⌗ WHITE PAPER

Crisis Communications in a "Tuned-in/Turned-on" World

By Joseph Hice, APR

Today's connected world means that when and if a crisis emerges, it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Thanks to the advent of web 2.0 technologies, everyone with a computer, e-mail, cell phone, blog and a YouTube or MySpace account, has become a potential journalist. This explosion in the amount of information available to those who are interested and the speed at which that information is disseminated, has created the need for public relations professionals to develop new processes when dealing with the news, especially during crisis situations.

Background

There is no more powerful demonstration of that need than the unfolding of the tragic events at Virginia Tech on the morning of April 16, 2007, when a student killed 32 people and wounded many more during two attacks about two hours apart before committing suicide. The incident, which received worldwide media coverage, was first reported and recorded on the victims' cell phones. While the traditional media responded quickly, it was the student, or the citizen journalist, if you will, leading the way.

Within hours, first-person blogs reported details and emotions of the situation. There were more than 40,300 blogs about Virginia Tech by 5 p.m. on April 16, according to Technorati.com, a blog search engine. By the same time, more than 5,000 Facebook.com sites had been created to monitor the tragedy. The major domestic and international media outlets relied on blogs, Facebook, MySpace and other web sources to report the story, often lifting comments and reports directly from these web-based communications tools.

University representatives also relied on the web as a chief source of information and often found themselves responding to reports posted online rather than issuing updates as they may have done in the past.

Today's Challenge

While it is unlikely your company or institution will experience an event as tragic as the one at Virginia Tech, it's very likely that should you have a

problem or crisis, news and video reports, as well as photography could end up on the web within minutes. And with social networking web sites, things can spread even more easily via electronic word of mouth.

Whether you like it or not, this is the age of invasive and pervasive transparency and nobody can hide. In the networked world in which we live, planning is critical.

So, how do you develop a crisis plan in today's always-on, globally networked world?
Like any crisis planning, you start with good common sense and methodology.

- Assess and prioritize risks – don't wait for a crisis to begin
- Examine operations and processes – honestly
- Evaluate and catalogue assets – people, facilities, equipment
- Keep it simple – bigger is not necessarily better

Perhaps the most significant change in planning is the need to develop a web-based component for your actions. While you may perceive the web as the source of your problems, it may also be a significant part of your solution.

Any planning should begin with a list of response team members and alternates including 24/7 contact information. You should also be comfortable with your team members and know their strengths and skills. A crisis is not the best time to get to know someone.

Dealing with traditional media sources is standard procedure for many public relations practitioners, but working with new media can be quite different. You cannot jump into the bloggosphere, for example,

without significant experience dealing with blogs and bloggers because of its unique etiquette and language. An inexperienced representative's attempt to enter a blog and provide new information may be ignored, or ridiculed if the accepted rules are not followed..

If you include web-based video services to distribute information during a crisis it's best to have an expert on staff. While YouTube and MySpace may appear simple to use, there is a learning curve. The stress and timely responses required during a crisis do not lend themselves well to a slow learner.

And while most of us have media lists of key contacts, a phone number or e-mail might not be enough. In fact, if you're working with bloggers, you'll need to have the e-mail and web addresses of the bloggers and the blogs themselves. That means you have to know who the important bloggers are, which requires advanced research.

Basic informational and news materials should also be available in a format suitable for new media. Usually an electronic version of a press release, key bios and fact sheets about your university along with digital photography will suffice. These files should be loaded on your computer and ready to go as soon as updates are made.

As part of the planning process, you should develop a series of 'trigger points' for activation of crisis communications plan components. For example, when a crisis first breaks you'll likely deal with traditional media outlets, but if reports appear on a local blog, or if images appear on flickr or YouTube, you will know to inform your new media experts and initiate your new-media plan. But if you are already using new technology as a normal part of your operation, then be proactive and use it to your advantage by posting information that helps tell the story. If you have a blogger in place, you could post

the story on the blog. If you have good photography or video that illustrates the story, you could go to YouTube or flickr.

Because you never know when a crisis will occur or what type of crisis it might be, you should always have a back up response facility or location. If there is a fire in your campus police station, you won't be able to go there to handle inquiries or monitor blogs and web sites.

In addition to a backup for your web activities, you should also have a back-up for communications. Cell phones and PDA's won't help if the cell service is down or your battery is dead. Rather than going away, land lines are regaining popularity because they don't rely on cell towers or batteries to operate.

At The University of Florida we're often faced with tropical storms and hurricanes, but a natural disaster can strike anywhere at anytime. So we're able to respond quickly, we've created a series of standard internet web pages that we maintain in file servers on and off campus. That way if our main servers are down due to wind or rain, we can quickly move to a back-up server and have messages ready to post almost instantly.

At Virginia Tech, the university's homepage was literally shut down within two hours of the tragedy due to the volume of traffic to the site. In response, the university worked with the Virginia State Police to post key information on their site. By doing so, they spread the burden and were able to regain control of their site by early afternoon.

To help deal with the traffic, through early evening, Virginia Tech also went to an all-text homepage, removing most images and videos to reduce the bandwith required to handle the traffic.

In dealing with crisis situations in today's world, there are certain things you need to accept.

First, there is a good chance the media (especially the web-based media and bloggers) will know about any crises at the same time, or even before, you know. This greatly compresses the time you need to collect all the important information and make a decision about the response.

Be that as it may, it is still critically important to respond quickly, with accurate information. Despite what is happening around you, you should never respond without adequate information. If you are forced to respond sooner than you would like, you should feel comfortable with a message that informs people that data is still being collected and you will respond as soon as possible.

On the other hand, you should not delay reporting back once you have enough information to provide a general response.

Because of the rapid dissemination of information in today's connected world, you should also realize that bloggers are journalists too. Their posts, photos and videos will be available to anyone who is interested as events unfold and you must have a way to communicate with them to avoid misinformation.

Today's connected world also means that when and if a crisis emerges, it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You should staff accordingly.

And while we already take the internet and e-mail for granted, be prepared for the onslaught. Your e-mail system may be overwhelmed by the volume of requests and without proper planning, you'll be left without a way to communicate with your key audiences.

Summary

Planning is still key when dealing with new media and traditional media during crisis situations. While your existing crisis plan may be sufficient for the local television and news bureaus, be sure to prepare for e-mail, blog and YouTube journalists.

Practice also is important. Because a true crisis is not a regular occurrence, many of us do not know what to expect. By assembling your crisis team and walking through the response steps, you'll be better prepared should the inevitable happen. And update your plan often. YouTube and blogs were not even on the radar three years ago, yet they can be a significant source of information today.

About The Author

Joe Hice, APR, is associate vice president of marketing and public relations for The University of Florida. He is responsible for marketing, advertising, public relations and employee communications activities at the University and also directs the University's news bureau. Hice joined UF in June 2005 after a successful career with some of the nation's most respected and well-known recreational product brands including Harley-Davidson, Segway, Sea-Doo Watercraft and others. Prior to entering the corporate world, Hice was co-owner of his own public relations and marketing firm in Tampa and a vice president of the international public relations firm, Hill & Knowlton. He also was business editor of the Tampa Times Newspaper and a staff writer with Florida Trend Magazine and Tampa Bay Business Journal. Hice earned a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degree in Journalism & Communications from The University of Florida and an MBA from The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

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