social media managers, customer service staff with scripts and messages to respond to the situation. Send personal letters to customers, associates, and investors if the situation so warrants.

The tone and tenor of communication – both online and offline - are as important as content:

Respond with empathy, be mindful of jargon, and corporate speak. Listen patiently,

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allow the public to be heard; do not be dismissive or insensitive. Do not attempt to censure or hide negative comments (unless they violate company policy) - it would only add fuel to the fire. Be professional and respond with facts. Do not give glib or canned responses. Be human and authentic. Respond directly to the person whenever possible. Exercise balance in responding to comments - responding only to positive comments and ignoring negative ones, will amplify the negativity and alienate the audience. Remain calm and try to take the ire offline, by pointing people to other channels, such as the customer service department or company website. Do not encourage trolls by overly engaging with them - these negative elements would needlessly up the ante'. Respond only to correct facts. Do not exacerbate the situation by responding to emotion with emotion.

Once the initial statement has been published, it may be necessary to issue a press-statement or hold a press briefing, depending on the situation. Once again, the statement should acknowledge the situation, express concern for those affected, provide verified facts and details, outline the actions you are taking including immediate priorities and next steps.

Pay attention to tone of delivery and body language during media interactions – perceived insensitivity or dismissiveness would not bode well for the organization. Reiterate your key messages, avoid speculating on why things went wrong, refrain from assigning blame, or discussing how things could have been done differently, or commenting on how the investigation will be conducted or what its outcome would be.

After your key message has been delivered, reinforce it in follow-up statements, briefings, interviews, and social media posts. Post media releases to your company website and social media channels. Share them with your employees, investors, business associates, and customers. Make copies available to social media managers and customer service staff, including guidelines for fielding questions.

If the crisis involves third-parties, coordinate with them before issuing press releases.

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As a courtesy, share all releases so that the messaging is unified and consistent.

Actively monitor all social media channels, to ensure that your organizational response is integrated and cohesive.

Review all external communication, including promotional material, ads, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram posts, etc., for insensitive or inappropriate content. Automated messages are best aborted. Manually review messages and assess their appropriateness. Refrain from selling or promoting products or services during a crisis- it would show your organization in a very bad light and antagonize the public.

As the investigation progresses, follow-up with updates through traditional press releases and social media posts.

Utilize key communication channels including:

### **Facebook:**

Facebook is an integral lever during a crisis because it allows for misinformation to be corrected in real-time. Closely monitor and update Facebook with relevant facts. Remove insensitive posts, including promotional material, or exuberant images, to present a sober organizational face. Hide negative posts that go against your company policy.

### **Website:**

Your company website is often the first place that customers, media, and the general public access for information during a crisis. Update it with press releases, management statements, and other relevant information. As with Facebook, tone down or remove potentially offensive promotional material or insensitive images. Develop a sober version of your website, that can be activated during emergencies. While the branding is toned down, it is okay to have links to your regular website, so that customers can access it if they wish.

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## **CEO Blog:**

If your organization publishes a CEO blog, post a message or video addressing the crisis. Again, tone and tenor are critical. Authenticity cannot be compromised whatsoever. The CEO must project a caring, responsible organizational face, committed to 'doing the right thing'.

## **Twitter:**

Twitter enables instant messaging and is effective in reaching a wider audience. Willingness to engage with a broader audience during a crisis bodes well for organizational credibility. Given its 280-character limit, use Twitter for brief updates, accompanied by links to your company website.

## **Instagram:**

As with Facebook, review photo-sharing sites such as Instagram and remove insensitive photos.

## **YouTube:**

If your company operates a regular YouTube channel to promote products and services, post a crisis related video message. Monitor YouTube, and respond to comments, in line with crisis communication guidelines.

Also, monitor online forums for comments. Do not post comments to these sites under a pseudonym - the ramifications of being exposed are grave, to say the least. With that said, you could encourage customers, brand ambassadors, and other influencers to post comments on behalf of your organization.

Once your crisis management plan is in place, conduct practice runs. These drills are best conducted when your organization is not operating at full strength and key personnel are not in the office. This scenario will replicate the likely reality when a crisis strikes. It would also help you gauge your preparedness to handle the crisis and

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institute corrective measures.

Once the crisis is past, hold debriefing sessions to evaluate the organizational response and refine your plan for the future.

Armed with a well-rehearsed plan, your organization will be ready to handle a crisis no matter where or when it breaks - even on a Sunday!

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### **About the Author:**

Sanjita Cariappa is a Corporate Communication consultant and writer with over 18 years of experience in Marketing, Corporate Branding, and Corporate Communication. She received her MBA from Duke University, USA.