

## The best time to manage a crisis: before it happens

*To ensure real time communication and maximum message control, businesses must put rapid communications channels into place now.*

By Sally Saville Hodge

Real time. It's the rule – not the exception – for the way our society interacts on an everyday basis. But when crisis strikes, information races over electronic channels faster than a California wild fire, making the three cardinal rules of crisis communications management – tell it fast, tell it first, tell it honestly – increasingly difficult to follow. Businesses that fail to incorporate new and social media strategies into their crisis management plans risk substantial damage to their reputations.

Smart PR leaders will stay on top of tech advances. Testing promising new communications channels under normal conditions will leave you poised to employ them under fire and overwhelmed by viral buzz.

Consider the April 16, 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy. In the minutes and hours after an armed student killed 32, wounded many others and then committed suicide, it all was captured and shared via cell phone cameras and text messages, more than 40,300 blogs, and more than 5,000 Facebook sites. A primary source of information for both the traditional media and the school? Web-based channels.

Crisis PR 101, meet Web 2.0.

A Web site, however, is only one touchpoint. Other electronically based communications channels such as blogs, wikis, and videos also can advance information transmission to and between internal and external audiences.

Among the new media that should be part of your crisis communications playbook:

### **The business blog**

A blog is really an ongoing conversation with your stakeholders. The best project an authentic human voice and personality that strengthens their connection with your brand. Whether an internal blog intended to foster discourse with employees or an external blog that's open to the world, posts must demonstrate authenticity and transparency.

Businesses are using their blogs with varying degrees of success in crisis situations.

Former Jobster Chief Executive Jason Goldberg took to his blog in late 2006 when rumors of layoffs by a company in trouble caused a crisis in confidence. The problems were legion. He did not clearly communicate details first to employees, was coy in his posts and never definitively addressed the rumors, offering only sly hints through posts which referred to songs he'd been listening to: "Survivor" and "I'm Telling You

I'm Not Going" among them. Criticism was harsh and intensified when, three days into the new year, 40 percent of Jobster's staff was cut.

Then there's Southwest Airlines. To manage a relatively minor crisis in mid-2007 over the removal from a flight of a scantily clad passenger, President Colleen Barrett apologized to the passenger on the carrier's existing "Nuts About Southwest" blog. The move defused hostility, and Southwest gained points as many commented on the blog.

Some practitioners recommend setting up a "dark" blog, ready to be activated and populated with messaging when a crisis occurs. This can work if you intend to use it as a vehicle for real time updates as the crisis progresses, without the features that make it a blog (e.g. comments and trackbacks). But as a new entity with direct connections to the crisis situation, it won't have the credibility, trust and following of a blog that has not only been long-standing, but also stands for something and generates the kind of goodwill that you want working for you in a crisis.

## **The Wiki**

If a blog can serve as a business' soapbox, then the wiki can serve as its filing cabinet.

Wiki is the term for collaborative Web sites created through software that allows users to create, edit and link web pages easily. And though most think of the "citizen" wikis that are springing up on the Web (Wikipedia, of course, being the best known), they also are being employed in the business environment as part of internal networks.

Sun Microsystems has a wiki that's open to contributions from inside and outside the corporation to share information. "Spaces" on the wiki are dedicated to topics ranging from "ask the experts" to "free wifi on the road." During last fall's rampaging California wildfires, Sun's San Diego campus established a space, geared largely to employees, to share news and developments, maps of the fire's progress, resources and the like.

This is one way to use an "enterprise" wiki, but crisis managers should also consider its value after the fact. When members of the team have shared their actions and outcomes, they will be well served by analyzing it all when the dust has settled to develop best practices to guide them through the next crisis.

## **Streaming Video**

Streaming video should also be integrated into the crisis management plan, and the smart PR team will have b-roll at the ready to augment official responses to the situation. Forethought combined with today's technological capabilities means that a convincing package can be prepared in hours, versus days.

It's not just for the traditional news media that this should be prepared: The footage should be posted to your Web site (or micro-site if one has been incorporated into the planning process), and posted to YouTube as well.

Taco Bell combined new and traditional media strategies to good effect when in late 2006, an E.coli outbreak affected 71 customers in a variety of locations. In addition to news releases and press interviews, the company created multi-lingual micro-sites, where a video statement on the situation by its chief executive officer and updates on the outbreak's status were posted. People were directed to the sites through a paid search initiative using such keywords as "Taco Bell E.coli." Marrying new and traditional strategies allowed the fast food company to better counter negative impact on its brand and business.

In today's communications environment, bad news spreads like wildfire. To offset the reputation and business damages of a crisis situation, communicators must be able to respond in real time. That means embracing the Web and its surrounding technologies – before disaster strikes.

*Sally Saville Hodge is president of Chicago-based Hodge Schindler Integrated Communications ([www.hodgeschindler.com](http://www.hodgeschindler.com)), providing new and traditional media strategies from a public relations platform. Formerly an award-winning journalist, she has been involved in crisis communications situations from both sides of the fence. She can be reached at [shodge@hodgeschindler.com](mailto:shodge@hodgeschindler.com).*