

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Whether it is a terrorist attack, political corruption, cybersecurity breach or natural disaster, the government is no stranger to crisis and the tricky communications that come along with them. Federal and local government organizations are held to an even higher standard of ethics and transparency, given their mission and citizen-driven purpose.

Despite the abundance of valuable guidelines for crisis communications, even the best public relations pros often come up short. Crisis situations are highly emotional, move much faster than desired and are loaded with unpredictability.

The pieces rarely fall into place to capture the 1980's Tylenol textbook response that we all studied closely in college. In the famed case, Johnson & Johnson acted immediately with full transparency to alert customers across the nation when it was discovered that some Tylenol bottles had been tampered with and poisoned. Due to the company's ethics, open communications, and determination to put public safety first, Johnson & Johnson gained more credibility and trust with their customers than they enjoyed before.

The digital age and ever-growing presence of social media have introduced a modern-day newsroom that operates in a minute-to-minute environment, where it's often more important to be first than it is to be accurate. Had Johnson & Johnson experienced this crisis today, the company would have likely experienced significantly more problems. The news would have traveled much faster and the traditionally PR-shy company would not have likely gotten its act together ahead of public discovery. Social media videos of tampered Tylenol bottles would have gone viral, rumors would have spread and it would have been much harder for Johnson & Johnson to make a comeback.

Social Media and the Rise of Unqualified Thought Leaders

The modern communications environment leaves public relations professionals in a much more precarious position when a crisis breaks. One of the biggest game-changers has been the introduction of citizen journalism. Unlike the ethics that guide traditional journalism, social media is often driven by what gets the most attention – whether it's true or not.

In looking through the lenses of crisis communications, it's important to note that social media platforms tend to be extremely self-righteous and haughty environments. This type of banter can throw even the best communications practitioners off kilter, but it is important to understand the context and act accordingly. This is largely driven by who the naysayers are and their influence, whether there is truth behind their message, and whether a groundswell is building.

Michigan Governor Drinks Flint Water

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is one of the best examples in the recent history of terrible crisis communications. Government leaders withheld information on the water toxicity for nearly five months

before making it public, and even then did not disclose the full urgency and danger. Deception – particularly when it comes to public health – is the fastest route to permanently ruining credibility.

While surely the traditional press would have covered this issue extensively before the digital age, citizen journalism and the social media platforms available today increased this crisis by tenfold. Governor Rick Snyder, in attempt to assure the public that the water situation was improving, drank filtered water with local residents and posted on Twitter that he will do so for the next 30 days. This effort was not perceived well by the citizens, where calls for imprisonment and his resignation were the tamest responses. This was followed by demands to see his grandchildren drink the water, pictures of bathtubs filled with corroded water and much more.

Authenticity Rules

Today's world of communications offers instant access and limitless ways to express yourself as an average citizen. Honesty, ethics, compassion and open communications has never been more important, particularly in government where the sole mission is to serve its citizens.

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