

Conversation Agent - Valeria Maltoni

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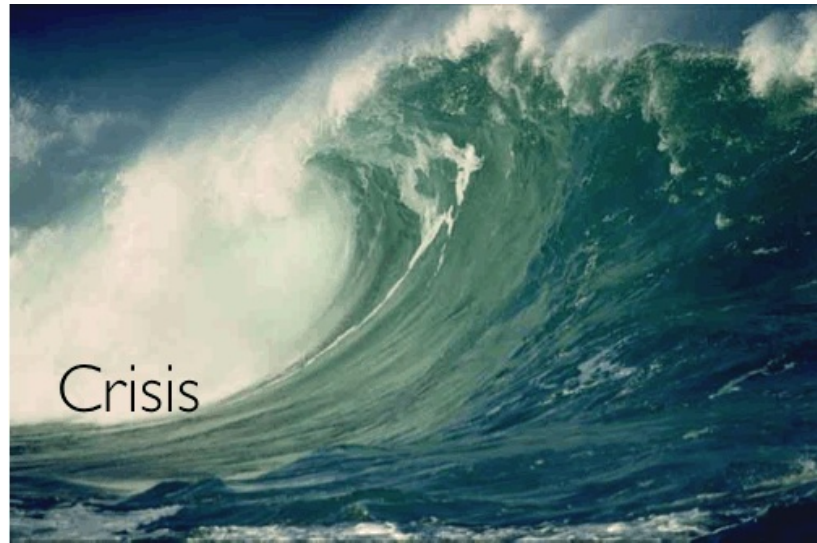
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Crisis Communications in Social Media: Are You Ready?



Remember the [Monster's Inc. move at Domino's](#)? In the post, I quoted a character from the movie. **CDA Agent** says: "We can neither confirm nor deny the presence of a human child here tonight." Do we stipulate that there are canned customers who like to receive canned messages? In this age of personalization and "Me, Inc."?

If you're experienced in crisis communications, you know that rarely does a crisis explode overnight. Even in the current murky sea of dissatisfaction with the oil situation and BP, we got where we are with stakeholders because of lack of communication.

There are usually **two things happening during a crisis**:

1.) the issue at hand that needs to be dealt with

It could be a fire in one of your buildings, a disgruntled former employee who shares internal documents, embezzlement or corruption, kidnap and ransom, a hurricane takes the roof off your warehouse, your plant goes down because of flooding or a power grid failure and production is halted, etc. You get the idea.

Or, it could be a known issue -- one the management team or the general manager (the one with the P&L) know about and may not have briefed the communication team. I'm inclined to think this is the case with many recent break downs between companies and their communities.

2.) communication with all stakeholders and the public at large where applicable

This includes employees and their families, local authorities and emergency personnel, business partners, vendors, board of directors, analysts, and the investor community as applicable, as well as the physical and virtual communities affected -- directly and indirectly.

Managing a crisis needs to be intertwined with communicating about what is known and being done during the crisis. There are plenty of crisis experts on both sides of the conversation. I worked for years in the chemical manufacturing and IT infrastructure services industries alongside some very senior and experienced crisis management teams.

You could say that no industry is immune from a crisis -- think for example of the financial services, both banking and insurance organizations have been in the limelight for their business practices in recent years.

ICE it

Communicators and PR professionals are taught that during a crisis, they should use the ICE method to guide the response. ICE stands for Information, Communication and Evaluation. These three areas and the processes associated with them will help you stay organized and keep the crisis response team and the crisis management task force on the same page.

I – Information

Gather as much information as possible about the event: who, what, when, where, why, how and more. *Check and double check the facts*, and *get updates* often. Do you have open communication lines with the people in the field and those close to the crisis? Do you have a process to capture information as it becomes available?

C – Communication

Once information has been gathered and verified, *communicate* to employees and other key stakeholders, including the media, as appropriate. Keep a log of all requests for information from each stakeholder group. Do you have pre-approved language you can insert key facts into to aid with speed in initial communications? What's your process for ongoing updates? Who needs to be involved in approvals?

E – Evaluation

Monitor media stories and online conversations to make certain information is being presented accurately. The crisis response team must *act immediately* to correct any incorrect or misleading information. Update information frequently and verify progress in the organization's response.

You will need to monitor public statements by third parties, including customers, emergency responders, fire and police personnel, and others. The same process applies here -- if information is incorrect or misleading, notify the media and the source immediately with the most current

facts.

Follow up proactively with the media and other stakeholders in the days and weeks that follow the crisis. You have an opportunity to add any subsequent findings or new information, and provide an update on your progress and next steps.

When the crisis is over, you will want to evaluate the performance of the crisis response team in executing the crisis plan to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

Planning for disaster

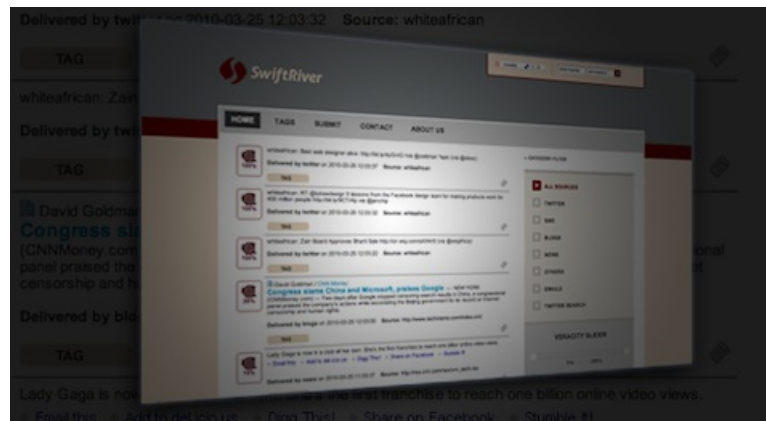
The truth is many organizations are not ready when a disaster or a crisis strike. They have failed to plan how they'll gather information, they have not identified stakeholders for their communications, and overlook the important steps in evaluating how the crisis is developing to shape what's next.

Richard Becker highlighted the four basic tenets of disaster planning:

- 1. Mitigation.** Mitigation focuses on long-term measures to reduce or eliminate risk. These might include technologies or policies, set in place by companies or government.
- 2. Preparedness.** Planning, organizing, training, evaluating, and improving activities that will ensure the proper coordination of efforts during a disaster.
- 3. Response.** Response includes the mobilization of all necessary emergency services and first responders in the disaster area. Organized response requires a structure (leadership) and agility (creativity).
- 4. Recovery.** Recovery aims to restore the affected area to its previous state before the disaster. This almost always occurs after a disaster; it is the opportunity to assess where mitigation, preparedness, and response broke down.

Which ones are you not prepared for? A crisis becomes a disaster when the issue that precipitated it is not attended to, and when the communication about it is not forthcoming, factual, and directed to all stakeholders.

The tangled webs weave



In the age of conversation, a story, and the ensuing public recruitment, rallying, and support, can rapidly spread unlike any crisis wildfire witnessed or experienced in previous generations. Add to it the fact that many, including mainstream media outlets, consume news and information on social networks and you have plenty to think about.

Are you prepared to deal with it?

Organizations are hitching to take advantage of new media for marketing purposes, and so they should. If your customers and prospect are online, you'd want to use the same tools to communicate with them and their colleagues and friends. Are you:

- creating social media guidelines and training modules to help mitigate the risk of your associates, employees participating in online communities
- developing likely business scenarios that could impact your business and running through them in table top exercises and drills
- training all the people who will be part of the response team, engaging actively with emergency personnel and leading community members, the communication team especially
- evaluating where things are breaking down in communication and issue management and gaining the proper agility and momentum to deal with all loose ends

Social networks made everything faster and the dependencies more complex. However, you should not overthink the process because of this. The same principles apply here that are time tested. I've been involved in crisis situations that we could not have even imagined as a business, never mind plan for it.

Working on mitigating and planning give you the mental and physical rigor to cover all bases. The structure helps you deal with the chaos when it presents itself.

Survival is not enough

Preparation and information are your friends. In social that means laying the ground work on building relationships with your community based on authentic openness about business practices, products and services.

When an unforeseen mistake or a disaster happens, the ground work will give you license to impress your customers.

Communicators and public relations professionals are usually involved with new media for this reason. However, businesses are still working on crisis communications plans and many have not taken the extra step to incorporate social media in those plans.

Think that misinformation and consequent chatter could happen only in social networks? How about a fake press release like the one General

Mills is dealing with?

Are you ready or will you be caught unprepared?

[image by SwiftRiver, a free and open source software platform that uses algorithms and crowdsourcing to validate and filter news. See the article on UX magazine.]

Further resources:

[Are you Hiring the Right Public Relations Candidates?](#)

[Your News Page is the New Newsroom](#)

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