

# Crisis Communication

SIX DEVELOPMENTS THAT HAVE REVOLUTIONIZED COMMUNICATION

by Lani Jordan

In an instant, your day can abruptly move from business-as-usual to the overwhelming stress of facing a crisis or major issue that leaves you fighting to preserve your company's or organization's reputation and possibly its very existence.

Today's complex and dynamic world of fast-paced, multi-sourced news may leave many leaders wondering not only how they'll respond should they find themselves in the spotlight, but the chances are of having their side of the story told. While the challenges are immense, successful crisis communication is a bit like playing the lottery: You may not win, but you certainly won't win, if you don't buy a ticket. In the case of crisis communication, that means being prepared to respond.

Preparation must start with a clear understanding of the environment in which you're operating, not only that of your



industry, but the world of communication, particularly the news media.

A few things have changed in recent years – and continue to change – such as how we get our information. This includes the vehicles, speed and scope of communication.

Many of us are touched by a dozen or more types of communication each day, ranging from phone conversations, meetings, and traditional news media to emails, texts, and a raft of social media tools. Add to that emerging platforms like messaging and video apps, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

## Six Media Developments

Here are six developments that have changed rapid communication and, in turn, communicating in a crisis:

- **Technology.** Information is now literally in the hands of most Americans. A January 2017 report from the Pew Research Center found that 77% of Americans now own a smartphone,

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more than double the 35% who had one in 2011. The greatest recent growth has been among adults over age 50 and those with lower income levels.

- **The citizen journalist.** Take a smartphone, add a couple of social media apps, and you've got an instant journalist. No college degree or internships required.

*Understand the changing world.  
Monitor how you're perceived by the mainstream media, social media, and your own closest stakeholders, including your employees, customers, and your community.*

This development has reshaped news gathering and distribution radically. Rather than stories reported by a traditional journalist educated to verify facts and events and to seek multiple sources and perspectives when reporting a story, the news now arrives via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and more. Each day seems to bring a new incident and, in turn, a crisis for a company, organization, or individual resulting from dramatic video or photos shot by an ordinary person.

The best-known recent example involved a passenger being removed forcibly from a United Airlines flight, setting off a chain of events that not only damaged that carrier's reputation but also brought the entire industry under scrutiny. The relatively new ability to livestream video via Facebook and other apps has only increased the challenge. Those on the scene can turn social media users into live witnesses to anything such as a political news conference, a brawl involving unhappy

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Spirit Airlines' passengers at a Florida airport or the horror of a shooting.

• **The never-ending news cycle.**

The days of predictable news gathering and distribution cycles are over. Traditionally, events occurred and – unless they were of a “break into current programming” importance – were reported over a period of hours. Stories typically appeared first either in the morning newspaper or as part of a regularly scheduled news broadcast. In the hours between, additional reporting on new facts or developments took place, and the story either earned a second day of life or faded away. Today journalists are under constant pressure to Tweet, post images on Facebook, shoot video, provide web updates, and more. As a result, being first too often outweighs the importance of being right.

• **Speed.** News virtually travels at the speed of light today. A great, albeit frivolous, example of speed involved the color of a dress. In February 2015, a woman posted a photo of a striped sequined dress on the social media site Tumblr. She asked her connections, theoretically mostly people she knew, to weigh in on whether the frock was white and gold or blue and black.

Within 30 minutes, her inquiry had 500 “likes” and “shares.” It then moved rapidly across numerous social media platforms. By the end of 48 hours, more than 28 million had viewed it, 670,000 simultaneously at one point. News media covered it, and even celebrities weighed in. The lesson for leaders from this silliness? The spread of breaking news about

a crisis, especially a visually dramatic one, is nearly impossible to stem, making ongoing monitoring and swift response essential. By the way, the world ultimately proclaimed the dress white and gold.

• **Polarized information sources.**

“Fake news” is not just for politicians any more. Given the ease and speed with which opponents or special interest groups can create and disseminate content via social media, it's no sur-

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prise that numerous issues, industries, and organizations have been the fodder for websites and social media containing either slanted or false information. Again, while this is difficult to counteract, monitoring is essential as you work to ensure your message is getting clearly and directly to your primary audiences.

Two additional thoughts: First, this isn't the first time in our country's history we've seen deliberately biased or fake news. In an earlier communication revolution, as easier and cheaper printing technology developed in the 19th century, the number of newspapers exploded. By the 1880s there were more

than 11,000 newspapers, dozens in New York City alone. (There are fewer than 1,300 U.S. dailies today.) Many of them were published by someone with a clear agenda. Even our nation's earliest leaders were the subject of scandalous untruths in what were known as “penny dreadfuls” due to their one-cent price.

Second, we all have a role to play in counteracting this. Wherever you are on the opinion spectrum, strive to ensure you're hearing your news from the most mainstream and unbiased sources possible.

**Proactive Responsibility**

Yes, it's a challenging communication environment out there, particularly when you're trying to tell your side of a story and protect your reputation during a crisis. That's why being proactive – buying that communication lottery ticket – is essential.

Understand the changing world. Monitor how you're perceived by the mainstream media, social media, and your own closest stakeholders, including employees, customers, and your community. Make a plan and keep it fresh. We'll delve deeper into each of these topics in the subsequent three installments of this series.

There are no guarantees, but with preparation and timely action, you may well hold a winning ticket in the crisis communication lottery.

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*In Part 2 of this series, Jordan looks at the fundamental components of crisis communication.*

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