EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

It's Time for a Seat for Communications at the Crisis Planning Table

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BY SEAN FITZGERALD / NOVEMBER 7, 2019

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And leadership is increasingly working to establish an overarching crisis management strategy

and the operational processes, and also protocols for responding to and resolving a crisis event. It's important to establish those protocols from both an operational and reputational perspective.

In addition to disruptive physical events, myriad digital channels for conducting business and multiple connected organizational touchpoints have given rise to new digital threats, such as denial of service, ransomware attacks and data breaches.

Moreover, the speed of online information flow, fueled by artificial intelligence (AI), real-time streaming and sharing technology, has opened the arena of public scrutiny and opinion to anyone, including political commentators, consumer groups, social media influencers and hacktivists.

Today, in one minute, there 3.8 million Google searches; 4.5 million YouTube video views; 41.6 million app messages sent; 18.1 million mobile texts, 347,000 Instagram views and 87,500 tweets. With that volume and velocity, it is expected that the Internet will enter the fray during any crisis, often with little regard for facts, and in many cases with fabricated information. One fact illustrating this point is that the U.S. House Intelligence Committee held a hearing last June to study the "peril and promise of AI-based technology as a propaganda tool."

Effective and timely communication with stakeholders and the public has always been a vital element in managing an organization's reputation — especially during a crisis. Today's hyperdrive digital information and misinformation culture makes it more critical to have a finely tuned, mature communications expert in place before, during and after an event.

Crisis communications

To have a truly comprehensive crisis management plan today, it must incorporate crisis communications. While most organizations communicate during crises, much of it takes place during the event, without the benefit of a well-articulated strategy and communications protocols that determine roles, actions, audiences' messages and timing. The consequences are predictably poor — confusion, indecision, delays, sloppy execution and weak messaging. The outcomes are equally bad and include public frustration and mistrust; criticism by pundits and public leaders; and skewering by social media platforms and traditional media.

The business impact of botched crisis communications can be disastrous, with substantial financial, legal, operational and reputational impact, including loss of employee and shareholder confidence, threat of lawsuits, increased regulatory activity and erosion of brand equity. All of these can affect a company's bottom line along with its ability to recover from a crisis and build long-term resiliency.

The effectiveness of an organization's crisis communications function reflects the maturity of its overall approach to crisis preparedness. Unfortunately, a painful "maturing" is, at times, necessary to drive home the critical need to have communication professionals as an integral part of the crisis management team. It is important to clearly and completely define their roles, to and ensure that they are engaged at every step in the process planning, documentation, testing and the execution of crisis responses.

A major challenge to becoming a mature crisis-prepared organization is that crisis

communications is a complex, multi-layered and fluid discipline. Integrating communications into the crisis management function requires top-down commitment. The first step is for leadership to mandate a well-developed, strategic communications framework that defines and governs the communications function in crisis scenarios.

The framework organizes crisis communications functions, such as objectives, principles and policies, strategy development, notification requirements, tactical procedures and protocols, stakeholder relationship mapping, spokesperson guidelines and message and response development. It's good practice to outline the systems and technologies that will be used to manage notification and information dissemination, as well as public sentiment monitoring.

For multi-regional organizations, the crisis communications framework should also address crisis protocols and processes in regional offices that address the differences in risk profile for their region or specific market. This includes regulatory considerations, culture and values, public perceptions and how crises and issues are handled by the media.

Having a mature communications framework in place streamlines development of event-specific messaging, allowing your communicators to more effectively manage the narrative. It can also serve to establish your firm as a go-to, trusted source of information.

Pre-event, crisis management and incident response teams can use the framework to advise the communication team on technical matters that inform the specific communications plan. The communications team provides counsel to both the crisis management and incident response teams regarding message and media strategy, as well as timing and expected outcome of public and stakeholder communications. All teams collaborate on defining the internal personnel and external organizations and individuals to be notified under the event scenario, along with the message delivered to each group.

During an event, both groups advise communications about the response status, resolution progress and issues that emerge from respective stakeholder groups. They also review public statements and materials for accuracy and completeness. The communications team manages inbound inquiries resulting from public notification and media inquiries. The team updates notification and statement content dynamically to address evolving issues and information needs throughout the event and conduct ongoing monitoring of media and digital communications channels.

Post-event, the communication focus shifts to recovery and reputation management. The communications team works to inform stakeholders and the public about the steps taken to restore infrastructure and systems that were impacted. It also works to re-establish trust and create a long-term dialog about larger community concerns such as security, health and financial stability.

Self-awareness

Another important aspect of organizations' crisis preparedness maturity is knowing what it can and cannot handle internally. Few organizations have the bench strength to field a full-time crisis communications team, so the responsibility becomes one of many critical corporate communications duties. Further, even highly seasoned crisis management professionals can lack the experience to pull together a comprehensive and workable crisis communication framework.

This is particularly true when it comes to managing multiple localities, understanding how stakeholder communities form and behave in digital and social channels, and how to best use new communications technologies for disseminating information, and monitoring online conversations.

An organization is wise to partner with experts who have hands-on experience in both crisis management and crisis communications and can help build the framework, and provide guidance and tactical support during an event.

A holistic integration of strategic communications into crisis management planning and event response can help reduce risk, minimize negative reputational impact, drive best possible outcomes and sustain resiliency during recovery. Strong alignment between crisis management and communications allows stakeholders and the public to transparently observe what an organization is doing to respond to a crisis, which helps protect and rebuild trust.

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