

Chapter 7

Social Networking Engagement and Crisis Communication Considerations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter covers crisis communication, focusing on the crucial activities before, during, and after a crisis occurs. An environmental scan identifies risks an organization may encounter. Prioritizing these risks informs the creation of crisis communications plans for each risk. These plans include a strategy to guide all organizational communications efforts. Timeline, budget, products, digital resources, and formative measurement all must be considered. Practice is essential. These actions can prepare an organization and its people to manage high-pressure, high-speed activities in real time. Once the crisis is controlled, it is time to evaluate the plan and institute adjustments as required.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to write this chapter, I couldn't stop thinking about what new insight I could offer. I have spent much of my career dealing with crises, or potential crises, from personal tragedies as a public affairs officer in Germany during 1982-1985 to the 2004 prisoner abuse scandal that took place at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. It occurs to me that I have planned for crises, implemented others' plans, and have adjusted both to account for the realities that faced us on the ground as the crises unfolded. One thing my experience has shown me is certain: no plan, as the old Army saying goes, survives first contact with the enemy. Yet, I am just as certain that without a plan, you are doomed to fail to achieve your objectives. Planning affords you the opportunity to think things through in the comfort of your office. It allows you to get to know the people you will be working with in a real crisis. And, it permits you to have something to practice.

What I was able to see over the years is that while our understanding of crises and the communications tools we have at our disposal have gotten better, the basics have not changed much. Crisis managers must be able to envision what can happen, prioritize potential crises, identify the resources necessary to resolve the crisis, and lead and manage those resources when a crisis strikes. The goal, of course, is to return the organization to normal operations as quickly as possible. While it goes without saying that operational excellence gets an organization back to normal, an active, creative, and well implemented crisis communications campaign cuts through the fog of crisis, informs employees about what needs to be—and is being—done, displays empathy on behalf of the organization to those affected, and demonstrates professionalism in resolving the problem. A well implemented crisis communications effort can determine whether the organization can survive the crisis after the crisis ends.

In this chapter, we will take a journey to explain the role of communications in crises. We will briefly examine theories of crisis communication and focus on the important role digital and social media strategies have assumed over the last 20 years. We will also examine the latest thinking on how best to measure social media activities so that your work can indeed help your organization accomplish its goals.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Imagine a world without Twitter, without Facebook, without Instagram. Imagine a world without the internet. Well, let us not go back that far! Let us just go back to the world of Windows 3.1, when the internet was for nerds only, the stuff of the Defense Department and college professors. Amazon.com had not gone online yet.

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