

Crisis Communications

How Businesses Respond in the Wake of Tragedy

Sarah Blow

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Colleen McLaughlin, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

John Frichtel, MBA
Committee Member

Clark Greer, Ph.D.
Committee Member

David Schweitzer, Ph.D.
Assistant Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Crisis communication is an ever-evolving form of communication that is integral to a business's success. When tragedy strikes, businesses must have a thorough plan of response that manages the situation and protects their brand. This paper discusses the definition of crisis communication, its history, and how modern trends like social media, have revolutionized it. This study is important because it influences a business's public perception, and sustainability. Thorough knowledge of crisis communication is critical to a business student's education and will prepare them for working in fast-paced communication and business environments. An analysis of this topic should yield an understanding of crisis communication and how it can be best applied in crisis situations.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

HOW BUSINESSES RESPOND IN THE WAKE OF TRAGEDY

Introduction

As the ocean water began to blacken, the American public knew it was witnessing tragedy. It was 2010, and BP had just experienced one of the biggest rig failures of the century (Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2013). In the weeks to come, communities, environmental groups, activists, and reserves would scrutinize BP and many others for their involvement in the oil spill (Starbird, 2015). News channels ran clips on repeat of the black ocean water crashing upon the beach shore, leaving behind streaks of dark oil and the animals it had killed. Many conversations and debates centered around the same question: who was responsible? In the years to follow, communications and public relations specialists studied the cause and impact of the spill.

How did businesses respond? Many seized this opportunity and mobilized their crisis communication strategies. Brands like Tide and Dawn responded to the tragedy with marketing campaigns centered on helping the wildlife that was hurt the most (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2013). This innovative form of marketing resonated well with the public and solidified the corporate perspective that crisis communication is an asset. The BP oil spill was a transitional event in the world of crisis communication; it taught companies that crisis communication plans were not optional and that they can transform the outcome of a crisis (Anderson, 2013). While developing a crisis communication plan is no easy task, understanding its history and current trends is a critical first step in the process. This paper provides a historical analysis of crisis communications and the best

practices for businesses moving forward. This paper also gives an overview of crisis communication and how events throughout history have shaped its development and application.

What is Crisis Communication?

Edward Burkhardt, the CEO of Rail World Inc. said that, just because one communicates during a crisis, does not mean one necessarily make the situation better (Coombs, 2015). Burkhardt learned this the hard way after his company's subsidiary, Canadian Pacific Railway, experienced a lethal crude oil locomotive crash that resulted in 42 deaths and millions of dollars' worth of fire damage. The way Burkhardt and Rail World Inc. communicated to the public after the locomotive crash made the situation worse (Coombs, 2015). They soon realized that crisis communication is a strategic and complicated process that cannot be entered blindly. While the field of study is still relatively new, much can be learned from defining and analyzing theories and historic examples of crisis communication.

Strategies in Crisis Communication

As crisis communication continues to develop, so do the theories used to explain it and the strategies companies utilize. Coombs (2018) suggests three basic categories, the first of which is instructing information. Coombs says that a unique set of stakeholders are created during a crisis. These stakeholders are not the people who hold stock in the company, rather they are the victims who can be, or have been, negatively affected by the crisis. Properly instructing information prevents stakeholders from becoming victims of the threat by warning them to evacuate or to avoid a specific product (Coombs, 2018). An

example of this is in 1992 when Tylenol recalled all its bottles and publicly announced the potential danger of their products to the public. The goal was to create public safety and prevent the spread of any more harm. Tylenol's recall ended up helping the company both financially and in brand perception because the public appreciated the company placing the safety of the general public before its own financial gain.

The second response strategy that businesses can utilize is adjusting information. Coombs (2018) says that this step involves adjusting information to support stakeholders in their psychological processing of a crisis. This support can involve showing sympathy over the event that occurred, providing professional counseling, taking corrective action or discussing the crisis with the stakeholders which reduces the anxiety and frustration caused by the initial crisis. By giving more information to stakeholders, the company involved in the crisis reduces the likelihood of anger and anxiety over the unknown, and ushers in a process of corrective action (Coombs, 2018). Corrective action assists stakeholders in comprehending how the organization will prevent a similar crisis from occurring in the future.

History has shown there is a positive relationship between the more a business communicates with the public and the more the public trusts that the business is working to correct the crisis. Communicating sympathy and responsibility over the events will also reduce the magnitude of the crisis and its long-term effects. The last strategy Coombs (2018) highlights is reputation repair, which he sorts into four groups: denial, reducing offensiveness, bolstering and redress. While they each have different approaches to reputation repair, their overarching goals are to reduce the negative effects

a crisis has on the organization's reputation and the impact on related assets (Coombs, 2018). Denial is when an organization states that it was not involved in a crisis and attempts to establish no responsibility for the event. This tactic can be legitimately used if an organization is being used falsely as a scapegoat or is mistaken with another similar organization that is at fault. Coombs (2018) warns that organizations should use this tactic carefully, as there can be criminal repercussions for publicly denying involvement in an event that the organization was in fact responsible for.

Next, reducing offensiveness can be utilized by organizations who want to acknowledge that they have some connection to the event, but that the circumstance could not be prevented, or the crisis is less serious than the public perceives. An example of this is when one of Tesla's first semi-autonomous vehicles crashed while in auto-pilot mode, killing the driver (Yadron & Tynan, 2016). While the public was outraged by the incident, Tesla stated that they were not liable since the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and that car crashes occur frequently (Yadron & Tynan, 2016). This is an example of the circumstance and severity model that organizations utilizing the reducing offensiveness tactic employ.

A Comprehensive Definition of Crisis Communication

While the importance of crisis communication is widely agreed upon, the definition is not. Coombs (2018) would agree, however, that crisis communication refers to communications reserved for serious events that require careful attention from management. Often, businesses have a determined contingency plan that is put into place when a tragedy strikes. This initiates a form of communication that is intended to

communicate the message of the company to the public in a way that controls the story, but still admits the truth of the situation. Usually crisis communication is used in situations where there are social, political or natural disasters. Heath and O'Hair (2015) discuss the rapid growth of crisis communication. They add to crisis communication's definition that a crisis is frequently seen in the academic writings to be a perception of events rather than the events themselves; what determines whether something is a crisis differs from person to person and the overarching perception of a crisis can ultimately affect the outcome of the events that occurred (Heath & O'Hair, 2015).

This point complicates the definition of crisis communication. If what Heath and O'Hair (2015) suggest is correct, it is impossible to settle on a single definition of crisis communication, because the crisis is perceived differently by each person involved. In other words, does a situation constitute crisis communication if it is perceived by only one person as a crisis? What about two people? Heath and O'Hair's (2015) theory complicates the definition of crisis communication.

In contrast, Coombs and Holladay (2010) asserts that a crisis occurs when someone, most notably stakeholders, perceives an event that was not predictable as a threat to important assets. This crisis may be a health, safety, environmental, or economic issue and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes. This definition is more workable with the macro-level crises businesses experience. Though some people may not perceive an event as a crisis for an organization, due to their situational presuppositions, the large scale economic, political and social impact the event has on the organization defines it as crisis (Coombs &

Holladay, 2010). While Coombs and Holladay do agree with Health and O’Hair (2015) that a crisis is perceptual, he goes a step further in suggesting that it is the perception of the stakeholder that determines whether the event is, in fact, a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). While certain people in the public may not consider an event a crisis, if it affects the stakeholders in a noteworthy manner, then it is a crisis. The communication process and channels are then selected by evaluating the event and its impact. While it is clear scholars and organizations will never fully agree on the parameters of a crisis, applying Coombs and Holladay’s theory of perceptual stakeholder impact provides an inclusive and solid baseline, while allowing us to move forward in the discussion.

Proactive vs. Reactive Crisis Communication

There are two categories of crisis communication: proactive and reactive. Proactive communication is when a company responds to a situation before the media does so that they can better control the story. Reactive communication happens when a company waits to address an event or denies their involvement in it. While proactive communication is far superior in its results and helps a brand’s long-term image, many companies still respond in reactive ways. Wan and Pfau (2017) suggest that proactive strategies have recently received more attention in the world of crisis communications through their study of inoculation, bolstering and other combined approaches with crisis communications. Wan and Pfau (2017) say that a trend in academia is developing towards the persuasion that a proactive strategy, one focusing on preventing any crises from happening from the beginning instead of waiting till a crisis occurs to respond, is the optimal approach to crisis communication.

If a business knows that a certain kind of liability exists in their industry, they should proactively communicate to their customer base their strategies, fail safes and crisis plan. Wan and Pfau (2017) go on to suggest that there are two elements of proactive strategies that one can observe: issue management and reputation management. Issue management focuses on proactively identifying and researching potential problems and then developing appropriate strategies to combat them. Reputation management builds from issue management but stresses the importance of building relationships and good will with the public that the company can, in a sense, cash in when a crisis occurs (Wan & Pfau, 2017). Furthermore, companies can vary in the involvement they have with tragedies. These are categorized as first level, second level and third level involvement.

Levels of Involvement in Crisis Situations

There are different levels that businesses can exist in when a crisis occurs, The first level is direct involvement, where the company either caused or was heavily involved with the tragedy (Grunig & Disbrow, 1977). In the case of the BP oil spill, this would be BP itself. This level has the greatest impact on the company and can affect public perception of the brand and their products.

The second level is companies who were related to the tragedy, but do not hold responsibility; those who are in the same industry, or whose brand is similar are often in this category. Many oil companies that were not involved in BP's spill still felt the pushback and negative consequences of the tragedy because they were in the same industry. Companies who exist in the same industry as another company which is experiencing a crisis should not ignore the situation (Grunig & Disbrow, 1977). Staying

silent, even though they are not directly involved, can leave the public believing that they are also hiding something, or condone the actions of the business responsible.

Lastly, the third level contains businesses who are not involved or associated, but rather take the opportunity to boost their own personal brand through responding to the tragedy (Grunig & Disbrow, 1977). Companies like Tide and Dawn fall into this category. While they did not need to respond to the oil spill, they leveraged the opportunity to build marketing campaigns that boosted their market share and brand equity. These responses can be dangerous, however, and must be done with taste and skill. If Tide and Dawn had read the public's perception of the spill incorrectly and their response was of ill-taste, the companies would have risked the perception of their company in a situation when they could have just been quiet. To understand the intricacies of how to respond in crisis situations, one should study the history of crisis communication and its development.

The History and Development of Crisis Communication

Early 1900s

While it is hard to define the exact moment when crisis communication began, many scholars trace it back to the early 1900s (Cutlip, 2009). The specific example many people look to is the Atlantic City train crash of 1906 that killed 53 people. The railroad service hired Ivy Lee, who created a public relations strategy to manage the crisis. After convincing the railroad company to be honest with the public about what happened, Lee wrote what has been called the first press release. His strategy of honesty and responding quickly created a model for crisis communication response (Cutlip, 2009). Edward

Bernays also had a huge influence on early crisis response and public relation. Bernays was more of an academic and contributed many writings and theories about crisis communication. In the 1920s, he published the first public relations textbook, which focused on how organizations could have stakeholders see scenarios from their perspective (Cutlip, 2009).

Late 1900s

In 1982, Johnson and Johnson experienced one of the biggest crises of the century. Packages of Tylenol medication were tampered with in store to include lethal levels of cyanide (Dowdell, Govindaraj, & Jain, 1992). Seven people died after consuming the pills and the company took a massive hit. In response, Johnson and Johnson were honest with the public and sacrificed 31 million recalled bottles to ensure that no one else was hurt. The public saw that Johnson and Johnson were more concerned with the consumers than their own bottom line; when Tylenol was relaunched with tamper-proof caps two months later, many of the company's customers returned (Dowdell et al., 1992). While Johnson and Johnson responded well to tragedy, other companies have not been as lucky.

The most notable negative benchmark is Exxon's response in the Valdez oil spills of 1989 (Wiens, 2003). Not only was the company liable, the CEO, Lawrence Rawl, was a distant leader who took weeks to visit the site of the spill and never recognized the severity of the event. Textbooks use his response as an example of what not to do in the face of crisis (Wiens, 2003). In 1992, the basis for *Liebeck v. McDonald's Restaurant* occurred when 79-year-old plaintiff Stella Liebeck was hospitalized for eight days with

third degree burns after spilling hot coffee from McDonald's on her lap (Forell, 2011). After losing the trial, McDonald's claimed that the lawsuit verdict was a fluke and was the result of poor communication and an inexperienced PR representative.

Lastly, the 1990s closed-out with the Firestone and Ford tire controversy that was associated with 271 fatalities and over 800 injuries, domestically (Daws, 2003). Firestone cited inflation pressure, low tire adhesion, vehicle weight and tire design as contributing causes for the mass of faulty tires that came from their Decatur, IL factory. The crisis led to the end of a 100-year partnership between Ford and Firestone, one of the longest in history (Daws, 2003). Communications specialists have noted Firestone's poor response to the crisis as a contributing factor for the split in their partnership. If Firestone had owned up to the poorly produced tires early on and refrained from blaming part of the failure on Ford's misadvised tire PSI suggestions, then they could have maintained the relationship and lost less market share (Daws 2003).

The Internet's Introduction

One of the first examples of the internet acting as a facilitator in a crisis communication scenario occurred in 1994 with the company Intel (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). The company had to replace thousands of chips after a math professor found a critical malfunction in their product. The professor shared his discoveries with other math specialists on an online forum, which sparked Intel to recall their product (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). While the crisis was not the most significant of the later 1990s, it marked an important point in crisis communication studies due to the new development of the internet and its effect on the event. This would, in a way, foreshadow

the influence social media would soon have on organizational crises and as a magnifier for response in crisis situations.

The 2000s

As crisis communication continued to develop, a shift occurred in the 2000s. In March 2000, a Phillips Petroleum Company facility experienced a petroleum explosion (Goldberg, 2017). When the newspapers covered the story, they reported on the explosion that happened that day and two others that Phillips Petroleum Company was involved in, one from 1989 that killed 23 people and one from 1999 that killed two people and injured four others (Goldberg, 2017). The company's public relations team had to respond to not one, but three crises. In analyzing the event, Coombs (2015) writes that the situation facing Phillips Petroleum Company in March 2000 was not unique. News reports about a current crisis often include reminders of past crises (Coombs, 2015). During this time, reports of crises in the news and online began to cite the history a company had of similar events. Companies had to adjust their crisis communication strategies to navigate this new practice.

In 2009, the Dominos' YouTube crisis showed the public how video platforms like YouTube can ignite a flame of crisis and concern (Clifford, 2009). A fake video of a Dominos employee tampering with food spread like wildfire through the internet with over 250,000 views in 24 hours (Clifford, 2009). Dominos made a public statement against the video on the platform it was first posted on: YouTube. A year later in 2010, the BP oil spill, also referred to as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, flooded the Gulf of Mexico with toxic oil (Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & Atteveldt, 2012). The

U.S. government estimated that the spill caused more than 210 million gallons of oil to leak into the ocean. The oil spill had a detrimental effect on the climate and the company's brand equity. Schultz et al. (2012) attributes last minute changes in plans, poor observation of risk triggers, insufficient resources and poor training as factors in the magnitude of impact. After BP executives met with President Obama in June of 2010, the company set up a \$20 billion fund to settle claims and assist in gulf restoration (Schultz et al., 2012).

The same year, another significant event for crisis communication occurred in Germany. On the July 24th, 2010, a crowd disaster lead to lethal suffocation at the "Love Parade" electronic dance music festival that caused the death of 21 people and injured 500 (Connolly, 2010). It was the first year that the popular event had been held in a closed-off area. Some reports list 1.4 million people as attending the event. The event was poorly planned and the venue could not handle the mass of people who attended (Connolly, 2010). On April 18th, 2017, the State Supreme Court Dusseldorf reopened court proceedings for prosecuting at least 10 people with negligent homicide and mayhem who were involved in the planning of the event.

More recently in 2017, a video of United Express Flight 3411 created an uprising as it was broadcast over popular social media platforms (Goldstein, 2017). The clip depicts an airport official dragging and forcibly removing passenger David Dao from the plane to accommodate one of the airline's staff. The officials knocked the man unconscious in the tussle, as they dragged his body and blood covered face out of the plane. At first, United and its CEO, Oscar Munoz, defended the actions of the staff and

said they were justified. After two days of aggressive backlash by the public, Munoz issued a statement saying that they apologized for the incident and no one should ever be treated that way (Goldstein, 2017). Somewhat ironically, PRWeek had named Munoz The Communicator of the Year for 2017 only a few months before. United's long-term response included not using police support in involuntary bumping situations and \$500 vouchers to the passengers aboard United Express Flight 3411.

How Social Media Has Changed Crisis Communication

Social media use has increased in the past decade. While some social media platforms are more common than others, a study by the Pew Research Center found that over 72% of adults use at least one social networking site (Perrin, 2015). Researchers have also noted that the first place people go for news and cultural information is social media platforms. Gottfried and Shearer (2017) support this saying that 62% of adults look to their social media feeds for public information and news. As more people use social media, the amount of time they spend on each social media platform is also increasing.

Crisis communication has changed since social media first developed and will continue to change in the future. Through a study of communication in the age of social media, Hagen, Keller, Neely, Depaula, and Robert-Cooperman (2017) concluded that the ability of social media platforms to transmit information in a rapid and on demand way through links, direct clicks, news content, videos, and images has shifted the usage and lifestyle patterns of users. Social media communication is continually transforming as patterns emerge (Hagen et al., 2017). The immediacy of information sharing can be both a good thing and a bad thing in crisis communication scenarios. Social media allows

businesses to speak directly to the public about what is happening during a crisis or what their stance on an issue is. These platforms have functionally removed the need for press releases or press conferences. While these used to be the primary way that people retained information from a company, social media is transitioning into this position.

There are negatives, however, to the immediacy of information sharing. Not only does the public spread negative messages on social media about a company or situation, they can participate in something far more detrimental (Jensen, 2017). The production and sharing of false information on social media are major concerns for companies in a crisis. Incorrect information can cause confusion and perpetuate false narratives.

Companies now must fight against the rumors circulating on social media and the actual event that caused the crisis (Jensen, 2017). To best combat this, companies should share information in the early stages of crisis recovery so false information is not developed and can be checked against the official statements of the company.

Businesses and Social Media

An example of a company who leveraged social media in its crisis communications response was a mass data management company called Gitlab (Lomas, 2017). While few had heard of them, they help organizations like NASA, Sony and IBM run day-to-day tasks. When their system crashed for over 18 hours, their PR team leaped into action. Their main strategy: honesty and vigorous communication. They posted on social media what problem had occurred, had live updates, recognized their mistake and managed the flow of information well (Lomas, 2017). This was a first category and proactive response (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). The result was overwhelmingly

positive. While some were rightfully upset by the data crash, most of their followers acknowledged the fact that everyone makes mistakes, and that knowing what happened was important.

On the other hand, companies like Pepsi have been less fortunate in their use of social media. After tensions in race relations were high, Pepsi released a commercial depicting celebrity Kendall Jenner drinking a Pepsi and solving racial tensions (Crowe, 2010). Social media platforms like Twitter trended with user's tweets accusing the brand of thinking something as complicated as racism could be solved with a soft drink. Initially, Pepsi responded reactively on social media and was bombarded with negative Tweets and comments. Twitter's response supports scholars like Coombs' (2015) conclusion that reactive crisis communication strategies, particularly on social media, escalate tensions and increase negative social response.

Customer Communication and Feedback

Positive outcomes. While navigating social media platforms as a business is no easy task, utilizing social media has a plethora of advantages. Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) discuss the benefits of crisis communications in the context of social media for professional organizations saying, "Social media has changed the business setting for organisations and has provided both opportunities and challenges for them. On the positive side, social media brings various benefits to organisations" (p. 351). Roshan et al. (2016) recognize that there are positive benefits organizations can receive from social media, but they also understand how it can magnify risk. Roshan et al. (2016) continue, saying social media "has enabled organisations to have an active and engaged

relationship with their stakeholders, listen to them and respond to their requests” (p. 351). Social media also gives organizations immediate access to current data and feedback for product and service response made by those invested in the company, known as stakeholders. Roshan et al. (2016) close with the third advantage of social media saying “it has created a cost-efficient way of communication for organisations as stakeholders can see organisations’ replies to other stakeholders’ questions which can be their own questions” (p. 351).

While there are many benefits to social media as a whole, one of the key advantages for social media use in crisis situations is communication with key stakeholders and the immediacy of customer feedback. Roshan et al. (2016) also note that social media can be useful in a crisis because it allows stakeholders to share information quickly. If the organization releases information on social media that is helpful to the stakeholders, they can easily share the information through posts and re-shares, which effectively spreads the information of the company to other stakeholders, reporters and the general public.

Negatives outcomes. While businesses can garner many benefits from using social media, the platforms can also act as accelerators or triggers for crisis situations. Three contributions to this are the user’s ability to send and receive information rapidly, the production of false information and the anonymity of social media. With the rapid communication of information, a company’s statement on social media can go from being seen by 25 people to a million people in a few hours. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith

(2008) address this by saying that the Internet merely acts as an agent that increases the validity of crises in high level situations.

Social media also gives users the ability to build international relationships and interactions. This Internet connectivity is accelerating the news cycle as it becomes an additional channel for discussion of events that already occur in the real world (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, false information can also trigger backlash on social media platforms. Often the information that spreads the fastest is the most polarizing and lacks critical context for understanding. Lastly, social media platforms provide a level of protection; posting an angry comment takes less effort and is less confrontational than speaking with someone in person. The comfortability social media users feel creating negative online engagement increases the risk of using social media as an organization.

Harnessing Social Buzz

When a product has a substantial amount of conversation around it or when people share and suggest the product frequently with their friends, the product has a high rate of social buzz. While an organization cannot always control whether their brand is being discussed online, they can learn how to harness that social buzz and create positive conversation around their brand (Thies, Wessel & Benlain, 2014). One recent example is the company IHOP. The company's name is an acronym for the International House of Pancakes, but in 2018 they told the public they were changing the name to IHOb, otherwise known as the International House of burgers, to advertise their new burger lineup (Tobin, 2018). The internet immediately began buzzing with conversations over

the name change and whether it was permanent. Some believe the confusion had an adverse effect on the company's brand equity and name recognition, but after evaluating the campaign one can see how IHOP's temporary name change stirred up conversations about the company and created social buzz around it (Tobin, 2018). The mysteriousness of their name change (was it permanent or not) lead friends, family and coworkers to debate the topic. Controversy and mystery are two factors in social buzz that allow a company to increase their brand equity.

Crisis Communication Moving Forward

Understanding the history, development and trends of crisis communication over the years gives one a foundation for discussing crisis communication's future. While social media, technology and social influencers are continually evolving, organizations must work to create predictive crisis communication plans that account for possible future growth. As new industries develop, these plans should be adjusted to accommodate new inventions and dynamics. Jin and Pang (as cited in Coombs & Holladay, 2010) break down the future of crisis communications through the lenses of emotion and suggest how organizations and scholars should prepare for the new wave of crisis communication. They propose that, moving forward, organizations should study how emotions contribute to decision making before, during, and after crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Jin and Pang (as cited in Coombs and Holladay, 2010) write,

There remains a lack of a systematic and integrated approach to understanding how publics' emotional experience in crisis influence their crisis information processing and behavioral tendencies, which will

eventually determine the success or failure of any organization's crisis communication practice (p. 677).

Moving forward, organizations should focus on the importance of both a robust crisis communication plan and an understanding of how their actions affect the stakeholders of their organization.

Another interesting area of development is the integration of AI, VR, and AR into the communication processes. Some companies have utilized these new technologies in their crisis response strategies (Lauras & Comes, 2015). AI technology in particular can develop an organizations ability to quickly answer millions of specified questions in only minutes which increases information sharing and can reduce the anxiety of stakeholders in an organization. As AI continues to develop, crisis communication strategies should investigate best practices for utilizing and managing the new technology (Lauras & Comes, 2015).

The Future of Social Media and Crisis Communication

Social media has grown steadily over the last 20 years, and it is projected to continue in growth. The feeling of connectivity and belonging it creates cements social media as a long-term trend. Lee and Ma (2012) discuss social media's effect on gratification and attitude saying that one of the main characteristics of social media that contributes to content generation is UGC, or user generated content. UGC effectively transforms users from being passive observers to content activators that create and share news. As these individuals share their opinions with people who have similar interests

and views on the world, they build community and create relationships with people (Lee & Ma, 2012).

While it is impossible to predict the apps and social sites that will develop in the future, they will all have the common themes of social sharing, personal content creation and user connection. Apps like Vine, that died in the 2000s, have recently been revamped with the new name Tik Tok and more social sharing options. The revamp is an example of how, while new social media options are always developing, many of them will have the same common themes. If organizations integrate proper fail safes into their crisis communication plans and address the core values of each app, they will be prepared for any response. New apps or ways of communicating on each social platform are always developing, but a synergistic response plan will assist in applying the core principles of crisis response.

Influencers and Brand Partnerships

As organizations look to the future of crisis communication, they should also consider both the benefit and liability of brand partnerships with influencers. Influencer marketing has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry in the last few years. Smith, Kendall, Knighton and Wright (2018) argue that brand ambassadors are becoming a near necessity for businesses that want to stay socially relevant and increase consideration in younger demographics. The risk of utilizing brand ambassadors is that if the person who represents an organization is involved in a scandal, the entire organization is dragged down as well (Smith et al., 2018). The influencer's imaging being tied to the brand functions as a great asset when positive, and a crisis initiator when negative.

An example is when social influencers Jake Paul and Logan Paul uploaded an inappropriate video onto YouTube with content related to suicide. All their brand sponsors had to make statements against the video and ended their relationships with the influencers. Smith et al. (2018) suggest that organizations request high levels of transparency when working with social media influencers. Organizations should also proactively include a section in their crisis communication plan that addresses the relationship they have with each influencer and what to do if the influencer is involved in a scandal. This section will allow organizations to quickly respond to any crisis situation that the influencer creates or is involved in.

Best Practices for Crisis Communications

Moving from Crisis to Opportunity

While organizations can never truly control when a crisis will occur, they can control the way that they respond to it. As noted in the beginning of this paper, companies like Tide and Dawn responded to the oil spill in a way that leveraged it as an opportunity for their organizations. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger's (2019) writings on effective crisis communication sums up what many scholars have echoed over the years; a crisis can be managed and reduced if communication is clear and a plan is put in place immediately after the event occurs. Alpaslan, Green, and Mitroff (2009) add to this with lessons for organizations to adopt to best turn a crisis into an opportunity: determine your goals, develop true partnerships with other organizations, acknowledge stakeholders, understand the diversity of your audience, communicate with underrepresented groups during the crisis, listen, communicate early and look for the good. If an organization

skips a few of these core steps when they are responding to a crisis, the magnitude and longevity of the event will increase (Ulmer et al., 2019). Since the steps are all intertwined, it is critical that organizations integrate them into their crisis communication plan so they will not miss one of the steps during the fluster of responding to a crisis.

Ulmer et al. (2019) also note that an important consideration in responding to any crisis is discovering the cause of the crisis. When the start of the crisis is isolated, uncertainty around it is cleared up and the crisis team can begin responding to the event and preventing it from occurring again (Ulmer et al., 2019). Many organizations jump into their crisis response plan without taking a full diagnosis on what caused the crisis in the first place. If an organization is going to effectively respond to a crisis and draw some positives from it, then they must actively identify what specifically caused the crisis and work to address that. If they do not, the problem will continue to grow even while the organization is walking their crisis communications plan out.

For companies like BP, they failed to address one key element of Ulmer et al.'s (2019) writings: communicate with underrepresented groups. In response to the spill, BP focused on communicating with the press, their major stakeholders and the general public. In doing this, they failed to communicate openly with people who were truly affected by the spill: coastal locals, fishermen and natural reservists. This soon developed into another sub-crisis, as people were angry with BP for the disregard and lack of representation and transparency. If BP were to try again, they should incorporate all the elements Ulmer et al. (2019) suggest. This would reduce the chance of new crises

developing and give BP the opportunity to leverage their position in the crisis to create better outcomes for the organization and the public.

Conclusion

While the landscape of crisis communications is ever-changing, studying its history, present form and charting its future is extremely important. When companies respond to tragedies proactively and leverage tools like social media, they can optimize their responses to political, social and natural disasters. Communication speed is increasing. If businesses ignore this, they risk losing current consumers and failing to convert new consumers. If businesses can capture this speed, they can use it to their increase market share and brand equity. The difference in these two things is planning an intuitive and innovative crisis communication strategy, while building a team who can respond to such crises in stride. In analyzing the definition of crisis communications, its developmental history, academic writings around crisis communication, and how it will grow in the future, one gains an understanding of these core topics creates a comprehensive analysis of crisis communication, and how businesses have responded to crises throughout history. As previously noted, the study of this topic is not finished, and should continue to develop around new trends and events. Moving forward, scholars should track the trends of crisis communication and its impact on business success.

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