Liz Floore

Cliff Shaluta

Research in Ad & PR

17 March 2012

Social Media and Crisis Management

Nowadays, any crisis management plan worth its salt should include social media in its

strategies. With the technology-driven culture that has dominated the world, news happens and

spreads within a matter of seconds. With mobile internet devices and social media platforms--

like Twitter and Facebook--news travels fast, and crisis management plans should have a strategy

in place to gain control of the flow of information pertaining to a crisis immediately. Using

Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other forms of social media in a crisis allow for the public to gain

information as it happens, maintaining the reputations of those involved in the crisis and gaining

control of the situation.

Immediate communication is key in today's world. The way people communicate with

each other happens in a matter of seconds, and gossip and news travels just as fast, if not faster.

Responding immediately to a crisis is essential because "the sooner an organization takes charge

of communication, the better it can minimize the damage" (Ide, Martin, and Totten 16). There is

no doubt that "[a]fter a major event, the first news will often come through social media--

particularly the platforms focused on instant distribution" (Baron and Philbin 12). Crisis

management teams need to develop a plan of action that incorporates these instant

communication platforms. This allows companies to participate in an ongoing conversation with

the public rather than just a one-way stream of messages (Baron and Philbin 12). Instead of a

company in a crisis sending out controlled messages to a potentially unbelieving public, it can find out what public perceptions of the crisis are and respond to those perceptions directly, changing public opinion much more authentically and effectively.

Knowing what the public is saying about an organization during a crisis is critical in understanding how to resolve the situation with minimal damage. In order to find out what people are saying and where they are saying it, crisis management plans must "incorporate monitoring, active engagement with relevant sites and the use of emerging forms of social media." (Baron and Philbin 12), and engage in a conversation with the public via Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. The internet has become a natural part of the every day lives of the public, and "[t]he nature of social media is that everyone is a publisher....[and] can generate content that is incorrect--or, worse yet, deliberately disparaging" (Armon 10). If a company's social media platforms are not monitored, false and damaging content can be posted and widely distributed without resistance. These posts can "spread rapidly and become amplified by a social media influencer or a mainstream outlet. The damage can be immediate and profound" (Armon 10).

The bottom line is that crisis management plans in today's world need to include a social media monitoring and conversation strategy. As soon as crises occur, crisis management teams need to actively interact with the public via social media platforms to not only inform the public about the crisis, but also to engage the public in a conversation about the crisis. This conversation gives useful insight to the crisis management team on how where the public stands and what to do to influence public opinion. Without a social media monitoring strategy, organizations are leaving their reputations and images in the hands of third-party influencers who can publish just about anything on the internet, true or not.

Dimitris Zotos, a blogger for WebSEO Analytics, argues that social media affects an organization more negatively than positively during a crisis. He states that the harmful, "[n]egative messages coming from unreliable sources can go instantly viral within social networks, generating a harmful publicity and reputation damage" (Zotos). As previously stated, anyone can be a publisher on the internet, and the things that third-party influencers publish online do not necessarily have to be true or factual for the public to believe them. Zotos provides "10 good social media practices" that organizations should use during a crisis (Zotos). Every organization with a crisis management team should put these practices to use immediately. One effective practice is "Have the content ready," meaning that preparing for a crisis and having "all the proper content (images, press release templates, documents with social responsibility actions, etc}" is an important time saver that allows an organization to focus on time-sensitive goals (Zotos). Timing is everything in a crisis, and being prepared ahead of time can save an organization precious time assembling all of those elements and, instead, allows it to immediately respond to the situation. Another practice is "Train your social media team," emphasizing that "[e]veryone that is involved in communications...must know that main position of the company regarding the crisis...[and] not to mention anything about the crisis [on social media platforms] and instead to forward possible queries to the crisis management team" (Zotos). Making sure that unverified content does not leak out is essential to controlling the flow of information from the organization about the crisis. Perhaps the most important practice that Zotos outlines is "Be Open," stating "[d]on't hide information: instead share all important data in order to be a reliable and accurate source of news" (Zotos). Honesty with the media is key in a crisis; withholding information or providing false information makes an

organization look guilty. Social media is a great tool to use to get the accurate, honest

information to the public quickly. Zotos provides many more practices that are effective in

navigating a company through a crisis and making use of social media in crisis management

plans.

Another blogger who comments on social media is Torben Rick, and he uses his blog to

provide some guidelines on how to use social media in a crisis. He discusses how to use social

media to keep people informed during a crisis, saying "[t]he worst thing in a crisis is not

knowing...social media can be useful as a tool to keep people informed" (Rick). Social media

outlets, like Facebook and Twitter, allow an organization to provide updates and information

about a crisis in real time to the public, controlling the flow of communication and allowing for

the public to interact with the organization. Rick goes on to say that "[t]he benefit of having a

well established blog or online community is that you can....[m]ake it the place people can go to

for information" (Rick). An organization needs to have an established, credible presence in the

world of social media so the public can go there for accurate information during a crisis instead

of relying on third party sources that can publish false information. Rick states the importance of

engaging in a conversation with the public on social media and that, during a crisis, "people are

going to complain, and these complaints need responding to" (Rick). It is important for an

organization to not only send out information via social media, but to also directly respond to the

comments and complaints posted by the public. Doing so allows the company to gather more

information about how the public views the crisis, "[c]orrect inaccuracies and give people who

are complaining information to stop them talking about you in social media" (Rick). The last

thing an organization needs during a crisis is unchecked false information about the situation

rapidly circulating the internet. Engaging in the conversation allows organizations to stop

rumors, correct false information, and connect with the public in a way that has never been seen

before in the world of public relations. The idea of having the ability to actively converse with

specific people and influencers in real time and using the information gathered from those

conversations to shape the next move in crisis management is a concept that has just emerged in

the last decade. Rick, like Zotos, states that an important step in involving social media in a crisis

is to be prepared before a crisis happens. The first step is to establish that presence online and to

engage in the conversation about an organization's brand before a crisis, as previously stated.

Rick says that "you need to have a history of really engaging your customers" in order for an

organization to be a credible source of information during a crisis instead of "just running social

media marketing campaigns" (Rick). Rick also emphasizes that "[s]ocial media is a powerful

crisis management tool, but only if you have been using it when you are not in crisis mode

too" (Rick).

The two bloggers discussed above make excellent cases for their points of view on social

media and crisis management, and both provide useful tips and practices to help organizations

better understand the benefits and the necessity of incorporating social media not only in its

crisis management plans, but also in its every day interaction with the public. But one thing that

these bloggers do not discuss is how social media should be second nature to any organization

nowadays. Social media should not only be a tool and resource, but it should be used every day

to promote an organization and its services. People spend a significant portion of their days

connected to the internet, be it from a computer or from a mobile device, and they are constantly

seeking new information and publishing new information via social media platforms. Shouldn't

company's be doing the exact same thing? Engaging in social media should not feel like tool that can be pulled out of the toolbox when its needed; social media should be involved in almost every aspect of an organization's interaction with the public. If social media becomes second nature to an organization during a non-crisis period, then using it to manage a crisis situation will not seem like such a daunting task. Having a social media presence makes all the difference in managing an organization's reputation and brand in today's culture. If social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are where the public goes to interact and get information every day, then organizations need to be there, too.

Works Cited

Armon, Dave. "Ready or not: Is your crisis communications plan anti-social?" *Public Relations Tactics* 17.4 (2010): 10-11. *Business Source Premier*. Web. 17 March 2012.

Baron, Gerald, and John Philbin. "Social media in crisis communication: Start with a drill." *Public Relations Tactics* 16.4 (2009): 12. *Business Source Premier*. Web. 17 March 2012.

Ide, Bill, Summer H. Martin, and Mary Totten. "Crisis Management and Maintaing the Public Trust." *Trustee* July/Aug. 2011: 15-18. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 10 March 2012.

Rick, Torben. "How to use social media as a crisis management tool." *Torben Rick Blog*. 3 April 2011. Web. 17 March 2012.

Zotos, Dimitris. "How to Use Social Media for Crisis Management." *SEO Blog*. 16 January 2012. WebSEO Analytics. Web. 17 March 2012.