How Social Media Impacts Crisis Communication Strategies
Industry Perspective & Case Studies’ Review

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When all hell breaks loose, you can be sure that everybody’s watching

Mega disasters for mega brands proves to be a major headache for all involved. From an oil rig that dumps millions of gallons of oil into the sea to the fatal Costa Concordia cruise sinking to more recent crises like Burger King’s lettuce stomper to the stranded Carnival Triumph, when disaster strikes brands face public scrutiny. The public stands, judges, and is the ultimate jury when it comes to deciding a brand’s reputation.

Social media has given the public more control than ever before over the way information is received, disseminated, and spread across the social web. Public opinion has a significant impact on the way your brand is perceived by others, and it only takes one scathing review or incriminating video to tarnish your reputation. This is why organizations must incorporate a social media component as part of their crisis management implementation strategy.

The Catch 22 of Social Media: 3 Factors that Impact Crisis Communication

The inclusion of social media may seem like a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation for businesses. While some may still have this mentality, today it is less of a question of whether or not companies should include social media as a communication channel. Rather, it is a matter of ensuring the benefits of incorporating social media outweigh the risks. This thinking extends beyond the initial implementation strategy and to the crisis communication/management plan. The following three factors influence crisis communication plans:

1. **Transparency**—The first lesson of Crisis Communication 101 is that organizations MUST BE transparent, open, and honest when dealing with a potentially devastating situation. This of course remains true, but now organizations must be cognizant of the impact social media has
in communicating brand transparency. With millions of people connecting online, social media is a tool that offers greater transparency for content creators and brand influencers. Failure to own up to mistakes or omission of information in public statements will be recognized by the public, which can have serious repercussions.

2. **Time**—A consumer can create, post, and share information in very little time. Speed is a component of social media that has a significant impact on crisis communication. “They used to say it was the first 24 hours of a crisis was crucial, today it’s the first hour” (Insignia Communications, Reputation Management & Communications Consultancy)

3. **Viral Effect**—Information has the potential to spread across the web like wildfire. A negative post that goes viral has the ability to completely ruin or devastate a brand.

The three elements listed above can make or break a brand, product, person or organization. It is so important for companies to include a crisis management plan that regards these factors and anticipates worst-case scenarios.

**Crisis Management Case Study: Carnival Cruise Triumph**

The ability to successfully and effectively manage a crisis is not an easy task. Let’s consider the most recent crisis to hit the airwaves: The Carnival Cruise Triumph. Passengers of the ship were stranded for close to a week with no running water, no air conditioning, spoiling food, and exposure to toxic air from waste. With law suits streaming in upon the ship’s docking in Mobile, Alabama, Carnival was and still is dealing with a potentially brand damaging crisis.

Now, calculate the use of social media by passengers aboard the ship who shared photos and posted real-time updates of the worsening conditions. The stranded Carnival Triumph situation is a perfect example of how social media plays a crucial role in the spread of a crisis. Take a look at couple of the passengers’ posts via WPTV:

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Haley Meyer
@haleymeyer

Made tents outside. Barely any food, 3 hour lines.
This Instagram photo was captioned, “These were the hallways by the elevators because it’s so hot in the rooms #triumph.”

In addition to an influx of posts about the ships conditions, the hashtag #cruisefromhell started to trend on Twitter. The owner of Carnival also made headlines as he sat courtside at a Miami Heat basketball game during the incident.

So how did Carnival’s PR team react overall? Minus the owner’s basketball mishap, the crisis communication team for Carnival reacted well. The team created a designated page on Carnival’s website for news updates, consistently updated their social sites, one Facebook and two Twitter feeds (@CarnivalCruise @CarnivalPR), and according to Ad Age, took over 7,000 calls from concerned friends and family members.

Carnival expects to take a loss regarding bookings as the ships goes into dry dock for two months. Consumer sentiment has also taken a hit as passengers continue to voice their transgressions toward the Carnival brand and cruise industry. It will be interesting to watch this story unfold and to see whether or not this crisis will affect the cruise industry. What do you think? Would you take a cruise?

Crisis Resolution Case Study: Burger King Lettuce Controversy

A significant component to crisis management is crisis resolution. In the case of the stranded Carnival Cruise, we will have to wait and see if their crisis response was enough to uphold the Carnival brand reputation in the long run.

Burger King recently dealt with reputation-threatening crisis last year when an employee took a photo of himself standing in the lettuce served as the popular fast-food chain—Cue the viral effect of social media. The photo garnered a significant amount of attention as it spread across the web and, naturally, people were disgusted by the image. Using GPS data and the photograph, Burger King, with the help of Internet users, was able to identify, contact, and fire the offending employee—all within 24 hours. Burger King’s reaction to the potential crisis was swift. They not only located and fired the employee, they also worked together with the online community and promptly released a statement to their customers about the important of food safety. By all accounts, Burger King’s crisis response embraced and
considered all three factors that impact social media: The were transparent with their customers, reacted quick, and were able to deal with the ramifications of a negative viral message.

Key Takeaway

The public has an undeniable control over the way brand messages are spread and perceived. With the public having so much power, it is seemingly a no-brainer that organizations must consistently monitor conversations across the social web. Conversations are happening every second. It is an absolute requirement for companies to monitor public sentiment of their respective brands. Organizations that know what is being said about their brands, who is saying it, and where it is being said will be better prepared to handle crises.

References


