

Digital Crisis Management

MEDIA UNIVERSITY EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

On November 5, 2015, Communications Council members were joined by three experienced panelists to discuss how organizations can plan, prepare, and respond to crises ranging from the everyday to the global emergency.

In 2011, the Nuclear Energy Institute became part of a large international crisis. As the world watched, a large earthquake and subsequent tsunami wiped out entire cities in Japan and led to an equipment failure that would cause three nuclear meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. While the event was thousands of miles away, NEI knew they had to respond to public concerns as quickly as possible.

Today, Scott Peterson, the Senior Vice President of Communications at NEI, speaks about the situation as a case study on the importance of crisis preparedness. While most associations won't face a communications crisis on the same scale as NEI's, they will face policy changes, industry blunders, and even internal feuds. Underlying all of these possibilities is the threat of public backlash. Peterson was joined by Dan Webber of Edelman and Jon Melzer of Weber Shandwick to speak with Comms Council members about the importance of having a digital strategy for crisis management.

In the words of panelist Dan Webber, any public-facing organization fears "the digital mob," the group of people who want to make an issue public or who want to sensationalize a problem. Although these groups might be small in the beginning, it seems easier than ever before to use digital networks to incite disagreement, fear, anger, or anxiety. The size of today's connected world can also make it feel more difficult to manage a digital response. So, how can associations and nonprofits prepare to confront a communications crisis? And if it happens, how should we respond?

Threat Assessment

Before you're in the weeds, there are simple things you can do to stay ahead of any potential crisis. The easiest is to monitor online media with free tools. With tools like Google Trends, Dan Webber says you can spot spikes in online activity and target where those spikes are coming from. He recommends Topsy for monitoring similar spikes on Twitter, and while not free, you could also try Quid, which uses language-processing to determine what is being said about an issue on news sites and in blog posts. If you notice a troubling change, you can then determine how widespread the problem is, where you should respond, and potentially prevent the trouble from escalating.

However, Webber cautions not to respond without preparedness. "Ashton Kutcher tweeting might not be worth a response," he says, but a powerful activist may be. Before responding, he recommends asking two questions: 1) What will be the impact to our organization or our membership? 2) Is the threat relevant to the rest of the industry? Don't assume that a vocal group represents a majority of

your audience. For example, one participant expressed concerns about responding to members who were unhappy with the association's goals. Panelists recommended that the dissatisfied members were likely a small but noisy force while anyone who disagreed with them likely remained silent. They recommended tailoring the response to the silent group rather than engaging - and possibly empowering - the angry group. Panelists stressed that responding at the wrong time or on the wrong platform could potentially bring more attention to a crisis. "Half the battle is making sure we all agree on what it is and when to go," Jon Melzer says.

Before a crisis occurs, he suggests conducting a threat assessment with your staff. Set up a time to discuss the types of potential threats, where they could surface, and possible responses. Ensure that everyone agrees on the actions to take before establishing a plan. To help your team go even further, Weber Shandwick has developed a crisis simulation software known as Firebell. It tests entire staffs' crisis preparedness.

Crisis Simulations

As one attendee said, in the digital realm, scenarios are fluid; they can change in an instant. His communications team once experienced a crisis while all of the association's leaders were inaccessible. He could see how staff-wide training might have made everyone feel prepared to respond even without leadership. All participants agreed that advance training would unearth some of the surprises you might encounter during an actual crisis, and at minimum, it would help staff members realize how unpredictable these crises can be. Planning is a way to establish "muscle memory" for your team, Webber says, so that they are not reacting to emotion or immediacy during an actual crisis.

If you don't have access to simulation software like Firebell, he recommends creating your own simulations. You could also try spending a few minutes at the start of a staff meeting with an activity, like walking through a case study and discussing how your team would respond if they were in a similar scenario. Most associations should aim for at least one annual training although larger organizations might consider quarterly trainings.

Sunny Day Development

In between trainings, there are everyday things you can do to maintain crisis preparedness. Peterson refers to this as "sunny day development." For example, stay active on your social media channels to foster relationships there, being especially active on Twitter. "We almost always see events happening on Twitter first, even from our members," Peterson says. As for other platforms, cover what you can, then try to build relationships with people or groups who occupy other digital spaces. Being active in these spaces will ensure that you're prepared if or when a crisis does occur. Webber stressed the importance of not waiting until a crisis to join social media. Instead, if you aren't present in a space when a crisis breaks out, try to leverage those allies who are already in that realm.

Also remember that in many scenarios the best digital media responders are different from the best traditional media responders. One member shared that his expert sounded great in a professional setting but on social media he was "slaughtered." Peterson says he's used the Edelman Trust Barometer to determine the right tone and type of person to use when addressing the public on social media. The barometer helped him realize that the CEO wouldn't be as trusted as someone lower in the

organization. As another example, Webber says to consider that the person with the most influence on YouTube is likely very different from the most influential writer at the New York Times. He recommends that you figure out who your online influencers are. Then, you can develop a strategy that works for digital media and another that works for traditional media.

Finally, when a crisis occurs, there are steps you can take to keep it contained. Peterson recommends setting up a “dark site.” Dark sites are pre-prepared websites that are devoted to crisis response. They can be updated and launched quickly. For example, a dark site can become the main homepage for an organization during a crisis, or it can be listed at an address that targets popular search terms. When done well, it can become one of the first resources that the public finds when they search for an issue. Because your website is likely to see a big spike in traffic during a crisis, Peterson also recommends working with your IT personnel early in the process. They can prepare your site for more traffic or take added measures to prevent a security breach.

Traditional Media Online

You should also be proactive in your response, by creating and releasing media products as soon as you can. Peterson says to focus on sharing the kind of perspectives that only your organization can provide. After Fukushima, NEI released infographics and gave tours of nuclear facilities to the media in order to explain the differences between Japanese and US nuclear operations. They also engaged radiation and health specialists to speak about the potential fallout concerns. Because NEI was quick to become one of the best resources on public concerns, the media came to them for assistance in building infographics. Peterson says their response was inspired by BP after Deepwater Horizon. They appreciated the way BP released videos of experts to try to address concerns before they became out of control.

Even if you don’t have access to traditional media, Webber says you can boost your organization’s positive messaging by adopting paid social pushes. He says it’s a great way to trend instantly and make sure your message is prominent. He adds that with paid pushes, you can microtarget your audience to efficiently reach the right groups. This type of targeting is often the goal of crisis management. “It’s so difficult to win [against a digital mob],” Webber says.

He compares digital strategy to driving in terrible traffic. No one honks their car horn for a job well done, but when you mess up, the horns will blare. As an organization, you have to be out there, driving well, for the undecided and the neutral groups. “Focus on the people you can sway,” he says. Just as importantly, Peterson adds, remember that the crisis will end.