Managing the 'unmanageable'
Social media in a crisis
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Managing the 'unmanageable'

A question we are asked often is “how has social media changed crisis communication?” Social media is no longer new; Twitter and Facebook have both now been around for over a decade and are firmly part of the media environment. And yet, too many communication professionals still fear the prospect of responding to a crisis in the digital era, and managing the 'unmanageable' world of social media.

In this piece Ben Overlander examines what lies behind this nervousness and argues that the impact of social media has been overstated. He suggests five principles for thinking about social media in a crisis and concludes that communication professionals are in a better position to manage reputations than they might think.
Too many capable and experienced communication professionals still talk about social media with a discernible fear in their voice. Smart individuals, who have managed the reputations of global organisations against a backdrop of challenging issues, suddenly appear less confident when talking about social media. Anecdotal evidence from interactions with senior clients suggest they feel exposed when talking about social and digital media.

This nervousness is hardly surprising: it seems as though every week a new article is published or a marketing email lands in my inbox asking, “Are you doing enough to manage social media in a crisis?” Self-inflicted social media crises are well publicised and everyone has a favourite corporate #fail.

This disproportionate focus on social media gives the impression that an organisation’s post-crisis reputation will be determined by how effectively it uses YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. That may be helpful to those wanting to sell special social media crisis solutions, but organisations need to take this with a pinch of salt.

The truth is a lot simpler: social media has, of course, changed the tactics and context in which reputations are managed but the principles of effective crisis communication remain the same. Timescales have been radically altered, ‘ordinary’ people can more easily contribute to the way we think about an organisation and there is a new expectation of openness, transparency and engagement. But, fundamentally, social media is just another communication channel which can be used effectively – and simply – to support the wider crisis communication response.
Social media isn’t always the right way to communicate in a crisis

Effective crisis communication is about saying the right messages to the right people at the right time. It is about seizing the initiative and taking control of the narrative, explaining what has gone wrong, how you feel about it and, crucially, what you are doing to make things better.

Social media may well form a key part of an organisation’s crisis response, allowing it to do all those things. Germanwings and its parent company Lufthansa, for example, used Twitter and Facebook effectively following the tragic plane crash in the French Alps in 2015. They published key updates at regular points throughout the crisis, including a statement on Twitter from its Chairman and CEO within an hour of the crash. Both brands promptly recoloured their logos black and removed all marketing references which would have looked highly insensitive in the circumstances. In the first 24 hours, Germanwings and Lufthansa published a total of 26 tweets, in English and German to more than 200,000 followers. This swift response on social media formed part of a wider communication effort which undoubtedly helped form a sympathetic environment for the airlines over the following weeks.

Germanwings’ decision to use social media was the right one for them in this crisis because its stakeholders had turned to Twitter and Facebook for key information. Within the first 60 minutes, 60,000 tweets were posted referencing #Germanwings and the number grew to 500,000 after six hours.

Cries by their very nature are unique, complex and fast-moving. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Each crisis will require a communication strategy tailored to the particular incident or issue, and a bespoke tactical plan for how to engage with key audiences. Often that will involve at least an element of social media, but there are exceptional circumstances where it might not.

Social media is not the most effective place for dialogue in a crisis, or communicating difficult or emotive news. Conventional crisis communication ‘tools’ such as phone calls, meetings or town halls are able to convey empathy, concern and two-way communication in a way that Facebook and Twitter never can. Employees would much rather hear from their bosses directly, than having to turn to social media to find the latest information about their organisation. Moreover, there may also be occasions when having a presence on social media is counterproductive, provoking an outspoken lobby group intent on causing harm to your organisation’s reputation. If very few of your key stakeholders are likely to get their information through Twitter, Facebook or other digital channels, using social media in a crisis may do more harm than good.

The vast majority (95% of companies) of the FTSE 100 have a social media account used for corporate communications. That still leaves five leading businesses – and undoubtedly countless other smaller organisations – that have made the decision not to use social media in ‘peace-time’. It would be rash for an organisation to start something new and unfamiliar at the moment of highest scrutiny and pressure.
Great social media engagement in ‘peace time’ can be your downfall in a crisis

Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and YouTube, provide opportunities for organisations to connect with their stakeholders in ways that were impossible to conceive of only a few years ago. Colourful, creative and engaging platforms continue to transform customers’ relationships with a company and drive sales. The significance of these channels should not be underestimated: Coca-Cola has over 105 million ‘likes’ on Facebook; Nike has over 75 million followers on Instagram; Burberry has over 5 million followers on Google+.

But, having a strong digital presence during ‘peace-time’ does not necessarily translate to being able to use social media to protect reputation in a crisis. A major crisis will generate interest and scrutiny in an organisation that is far beyond its usual stakeholder groups. Organisations that ordinarily do social media well must not be complacent; its current approach may not be fit for purpose in a crisis. Twitter accounts, for example, are often run by marketing or customer service teams with relatively junior members of staff writing and approving content. Light-hearted posts or marketing campaigns can be pre-scheduled weeks in advance and are focused on driving sales. In the wrong circumstances, these practices could prove explosive, igniting a low-level and contained issue into a major communication headache in front of a large online community.

Organisations that want to build on the strong foundations of their social and digital footprint need to have developed plans for how they will use social media as part of a wider crisis communication response. The first step is to have a clear trigger point where responsibility for social media moves away from marketing and into the corporate affairs team. Guidelines outlining who would be responsible for drafting and approving content, how offensive posts would be handled and the monitoring systems used, all need to be agreed in advance of a crisis.
Whilst social media has changed corporate communications from primarily ‘top down information provision’ to a ‘conversation’ that is harder to control, this does not have to be the case in crisis communications. In most instances, social media should be used to disseminate new information and amplify messages, not to engage in conversation or debate.

Choosing to have a dialogue on Twitter, for example, where communication is public and restricted (even now it’s expanded to 280 characters) is dangerous. Once you have started responding to comments, it is difficult to stop without that generating its own communication challenge.

Twitter is a channel that is naturally hostile and confrontational, making it unsuitable for nuanced debate. Journalists from traditional media will report on any Twitter arguments to keep the story – and the crisis – alive. On the occasions where dialogue is necessary with social media users, efforts should be made to take these conversations off-line and out of public view.
At its essence, social media is a series of conversations conducted publicly. The beauty for communication professionals is that it allows you to listen into what previously closed groups are saying about your organisation in real-time: What do they think about you? What do they know about the incident/issue? What do they expect you to do?

An adept communicator will bring an understanding of the outside world into an organisation’s wider decision making during times of crisis. Scanning social media channels, and using the right listening tools and software to identify trends can be useful preparation before a crisis management team meeting. Likewise, monitoring social media throughout a crisis can allow you to listen and track what is happening externally, whether sentiment is being moved by your online and offline activities and whether there are new issues to which the organisation should respond to.

Caution must, of course, be taken because the narrow world of Twitter does not equate to the wider offline world. Contributors on social media platforms such as Twitter, for example, tend to be more anti-establishment than the general population, meaning online conversation is often more critical of large business than wider offline audiences.

Social media undoubtedly generates huge volumes of comment during a high profile crisis, particularly if it involves perceived wrong-doing resulting in loss of life and environmental damage. To gain valuable insight from social media, it is essential to distinguish stakeholder reaction that really matters from background noise. Not all social media users are made equal; skilled communicators should ask “will the online activity happening now have any tangible or material impact on our organisation in the long-term?” Simply put, does it really matter – and why – if my organisation is trending on Twitter?
Traditional media in a crisis will often spend as long focusing on the behaviour and actions of a Chief Executive Officer as on the organisation’s wider response. Recent crises show how difficult it is to communicate on your own terms in a crisis, rather than be framed in the way the media pack decides.

Seeking greater exposure for an organisation’s under-fire CEO may seem counterintuitive. But social media allows the CEO to bypass traditional media, connecting directly with key audiences and challenging the media’s caricature. A CEO who shows empathy and emotion for those affected by an incident can create a major change in the perception of an entire organisation.

CEOs who are on Twitter, or contribute to regular to-camera YouTube videos, show stakeholders their organisation is not a faceless corporate building, but made up of real people genuinely affected by an incident trying to do the right thing.

Tony Fernandes, CEO of AirAsia showed a quite different side of his character in the aftermath of flight QZ8501, which crashed off Indonesia killing all 162 passengers in December 2014. In different times, Fernandes is a keen user of Twitter, tweeting regularly about the airline or Queens Park Rangers, the English football club he owns. In the wake of the crash, Fernandes did not go silent and leave it to AirAsia’s communications team to take the lead. Instead, he continued to update followers on recovery efforts, expressed personal concern about victims’ families, and rallied AirAsia staff morale.

Heading off allegations that AirAsia was not providing sufficient information on the crash, he tweeted: “As I have said we never hide. All will come out at right time. Focus is finding all guests and looking after families.” In another message, he tweeted about traveling to Indonesia to retrieve the body of a flight attendant and to escort the body back to her hometown. “I’m arriving in Surabaya to take Nisa home,” he wrote. “I cannot describe how I feel. There are no words.”
But the expectations around social media are such that often organisations find themselves engaging on public platforms in ways that do not necessarily help the wider communication effort. Companies must not feel pressurised into taking a cookie-cutter approach to social media that some commentators might want them to believe.

Organisations need to think through their corporate character and the needs and expectations of their key audiences. Then they can ask themselves the key question: “how has social media changed the way we think about crisis management in our organisation?” Few of the above points should come as a surprise to experienced communicators. They are consistent with crisis communications best practice.

Conclusion

Ben Overlander is a specialist in issues and crisis management with a particular focus on media relations. He has worked in a number of high-profile press offices and has supported different organisations through many live issues.

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