



WHITE PAPER

Crisis Communications: You Can't Afford to Be Anti-Social

ENGAGE OPPORTUNITY *EVERYWHERE*



PR Newswire

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WHITE PAPER

Crisis Communications: You Can't Afford to Be Anti-Social

Social media has changed the way companies will communicate in the wake of a crisis. Within the right framework, social media can be used strategically to your advantage.

In the age of social media, is your business equipped to manage a potential crisis?

We've heard it over and over again: social media is a double-edged sword. The thoughtful use of social media can foster relationships but, when mismanaged, it can destroy them – in 140 characters or less! Companies have been told to be wary of social media, so why is it that so many aren't heeding the call?

Businesses large and small are too often engaging in social media without a plan. In a world where social media is part of everyday operations and an integral part of reputation management, that's a big risk.

If your company was trying to penetrate a new niche market, you would conduct extensive research and financial analyses on every inch of that market to ensure your company was best-positioned to leverage the untapped benefits. Why then is it such a different story when it comes to the social media "market?"

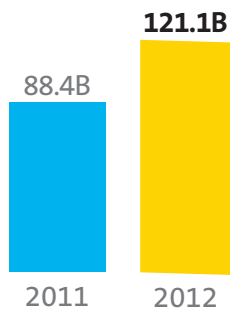
Most companies are aware that customers, partners, shareholders – many, if not all, of our audiences – are online, talking about the good, the bad and the ugly of their brand. In the eyes of many businesses, social media platforms are the low-hanging fruit of communication mediums. The lure of instant, low-cost technologies is so tempting that we often end up biting off a lot more than we can chew.

So, with good intentions and little context, many companies are telling their PR teams to engage with their audience through the use of social media. And, in a rush to catch up, few

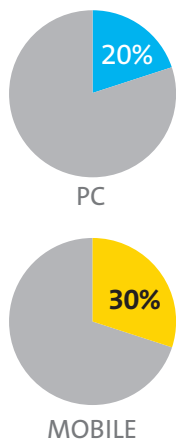
are taking the necessary steps to prepare their companies for the consequences. When it comes to managing their reputations, many companies fall flat because they don't truly understand how to properly use social media *strategically* and *to their advantage*. Not surprisingly, the onus falls on PR teams to do the work up front.

In an age where social media can amplify the severity of a reputational crisis (and, in some cases, create one), PR teams are tasked with positioning their company's brand(s) intelligently in the social media stratosphere *before* things go wrong.

TOTAL MINUTES SPENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS



PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS



Setting the Stage

HOW MUCH IMPACT DOES SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE ON THE WAY WE LIVE AND COMMUNICATE?

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, SlideShare, Instagram, the blogosphere, Pinterest, Google +, LinkedIn – ring any bells? Did you stop caring after Facebook and Twitter? A recent U.S. survey of social media usage by Ipsos, a leading research firm specializing in survey-based marketing, suggests that may not be the best approach.

The study revealed that there is a dramatic increase in the frequency Americans used social networks in 2012: **Nearly 121.1B total minutes were spent on social networks in 2012**, which compares to 88.4B total minutes the previous year. It's no secret people continue to spend more time on social networks than any other category of sites – When using a PC, social media consumers spends 20% of their time on social networks, and 30% of their time when using a mobile device.¹

Something else to consider: On average 47% of social media users prefer to engage with brands or companies on social sites to voice their questions, praises, issues and complaints. If we know where our audiences are talking about us – and even promoting us – why not go to them to engage in conversation? If our followers 'like' us on Facebook, it only makes sense to go to Facebook to engage with them.

Although activity on social networks shifts rapidly, PR pros are tasked with navigating these ever-changing and increasingly turbulent waters. We've got to stay current, and it's tough to do.

If we're not already listening to our audiences on social media, now's the time to start. A crisis or reputational threat can be overwhelming and attempts to gain presence on social media platforms during a crisis won't have much traction. We can make it easier on ourselves by starting before the crisis strikes.

1. <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2012-Reports/The-Social-Media-Report-2012.pdf>

When it comes to brand management and crisis communication, this will help us make social media part of every stage:

BEFORE

ENGAGE/ANTICIPATE

Social media can be a tool to engage audiences, anticipate crises and even help you prevent them. If you can engage in conversations early, you may be able to position yourself to better measure whether or not you were effective in managing the crisis.

DURING

COMMUNICATE

Depending on the type of company you work for, social media can be used to reinforce more formal communication in an urgent situation and may even help reduce the severity of a crisis or potential crisis. Keeping those two-way lines of communication open will express better transparency to your audiences and can help re-establish your company as trustworthy. Don't expect much in the way of results though if all you're doing is talking at your audiences; you have to stay engaged in a dialogue

AFTER

REGAIN TRUST

Re-engaging on social media platforms might be your opportunity to regain the trust of your audiences. You can't afford to stick your head in the sand; you need to be part of the conversation and, when the opportunity arises, lead it.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

Communicators are using social networking sites more frequently and the majority of users prefer to connect with brands or companies through social networking sites. The more we, as PR pros, have our companies engage in social media from the beginning, the better positioned we'll be to anticipate, communicate and regain trust in order to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

Why it matters to PR pros

We need to be smart about our use of social media, and planning is an essential approach to using it to our advantage.

Let's look at the positive. As stated earlier, social media can help reduce the severity of a crisis or potential crisis. A good example is the Red Cross, they deal with tens of thousands of disasters and requests for help each year. The Red Cross is in the business of crisis management on a large scale for other people. By issuing a crisis response program through social media and quickly reacting to individuals concerns or requests for information about a



recent disaster, Red Cross take a proactive approach and prove that they are always prepared for any situation and offer a quick solution for those directly affected.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

HOW WILL YOU REACH THEM WHEN A CRISIS STRIKES?

In a time when the news cycle is 24/7 and new information is measured in minutes, not hours, it's important to keep calm and act swiftly. Get your crisis plan in place. Segment your audiences early on and be sure you know exactly how you'll reach the highest number of them in the most efficient way. Be specific and don't skimp on the details.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

The important thing to note is that social networking sites have brought significant changes to the ways our audiences receive and share information. We have to be mindful of the diverse ways our audiences communicate and the platforms they use most frequently. While social media is only one of those platforms, it certainly can't be ignored.

Examples (in extremes)

If you're unprepared to handle all that using social media can imply, take heed. Let's look at some examples of how social media can amplify and even cause a crisis.

BAD PUBLICITY

As we saw with the Red Cross example, social media can be used to offer a solution for a crisis. Social media can also get you into a lot of hot water.

As Kenneth Cole experienced, your (mis)use of social media can also burn you. In an attempt to promote his 2011 spring collection, Kenneth Cole sent out a tweet that made light of the (at-the-time) topical uprising in Cairo – a historical event itself organized by way of social media. Thousands of people were outraged and went to Twitter and Facebook to voice their disapproval. Cole was forced to engage in the conversation he created and responded with an apology to the media and on Facebook, as well as several regretful tweets.

Unexpectedly, at the end of it all, Cole gained thousands of new followers on Twitter and his company's share price rose. But we'll argue that a better business practice is to do the right thing rather than leverage "bad publicity." Raising awareness of your brand in an ethical way will take your company a lot further in the wake of a social media crisis. Making sure your audiences recognize the positive things you do is the challenge.

IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Communities are no longer confined to cul-de-sacs – they're online and they're far-reaching. These online communities have given rise to new responsibilities, and more and more companies are hiring professionals to fill community management roles



– experienced PR pros, familiar with social media management, who are dedicated to building and maintaining relationships, and assessing and addressing potential crises.

Prior to social media, if a customer had a complaint about your product or service, the word may have spread to a few friends and family members. Now, the word can go viral in an instant.

Papa John's, a pizzeria chain, learned this the hard way. In January of 2012, a Papa John's employee printed a racial slur on a customer receipt at one of the chain's New York City locations. The customer posted a photo of the receipt and tweeted about it to her following. Papa John's responded quickly by publicly apologizing for the incident and firing the employee in question.

Situations like these usually present an opportunity for companies to tip the scales of influence. Papa John's certainly gained some new followers in the wake of this event – people who wanted to observe the controversy. If Papa John's plays its cards right, the company may just be able to change the opinions of its newest followers.

VIRAL VIDEO

As PR Newswire's white paper entitled, "Using Multimedia to Amp Up Your Social Media Echo", tells us, "of all the multimedia content formats available, none is seen as more potent than video."²

If that's not enough proof that video is a catalyst for conversation, here's one for your record books:

In March of 2010, Greenpeace produced a one-minute, attention-demanding video and launched an online campaign against Nestlé's use of palm oil extracted from resources in the Indonesian rainforests. In the eyes of the public, Nestlé's response was sluggish at best and its Facebook page was overrun with negative comments. Rather than address the comments accordingly, the company kept relatively quiet, save for posting a Q&A.

Just because you ignore it, it doesn't mean it's not there. Your better bet is to face the issue head-on and do everything you can to tell your side of the story. We would even argue that, in this case, Nestlé should have posted a response video of its own. If your ethics are being questioned, be prepared to take steps to change the way you do business – it's all about trust and customer perception.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

As the leaders of BP might tell you, communicating shouldn't stop after the crisis dies down. After the urgency of the crisis fades away, figure out what the lingering points of contention are and take ongoing steps to address them. You have to lead here; don't sit idly by.

2. PR Newswire Association LLC. "[Using Multimedia to Amp Up Your Social Echo.](#)" 2011.



As its Web site indicates, BP has embarked on a quest to re-earn trust. Nearly two years after the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig and the resulting oil spill, BP is still trying to restore its reputation. In January of 2012, Robert Dudley, BP's Group Chief Executive, spoke to the Economic Club of Chicago and gave the audience a progress report on their conciliatory efforts. The company has been engaging audiences on social media platforms like Facebook and encouraging a dialogue. Dudley reaffirmed BP's commitment to continue the quest to re-earn trust through a three-pronged approach of "Respond. Reinforce. Restore."³ Unsurprisingly, Dudley's talking points alluded to trust more than a few times.

Summary: things to keep in mind

During a crisis, we have to take action where we can. Keep in mind that you will never be able to control everything. Social media platforms host a lot of messaging without context – there are bound to be some misunderstandings.

Here's what you can do:

BEFORE

- Develop a strategy and get a crisis communications plan in place.
- Wade through the many social media platforms, pick your top three and focus on them.
- Know your public: be realistic about your spectrum of influence and manage it continually.

DURING

- Think before you speak.
- Leverage the positive relationships you already have with your audiences. It's okay to ask for help in times of need.
- Fight fire with fire: be ready to respond in the same forums where the conversations are taking place.

AFTER

- Be creative, think differently: come up with some crisis scenarios and run through the what-ifs.
- Practice makes perfect: once you've got those worst-case scenarios outlined, make sure your team knows exactly what they would do should a scenario become reality.
- Don't stop communicating: if you've made mistakes, acknowledge them and do your best to regain trust.

2. BP. "A Safer, Stronger BP: Our Quest to Earn Back America's Trust – Bob Dudley speech to Economic Club of Chicago." January 13, 2012. <http://www.bp.com/genericarticle.do?categoryId=98&contentId=7072999>



Learn from it

Social media has changed the way companies will communicate in the wake of a crisis. We've explored the good and the bad of social media and framed how to properly use social media strategically and to your advantage.

Some will argue that an organization has to experience a crisis to be able to prepare for one. We think differently. Learn from the mistakes of others. You have a creative team on staff – use them. Come up with some worst-case scenarios and go through, in detail, how you'll handle all aspects of a crisis.

In the end, it's all about trust – any communicator will tell you that. Doing the right thing and being transparent should always be at the core of your social strategy.

About PR Newswire

PR Newswire (www.prnewswire.com) is the premier global provider of multimedia platforms and solutions that enable marketers, corporate communicators, sustainability officers, public affairs and investor relations officers to leverage content to engage with all their key audiences. Having pioneered the commercial news distribution industry 59 years ago, PR Newswire today provides end-to-end solutions to produce, optimize and target content – from rich media to online video to multimedia – and then distribute content and measure results across traditional, digital, social, search and mobile channels. Combining the world's largest multi-channel, multi-cultural content distribution and optimization network with comprehensive workflow tools and platforms, PR Newswire enables the world's enterprises to engage opportunity everywhere it exists. PR Newswire serves tens of thousands of clients from offices in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, and is a UBM plc company.

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