THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A CRISIS

In today's ever-changing world of digital communications, an organization or government entity can lose control of a crisis faster and easier than ever before. News coverage is no longer limited to the traditional media of newspapers, radio and television. One citizen with a smartphone can broadcast your emerging crisis to the world – but that also means you can use the same communication platforms to get your message out quickly.

In 2015, online search engines surpassed traditional media as the most-trustworthy source of general news and information. As a source of business news, online search engines are just as highly regarded as television, and both outrank newspapers as the public's preferred first source of breaking news. Online search is used almost twice as often to confirm and validate news as are television and newspapers.

Friends and family are considered the most trustworthy authors of information on social networking and content sharing websites, which places them 36 percent more trustworthy than journalists and 80 percent more trustworthy than elected officials.

Citizen journalists can reach thousands of others in a matter of minutes, with an unfettered ability to share facts, speculation and unconfirmed rumors about your crisis across social media. Delay your response and you will likely lose control of the crisis. Today's speedy sharing of information requires a greater focus on preparation, listening, and then quick activation of your response.

MONITORING THE CONVERSATION

Cities should integrate a digital layer into their crisis communications plans, including designation of specific staff members to monitor the online landscape and to draft and publish suitable responses for social and digital media channels. In the midst of the crisis, designated staff should also monitor citizen comments and respond with approved language, as deemed necessary.

Once your crisis breaks, identify keywords and hashtags that the public is using in online commentary. Then closely monitor the use of those keywords and hashtags to spot new conversations before they can spread and add fuel to the misinformation fire. Free and low-priced services such as Google Alerts and Mention provide real-time alerts when your selected keywords are used across several online and social media channels. More costly services, like Social Studio, Brandwatch and Crimson Hexagon, provide a greater volume of mentions, along with additional valuable tools like sentiment analysis, influential authors, share of voice and key trends over time.

FIRST STEPS ON SOCIAL

Your city's crisis communications plan should include the use of social media for message distribution. Take action by quickly publishing an initial update message to your city's social media accounts. The message does not have to provide detailed information; it can simply include a brief acknowledgment that "it happened" or state that "we are investigating the matter." The important thing is that this allows you to be seen as quickly responding to the crisis. As the crisis emerges and new information is identified, take a proactive leadership approach by owning the issue and sharing updates, thereby getting ahead of speculation and misinformation.

THE HUB AND SPOKE MODEL

Where should you distribute your messaging when everything is on the line and you don't have a second to spare?

Interested stakeholders may check one of several social and online media channels for the most up-to-date information on the crisis. When in a crisis, limit the number of places that people need to look for the latest information.

Follow the Hub and Spoke Model, where a hub – like an easily accessible page on your city's website – is used as a central repository for the latest updates and information. Use all your other communication channels, including social media outlets, blogs, forums and directories, as spokes that point to your central hub of information. Any time you publish a new update to social media, include language that advises people to visit the hub for the latest information.

Emotions will run high during a crisis. Be sure your responses deliver a strong message and are not argumentative. The words contained in any response should be authoritative, yet calming.

Social media offers a platform that allows people to say whatever they wish. Avoid deleting any negative comments that appear on your social media sites, as that could further inflame emotions during a crisis. Deal with the facts. Don't attempt to mislead the public. Communicate early and often. Remember that your social media interaction may be seen by hundreds or thousands of people, so think, "How would others perceive our city if they read this interaction?"