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THE NEED FOR A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY IN CRISIS RESPONSE PLANNING

Social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook are having an impact on the way companies are approaching their crisis response planning. Dominic Cockram and Drew Gibson look at the reasons why and give advice on how companies should approach social media in their crisis response planning.

Specialists in crisis response and crisis communications often refer to a 'golden hour', akin to that in medicine, in which the quality of treatment received in the first hour after a trauma can have a huge impact on the likelihood of survival and long-term outcome.

In the business world, the first hour of response after a breaking crisis has the same impact. If a company's crisis response is swift and well executed, the long-term damage to reputation can be significantly reduced; it may even be enhanced.

The impact of social media on crisis response

The advent of social media, including networks such as Twitter and Facebook, has changed this golden hour into something closer to golden minutes. Pictures and commentary can sweep across the globe in seconds, only slowed down by the time it takes for someone to get out their phone, take a picture and post it to the internet. Crises can also be exacerbated or even precipitated by the snowball effect of uncountered social media comment.

Recent examples of social media's impact on breaking news

The impact of social media has been demonstrated many times over the last two years. An excellent example of the speed at which social media can break a story was the emergency landing of US Airways flight 1549 on the Hudson River. In less than four minutes, images of the aircraft in the water and comment were being sent around the world over Twitter, before the outcome of the emergency landing had been fully reported to the companies involved or even the Air Traffic Control Tower. It took CNN over fifteen minutes to break the story, a sure indication of how social media is shrinking that golden hour.

The need for a social media strategy is evident

With the short timescales involved, and the tendency for emotions to run high as a crisis unfolds, it's imperative that the use of social media channels has been considered carefully during crisis response planning based on a sound policy and strategy. When global speculation can begin in minutes, using a social media component in your response can be as fast but it requires preparation with staff trained in its use and aware of the environment and audiences.

The approach and attitude of every company to social media is different. Some are already actively engaging in social media whilst others have no social media presence at all. Social media communities can react poorly if they are only engaged actively when people start to speak ill of the company. Equally, organisations do not have to actively engage with social media sites on a regular basis to benefit from the information they provide in a crisis. There are many

aspects to consider and that's why a strategic approach based on a well thought through policy is so important.

Social media can be used actively and passively

If social media networks are already being used actively by a company, then it makes sense to keep those channels open and convey information and messages as deemed appropriate by a pre-existing crisis response plan in an appropriate form.

However, if a company does not participate actively, and doesn't want to change that policy, social media can still be used passively. Monitoring mentions of the company is very easy in Twitter and Google Alerts can also be used to track blog entries and news reports online. This information may then be used to inform messaging via their usual communication channels.

Of course, monitoring is also just as important for companies actively engaged, perhaps more so, but it should be remembered that different networks will appeal to different demographics, and the sheer amount of information can be overwhelming. As conversations take place in real time, it can be tempting to get sucked in; a cool head and concurrence with the strategy remains critical.

Social media doesn't change a crisis response

It should be remembered that the involvement of social media shouldn't change a company's crisis response; it simply alters the timescales involved because of the fast access of this channel. The essence of the message should be the same, the reasoning behind it the same, and all of the other channels such as traditional media still play a crucial role. Social media simply allows the response to be quicker, and can create a louder 'noise' around the event.

Social media shouldn't be feared. However, because it has the potential to influence the lifecycle of a crisis, it is essential to understand it in the context of your organisation and be proactive in deciding how and whether to engage with it through a coherent strategy, implementing any necessary training in support of your plan.

About the authors

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