

Using Social Media in an Emergency

The rapidly evolving world of digital communication and savvy journalists requires a new and expanded approach to communication. Social media plays an increasingly critical role in informing, engaging, and interacting with the public during a crisis.

That public, in turn, spends a great deal of time online discovering, analyzing, and engaging in sharing information and debate.

Interactive online media makes it easy for stakeholders and others to participate by contributing content, and creating and sharing experiences. In many instances, not all the sharing is positive or truthful.

Social media have created an information flow of far greater velocity and volatility than previously experienced. It has also emerged as today's most convenient and likely first news source.

Even mainstream media has turned to social media to generate content. In turn, much of the content on social media is a rehash of mainstream media stories and opinion.

As a result, social media requires communication professionals to mix time-honored experiences with real-time public scrutiny, and transform how they view, interact with, and disseminate information to affected communities.

Start with a Social Media Plan

An effective crisis communication plan must include a social media strategy. You can use social media as a systematic emergency management tool to communicate and engage with the public and affected individuals. However, applying the same crisis communication rules to social media as traditional media is outdated and ill advised.

If you are not already listening to your audiences on social media, start now. A crisis is overwhelming and attempts to gain a presence on social media platforms during a crisis are too late.

Developing relationships with stakeholders before a crisis occurs builds trust. Establish social media relationships early. If not, users will go to other sources and groups for information.

Best practices for using social media before a crisis

- Establish a presence by creating social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn.
- Make a commitment to using social media every day. Engage stakeholders by creating "conversations." This effort builds loyalty and a base of supporters in good and bad times.
- Determine how your organization will respond and who will be in charge of the response.

- Promote emergency preparedness and educate stakeholders about risks and response steps. Engaging audiences, anticipating crises, providing an avenue for tips, and focusing on the importance of preparedness may help prevent an incident.
- Join in on the conversation now and listen to what people are saying about your schools, district, personnel, etc.
- Social media tools can be analyzed and tested by day-to-day or frequent use during non-crisis situations.
- Establishes scanning and monitoring procedures to “listen” to stakeholders and community concerns.
- Collaborating with trustworthy and supportive sources can enhance the credibility of the school district and increase its reach.
- Frequent updates throughout the duration of the crisis, even if there is nothing new to report. Keep messages brief and pertinent. Users are not reading. They are scanning.
- Social media is often where stakeholders and the public go for information about the crisis and to give their own insight or opinion. Monitor social media networks (focus on the top three) to develop an understanding of stakeholder and community needs.
- Interact with users to address misinformation and establish the organization as a credible source. Responding to posts demonstrates your district cares what stakeholders think.

In a time when the news cycle is 24/7 and new information is measured in minutes, not hours, it’s important to act swiftly. The immediacy of social media is an important feature during a crisis.

Best practices for using social media during a crisis

- Waste no time in sharing information on all forms of media – internally and externally. Stay on message. Instead of creating a new message for social media, use existing key messages.

Best practices for using social media after a crisis

- Reassure the public by communicating ongoing response and recovery efforts. Demonstrate your commitment to transparency and let stakeholders know the school district intends to share the results of any after-crisis review and the corrective action.
- Re-engaging on social media platforms gives you an opportunity to regain the trust of stakeholders. Don’t stop communicating. If mistakes were made, acknowledge them and work to regain trust.

Use Social Media Networks

Twitter

Twitter is the social media platform that dominates the dissemination of news and information in a crisis. In times of crisis, the ability to rapidly share vital information is a key component of any crisis communication effort, and one of the quickest ways to calm stakeholders. Making crisis communication Twitter-friendly is essential.

Benefits of using Twitter in a crisis

- Follow anyone who comments during a crisis. Target influential online

stakeholders and encourage them to retweet messages.

- Be proactive. Quickly respond to fill the information void with facts about the incident, what you're doing to respond to the crisis. The more proactive, the better to stave off the negative wave of publicity or likely blame game.
- Think before tweeting. Simply firing off a quick response is dangerous. Consider taking harsh critics off line as soon as possible.
- Establish #hashtags about the incident. This allows you to group relevant information for ease of following, finding, and sharing. It also organizes communication and eases monitoring.
- Use the sign-off "Please RT" to increase spreading the message.

How to use Twitter During a Crisis

Use hashtags as a way for public to track information.

Direct public/media to website if applicable. URL should be shortened.



Retweet relevant information others provide.

@ symbol is simply the address of the entity you are retweeting.



Facebook

Facebook is a valuable tool that can improve the overall image of the organization experiencing the crisis. According to a University of Missouri School of Journalism Study in 2013:

- Facebook posts were more effective in improving perceptions and downplaying the severity of the crisis.
- Personal posts written in casual “narrative” style were more effective than talking points.

Benefits of using Facebook in a crisis

- Post status updates of the known facts about the incident and the school or district response.
- Monitor Facebook page throughout the crisis. Provide accurate responses to correct misinformation, etc. However, consider taking individuals’ problems, complaints, or rants offline using Facebook Messenger or email the person to resolve or respond.
- Maintaining interaction with stakeholders during and after a crisis sustains your page’s relevance, importance, and appeal.

YouTube

YouTube is the most popular video-sharing website, and it’s the fastest way to upload and share videos of up to 10 minutes duration. Most stakeholders consume media online now rather than through television, so using YouTube is simply delivering the message through a new channel.

Benefits of using YouTube in a crisis

- YouTube gives you a visual medium when your school or district needs to make a statement about an ongoing situation or critical updates.
- Video clips remain online and can be embedded on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, your website, and other online channels to help spread the message.
- Options are available to moderate comments to limit public input.

Listening Strategies

In social media monitoring during a crisis, look for signs, warnings, and patterns that may include one or more of the following:

- Frequency and intensity of conversations
- Sentiment or tone of posts and patterns
- Key fans or critics, frequency of their posts, and what their key message is
- Incorrect information, misquotations, and slander
- A pattern of comments that uncovers an organizational blind spot or a “ball that has been dropped”
- Legitimate request for information on a crisis
- Negative incidents that could bubble up into a crisis
- Breaking news concerning the organization or crisis, especially from influential non-mainstream media

Blogging During a Crisis

Blogs are effective tools for communicating during a crisis. They have several advantages over traditional media or press releases. Consider:

- Blogging is immediate. It allows an organization to respond very quickly to evolving public concerns and to correct misrepresentations in the media.
- Video and photo capabilities of blogs allow for near real-time coverage of how an organization is working to resolve the crisis.
- Blogging can put a human face on the school district because of its open and candid approach to sharing information.
- The public can comment and ask questions directly on the blog, creating an excellent forum to dispel rumors and clarify an organization's message.

Consider creating a "stealth blog" to launch quickly if a crisis arises. As part of the crisis communication planning stage, team members can use the list of weaknesses and vulnerabilities to build "lockbox blogs" with messages tailored to address all potential crises.

As part of the pre-crisis media strategy, it's smart to establish relationships with prominent industry and local bloggers, not just print and broadcast journalists. These "blogging allies" could be a powerful source of grassroots, word-of-mouth press to combat negative reports in the mainstream media.

Source: Steve Rubel, Micro Persuasion Blog

Final Thoughts on Social Media

Social media has fundamentally altered the communication landscape. Maintaining a robust crisis management strategy demands completely integrating social media into your district's Crisis Communication Plan.

While social media gives you a whole new set of challenges and opportunities, the fundamentals of crisis communication don't change.

Managing any crisis successfully is less about saying the right things and more about doing the right things.

Patterns of Media Response to a Crisis: The First 72 Hours

10 – 12 hours

- Reporters hear police radios and are often the first on the scene of a critical incident.
- Reporters will grab anyone willing to talk.
- Media tries to answer, “*What happened?*”
- Results are incomplete and conflicting stories will emerge.
- Media can interfere with police and rescuers responding to the scene.

12 – 24 hours

- Media tries to answer, “*Who?*”
- Authorities always try to notify the families of the victims before this information is released to the media.
- This effort usually causes conflict with the media’s doing whatever is necessary to find out everything about the victims.

24 – 36 hours

- Media tends to focus on, “*Why?*”
- Natural reaction in the aftermath is to look for blame.
- Unfortunately, people have their own ideas on this, whether they have the facts or not.
- Facts aren’t always corroborated.
- Victim confusion often leads to stories that are sensational, but the critical incident may not have happened as they initially recall.

36 – 72 hours

- Media begins more indepth analysis with, “*What happened?*” and “*Why?*”
- A new “spin” may be put on the initial stories.
- These spin-off stories take on lives of their own.
- Media may question the efforts of law enforcement and first responders.
- Funeral arrangements and memorials occur during this time frame, offering a the crisis team a chance to regroup and recharge.

Source: Marlene Young, National Organization for Victim Assistance and Rick J. Kaufman, APR, Crisis Management Consultant

Media Questions and Focus

News media cycles of yesterday are gone, replaced by the Internet, which provides media outlets with the ability to publish and broadcast around the clock. News cycles are now measured in minutes, not hours.

Most people get their news on social media sites than in mainstream media. Citizen journalists – consumer-generated media – with their blogs, tweets, posts, and smartphone videos have surpassed traditional media in near real-time delivery.

What were once news cycles is now a 4-stage news curve. These stages help to understand how news stories are shaped in a crisis.

Stage 1: Fact-finding

The nature of the media's initial coverage is to report immediately with little or no background or context of the crisis. While most journalists are responsible enough to offer disclaimers that initial reporting may be based on unsubstantiated information, it will not prevent them from reporting rumors. Initial questions will likely be:

- What happened? (Focus will be on facts or allegations.)
- How much damage was sustained? (or money was involved?)
- Who was involved? (Puts a face or name with the incident when media can report victims, perpetrators, and others involved.)
- What is your school district doing to help? (In other words, is a credible response underway?)

Stage 2: Information Dissemination

In this stage, more information is added and the focus is on what's behind the basic facts. The spotlight shifts to the speed of the organization's response, victim's stories, has something similar happened before, etc.

- What was the cause of the accident or incident? (Every conceivable cause is explored and dissected.)
- Is this a pattern? (Has the incident occurred before? Is it likely to occur in the future?)
- Who will pay? Who is responsible?
- What is the potential damage or impact? (This question implies organizational reputation. Some see it as the beginning of finger-pointing to determine who's to blame.)
- What are the future plans?

Stage 3: Spotlight Becomes a Floodlight

This is often considered the analytical stage, where the finger-pointing becomes the blame game.

- Why did this happen? What does it mean?
- What are the long-term implications?
- What is the organization doing so this doesn't happen again?

Stage 4: Lights Are Dimming

The crisis is over. Organizational debriefing occurs to prepare for the following questions:

- What was learned? What worked and what didn't?
- What needs improvement?

NSPRA Tip

Remember, you're not talking to the media; you're talking to the public.

Final Thoughts on the Media in a Crisis

- If something bad happens in a school or district, the news media is almost sure to find out about it — through a phone call, a text, or social media post from a student, a staff member, or a parent, or by listening to police radio transmissions. Don't be surprised to receive a call to comment on an issue believed to be "secret" or internal.
- Frequently an adversarial relationship exists between the news media and school administrators because reporters believe administrators will only talk about "good" things, and will try to hide "bad" things — which is generally true.
- School principals should be prepared to come under news media scrutiny. As public officials, they must be prepared for media coverage, not all of which will flatter the school or the principal. School public relations professionals can provide training on how best to communicate with the media.
- Understand that different media have different agendas and compete among themselves and the new world of social media. The nature of this competition will play a part in how they conduct themselves at a news gathering.
- The news media has a right to all student "directory information," within the meaning of the term under federal law, unless the parent has requested that this information be withheld. This includes a picture in a school yearbook.
- Learn or seek legal advice on what may be withheld and what must be released. Don't refuse to release something or stall its release if required to release it in the long run. Doing so only strengthens adversarial relationships with the media.
- Avoid educational jargon. If you must use it, explain what it means.
- Don't slight the broadcast media in favor of print media or vice versa, although at times, one may be more valuable to you than the other.
- Don't stereotype reporters — unless you welcome the same treatment of educators. Judge reporters as individuals according to the accuracy and fairness of their stories.
- If a reporter has done what you consider to be a good job, make it a point to let him or her know that.

NSPRA Tip

Since crises rarely unfold in textbook fashion, take time to brainstorm the "what if" scenarios that could occur.

What if phone lines are jammed? What if roads are blocked? How do you get buses to the school for evacuation? What if key members of the leadership team are unavailable or unable to respond?