SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
ARE ORGANIZATIONS USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

There is much research as to what exactly creates a crisis, how to plan for a crisis, how to manage a crisis and the best responses to a crisis. Scholars have defined a crisis in many ways, but a widely accepted definition is “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products or good name” (Fern-Banks, 2007, p.1). Crisis communication as a field of study is still growing while scholars are still developing best practices and theories in order to better understand crisis communication and crisis response.

Crisis communication as a field of study is still growing while scholars are still developing best practices and theories in order to better understand crisis communication and crisis response.

Crises have the potential to bring down an organization as in the case of Enron, damage the organizational reputation as in the Exxon-Valdez crisis or they can even improve the reputation of an organization if dealt with correctly as in Tylenol’s case. How an organization plans for and responds to a crisis directly correlates to how or if they will survive the crisis. Crisis managers must put together a team, and then, with that team, develop a plan for each potential crisis that could impact the organization. By using these tools, crisis managers can develop a road map of how a crisis can be dealt with in order to better prepare the organization.

Crisis communication mainly falls under the job of public relations practitioners in today's organizations. Because of public relations practitioners’
expertise in the field of communicating with stakeholders, crisis communications falls under their duties. Practitioners are beginning to look at new ways of communicating during a crisis, including using social media.

Social media and Internet technologies are new to scholarly research. Social media is a form of user-generated media that allows interactivity between users. Social media users can create and upload their own content such as photos, stories, and videos to web sites like Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube. Social media engages publics in a conversation online. Corporations, while they are widely using other Internet technologies in their day-to-day public relations practices, are still learning to incorporate social media into crisis communication plans.

Social media can have both positive and negative effects on an organization’s image. Users of social media often use this communication tool to discuss their experiences with a company and especially their customer service experiences. If a user is upset, they can often tell their story online with blogs or Twitter. This can bring much unwanted negative attention to an organization if the person has a large following. On the other hand, social media can allow organizations to participate in two-way communication with their stakeholders. Companies can use social media to take part in the conversations on the Internet and can quickly respond to any issues that may arise. Social media can allow companies to have stronger relationships with their stakeholders through constant communication.

The role social media can play in crisis communication has barely been studied. What role and what impact social media can have on a crisis is still
uncertain. In today's technology driven Internet world, crises can arise at any moment on the Internet. For organizations to be prepared, they must begin to incorporate social media into their crisis plans. Not only can social media help organizations when crises arise on the Internet, but they can also help organizations control the situation and respond to more traditional crises. It is important to look at how organizations are beginning to incorporate these new technologies into their crisis plans and how it is affecting them.

Social media can be a powerful tool in crisis communication if organizations can learn to incorporate it and learn to use it successfully. This study will help to define if and how organizations are using social media in their crisis communication plans.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication
There are many ways to define a crisis in an organizational setting. Fern-Banks (2007) describes it as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products or good name” (pg. 1). Crises can also be defined as a sudden and uncontrollable event that can threaten the life of the organization and in some cases the lives of people. (Thelwall & Stuart 2007).

Crises are often unpredictable and can have the potential to harm an organization and its stakeholders (Massey & Larsen 2006). A crisis is a low-probability, high impact event that can put the viability of the organization in danger and it often requires decisions to be made swiftly (Pearson & Clair 1998). Crises interrupt normal business and often threaten an organization’s existence (Fern-Banks 1997). Practitioners must realize that crises pose a threat to an organization and its values and that they have a very short time in when they should respond to the crisis.

Crises and the communication involved with a crisis often falls under the job of the public relations staff of an organization. Public relations practitioners are
responsible for both the internal and external communication during the crisis (Burnett 1998). There are many in the field who believe that the practice of public relations is about building and maintaining relationships with the organization’s publics (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey 1997). So who better to communicate with the publics during a crisis than the public relations practitioners who do so on a daily basis. One of the jobs of a public relations staff is to produce the strategic responses to crises (Burnett 1998). These planned responses allow organizations to release information quickly if a crisis were to occur (Marra 1998). For public relations managers, this is to help decrease uncertainty in times of crisis (Burnett 1998). Ultimately the goal of crisis managers is to prepare the best strategies for any given crisis (Cho & Grower 2006).

Fishman (1999) suggests five common characteristics of a crisis communication situation: "First, an unpredictable event occurs. Second, important values for an individual or institution must be threatened in order for a crisis communication situation to exist. Third, the intention of an actor or an organization plays a minor, if negligible role in analyzing a crisis communication situation. Fourth, crisis communication occurrence represents a time-sensitive situation. Fifth, a crisis communication situation involves a dynamic or multi-dimensional set of relationships within a rapidly changing environment" (Fishman 1999, 347-348).

Crises generally have three stages. Pre-crisis allows warning signs to go unchecked. The actual crisis occurs and the organization rushes to make sense of the issue and attempts to limit the damage to the organization and its stakeholders.
Post- Crisis is when the crisis has passed and business returns to normalcy (Smudde 2001).

Fern-Banks (2007) breaks a crisis down further in to five stages of a crisis. These stages consist of detection, prevention, containment, recovery and learning. Detection refers to watching for warning signs of a crisis. Prevention is the practice of ongoing public relations programs to either prevent crises from happening or lessen the blow of a crisis, this includes the crisis communication plan. Containment deals with limiting the duration of the crisis or to keep the crisis from spreading. Recovery includes helping the organization return to business as usual and restoring normalcy. Lastly, learning is important because it allows the organization to look at what was lost from the crisis, what was gained and how the organization performed in the crisis in order to be better prepared for the next crisis, because there will always be another crisis.

The public’s perception of an organization can depend on how well that organization was prepared for a crisis when it hit. If an organization is unprepared when a crisis occurs, there may be two levels of the crisis, the actual incident or event that occurred and then when the organization is unprepared, a second crisis occurs as they scramble to respond to the original crisis (Murray & Shohen 1992). Organizations who can identify possible crises are more willing to plan for those crises in the future (Penrose 2000). In order for crisis management to be effective it must be proactive (Perry, Taylor & Doerfel 2003). Crisis management is not only an emergency preparedness plan, but it involves thinking and planning for a wide
range of crises and their impact on organization’s and their stakeholders (Mitroff, Diamond, & Alpaslan 2006).

It is critical to the success and survival of an organization that there is a crisis communications plan in place (Guth 1995). Every organization, no matter the size or the industry should have a crisis management plan (Fink 1986). Planning allows the organization to develop a crisis team as well as plans to put in to action when a crisis does occur (Massey & Larson 2006). The crisis plan is important because it allows organizations to recognize potential problems that could arise and threaten the organization and give the organization an opportunity to plan for these scenarios (Penrose 2000).

When an organization has the opportunity to predict and plan for crises they are more likely to capitalize on that than an organization with no plan (Fink 1986). When an organization identifies potential crises, they are more likely to plan for those crises (Penrose 2000). Decisions and plans that a crisis team makes today will directly influence the organization’s ability to survive a crisis tomorrow (Umansky 1993). It has often been found that crises that were managed poorly had a lack of crisis plan (Marra 1998). “(A crisis plan) is a manual, a blueprint, a road map out of dangerous woods. It covers everything from A to Z on how to manage types of crises” (Fink 1986, 56).

Following preparation, responding to and communicating during the crisis are the next important steps to good crisis communication (Penrose 2000). While
communicating during the crisis, the most important thing to communicate is that the organization is protecting its stakeholders from any further harm be it physical, emotional or any other form of harm, over protecting the organization’s reputation (Coombs 2007). When a crisis hits, there are certain types of information that should be communicated to the stakeholders as soon as possible. These include the crisis basics, protection and correction (Coombs 2006). The crisis basics are the basics of what has happened. The protection is what the company is doing to protect the stakeholders, and the correction is what the organization is going to do to correct the problem(s).

“Research has shown that crisis response strategies – what an organization says and does after a crisis – can affect a variety of important crisis communication outcomes including the organizational reputation, anger, negative word of mouth and account acceptance” (Coombs & Holladay 2009, 2). These planned responses help to reduce the amount of time it takes for an organization to respond during a crisis (Coombs 2000; Benoit 1997). It is important for crisis managers to remember to keep the responses consistent throughout the duration of the crisis, as consistency is more effective (Massey 2001).

Social Media and Crisis Communication

Social media and new Internet technology has the ability to play a large role in public relations. Public relations practitioners must understand the new role the Internet can play to gather information both for their publics and for themselves (Christ 2005). The introduction of blogs and other Internet technologies has
definitely changed the way public relations is practiced (PRSA 2007). In 2009, 73% of public relations practitioners surveyed said that the emergence of blogs and other forms of social media have changed the way they communicate with their clients (Wright and Hinson, An Updated look at the impact of social media on public relations practice. 2009). Social media has the potential to one day contribute to agenda building for public relations practitioners so they must learn to adopt it into their practices (Lariscy, et al. 2009).

Social media has quickly become one of the most used Internet technologies. Social media creates a media of the masses (Baker and Green 2005). Social media is becoming more and more popular as communications from organizations (Wright and Hinson, Examining how public relations practitioners actually are using social media 2009). Social media allows people to create information on the web with the purpose of assisting in communication (Wright and Hinson, Examining how public relations practitioners actually are using social media 2009). Social media allows public relations practitioners to reach out and communicate with their publics and strengthen their relationships (Eyrich, Padman & Sweester 2008). Social media can help practitioners control their message and reach unsuspecting prospects for their messages (Marken 2007). “Social media have been classified into these categories: Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video” Wright & Hinson, Examining how public relations practitioners actually are using social media 2009, 11).
From a public relations perspective, blogs and other forms of social networking are excellent ways to segment the public as groups of individuals who read the same blog or visit the same social networking site as those who share common interests (Kent 2008). Social media also provides the opportunity for customers to interact with each other and fill information needs this way (Grensing-Pophal 2009). Humans have a natural need for interpersonal interaction and the Internet provides this (Phillips 2008). This interaction has resulted in a participatory culture where ordinary citizens can have their voices be heard by the general public and large organizations, if they are listening (van Dijck 2009). Because of these reasons it is time organizations and public relations practitioners to pay attention to the online conversations taking part without them and learn ways to get involved with their online publics (B. Murray 2007).

The Internet has become a place for organizations to monitor issues relevant to them. In a study done by the Pew Research Center, they found that for the first time in 2008, more people were receiving their news from online sources rather than from traditional mass media (Wright and Hinson, An Updated look at the impact of social media on public relations practice. 2009). These emerging issues can become prominent on the Internet (Heath 1998). Internet allows organizations to monitor issues that could develop into larger problems later on (Heath 1998). Many Public relations practitioners use the Internet for issues management because it allows them to reach diverse publics (Porter & Sallot 2003). By using the Internet
for issue management, practitioners can bypass traditional media and monitor what their publics are actually saying and they have the ability to respond immediately to the issues (Porter & Sallot 2003).

“Social media impacts crisis communication in two distinct ways. First, the conversation can affect your organization’s perception during an event whether you are involved in the conversation or not. Second social media outlets and formats provide new opportunities to engage stakeholders and the media” (Baron & Philbin 2009, 12).

Today, many people still learn about crises through traditional media but more and more are learning about them through online social media (Coombs 2007). The new technologies, including social media, can influence what information is reported, how it is reported, who reports it and in what format it is reported (Thelwall & Stuart 2007). It can also change how fast a crisis is reported and dealt with. If a company that experiences a crisis can engage stakeholders after the crisis to discuss the issue with them, the organization can learn from its mistakes (Martin 2008).

With the use of the Internet, news about a crisis can spread quickly and without any boundaries (Bucher 2002). Social media can give very few individuals the power to create a crisis quickly and sometimes unexpectedly for a large organization (Learmonth & Parekh 2008). It can also be very difficult to remove the existence of negative publicity from the Internet, even when a crisis has ended (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith 2008). The Internet and social media can also aggravate
crises as it has the potential to escalate crises (Dinardo 2001). "Hence, the internet plays a double-edged role in crisis communication. On the one hand, it increases the risk of information thanks to the loss of traditional journalistic controls over the information market. On the other hand, the internet extends the possibilities of getting information in a manner that has not been available up to now" (Bucher 2002, 5).

Social media and the Internet allows for strategic communication in order to inform and seek opinions of stakeholders and can be used as a crisis communication and management tool (Taylor & Perry 2005). These new technologies provide both large and small organizations and businesses the opportunity for a direct link to their publics (Perry, Taylor & Doerfel 2003). Public relations practitioners can experiment with the use of social media in crisis plans when they have their next crisis drill (Baron & Philibin 2009). Crisis managers not only need to develop plans for crises that arise on the Internet but they need to begin developing plans for crises that include Internet communication and social media (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith 2008).

Crisis communication plans must include monitoring and communication on social media sites in the pre-crisis phase (Baron & Philibin 2009). Just as companies monitor phone calls and letters to the organization, they must also begin to monitor the web including social media and blogs in order to find out what publics are saying about them (Fern-Banks 2007; Blackshaw & Iyer 2003). If an organization has been monitoring and they find an issue on the Internet, answering or
responding to the issue right then can help to contain an issue before it creates a larger crisis (Christ 2005). Social media allows for feedback between organizations and their stakeholders that can help avoid crises (Perry, Taylor and Doerfel 2003).

Many organizations use social media sites such as blogs as part of their crisis communication plans, but they don’t use it to replace the entire plan (Fern-banks 2007). Twitter can also be used to monitor and respond to issues before they become full-blown crises (Stewart 2008).

When organizations use new technologies such as the Internet and social media in their crisis management plans, it gives the perception that they are trying to supply timely information to as many publics as possible, leading to a more positive image of the organizations during and after the crisis occurs (Sweester & Metzgar 2007). The use of social media during a crisis can allow organizations to reach more publics as well as increase understanding, change perceptions and save time and money (Perry, Taylor and Doerfel 2003).

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

R1: Are organizations incorporating social media in to their crisis communication plans?

R1.1 How are organizations using social media in their crisis communication plans

R1.2 What types of social media are organizations using for crisis responses?

R1.3: What effects have organizations using social media in times of crisis experienced?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Online surveys were used to collect quantifiable data from public relations practitioners in various industries from throughout the state of Indiana. An online survey was chosen for several reasons. Online surveys are inexpensive and can reach a wide population fast as compared to other survey methods such as mail surveys, which can be expensive with postage and somewhat slow with responses. They offer fast results with no interviewer bias when compared to in person surveys or telephone surveys. The anonymity that online surveys provide is also beneficial to this research study because the topic could be considered sensitive when dealing with organizations in crisis. Also, because this study involves Internet technologies such as social media, an online survey was appropriate to gauge an organization’s use of Internet technologies.

The population for the survey was public relations practitioners from the state of Indiana. The researcher visited agency, healthcare, corporations, non-profits and other various business’ websites in order to compile a list of 510 public relations, communications, and investor relations contact information for this survey. The website surveymonkey.com was used to host the survey. Each
practitioner was emailed a link to the survey two times with a response rate of 105 or just over 20 percent.

The survey included both multiple-choice questions and Likert-style questions. Each Likert style question directly related to answering one part of the research question. The multiple-choice questions gave background information on the types of organizations and public relations practitioners who responded to the survey.

Following the collection of the survey results, responses were entered into SPSS in order to find the frequency of each answer and the percentage of respondents. This information will help to see how the average organization uses social media in their crisis communication plan and help to answer the original research questions.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The following results are based on the 105 responses from public relations professionals in the state of Indiana. Not all 105 of those surveyed answered all of the questions as they had the option to opt out of the survey at any time. Of those that answered what type of organization they worked for, 18.1 percent were from an agency, 19 percent worked at a nonprofit, 10.5 percent worked for a corporation, 10.5 percent were from a government agency, and 21.9 percent worked in education. The positions those surveyed held ranged from CEO and owner to account assistant.

Of the 105 responses, 59 percent responded that they communicate with their stakeholders through social media on a daily basis. In a similar question, when asked if they used social media on a regular basis to communicate with stakeholders, 75 percent responded with yes. They primarily use Facebook and Twitter with 47.6 and 52.4 percent respectively reporting they use those forms of social media on a daily basis.

YouTube is used less often with 31.4 respondents reporting they use it monthly and 16.2 percent reporting they never use it to communicate with stakeholders. Corporate blogs were the least used form of social media, with 41 percent reporting they never use it and only 20 percent saying they use it weekly.
When asked if their organization had a crisis management plan, 70.5 percent responded that they did. When asked about the different types of social media included in their crisis plan, majority of the responses were no with 45.7 percent reporting Twitter was not included in their plan, 44.8 did not include Facebook, 59 percent did not include blogs and 69.5 percent did not include YouTube. Of those forms of social media, again Twitter and Facebook were used most often in crisis plans with 34.3 and 35.2 percent respectively saying they included them in their crisis plans. The majority or 75.2 percent of those who responded said they used social media to monitor conversations online about their brand.

When asked about their last crisis and their social media use, most respondents answered that they had not had a crisis. Of those that had had a crisis, 31.4 percent said they used social media during the crisis. 34.3 percent of respondents said that they were not including social media in their crisis management plan following their last crisis. In response to the statement “My organization uses social media to stay in contact with stakeholders after a crisis” 22.9 percent responded with neutral, 15.2 with somewhat agree and 17.1 percent with agree.

In response to questions regarding social media and responding to a crisis, most responders were neutral. Twenty percent of those surveyed answered that they disagreed with the statement that social media had helped their organization respond during their most recent crisis, compared to 33.33 percent who responded with neutral. 23.8 percent responded with neutral when asked if their organization
used social media to respond to crisis compared to 20 percent who disagreed. In comparison, when given the statement that they would use social media in their next crisis, 61.9 percent answered with agree, somewhat agree or neutral.

There were several questions aimed at determining the effects of social media on organizations that used it during a crisis. Of those surveyed, 17.1 percent disagreed with the statement that social media used during crises had strengthened their relationship with stakeholders and 33.3 percent were neutral. 33.3 percent responded with neutral when asked if social media had saved time during a crisis and 14.3 percent disagreeing. When asked if social media had saved them money during a crisis, 39 percent were neutral and 16.2 percent disagreed, meaning it had not saved them money.

In regards to the organization’s image, 39 percent responded with neutral when asked if the use of social media had helped to improve the organization’s image, while 20 percent answered with either somewhat agree or agree and 16.2 answered with somewhat disagree or disagree.

In response to whether or not social media encouraged two-way communication with their stakeholders, 16.2 percent answered either somewhat disagree or disagree, 33.3 were neutral and 26.6 percent responded with either somewhat agree or agree. 27.6 agreed or somewhat agreed that social media allowed their organization to inform stakeholders quickly about a crisis, while 32.4 percent were neutral and 16.2 percent either somewhat disagreed or disagreed.
25.7 percent of those surveyed either agreed or somewhat agreed that social media helped their organization reach a wide range of stakeholders while 33.3 percent were neutral and 17.2 percent either disagreed or somewhat disagreed. When asked if the use of social media helped improve stakeholder’s perception of the organization during a crisis, 15.3 percent either disagreed or somewhat disagreed, 39 percent were neutral and 20.9 percent either agreed or somewhat agreed.
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Table 1
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The results based on this survey are not generalizable but they do give some insight into how organizations are using social media during crisis situations. Looking at the main research question of this study, “Are organizations incorporating social media into their crisis communication plans” it appears that they are, but not as many as expected. Slightly less than one-third stated that they used social media in their last crisis. But when asked if they planned to use social media in their next crisis, over 60 percent responded with neutral, somewhat agree or agree.

Research question 1.1 asks “How are organizations using social media in crisis communication?” To answer this portion of the question, practitioners were asked if they used social media to monitor conversations about their brand, to which 60 percent reported that they did use it. 32.3 percent reported that they used social media to stay in contact with stakeholders following a crisis and 31.4 percent said they used social media to respond to a crisis. This information shows that some, about one third, of organizations are using social media to respond to a crisis and stay in contact with stakeholders after a crisis occurs, while almost two-thirds are using it to monitor conversations about their brand and organization.
Question 1.2 asks: "What types of social media are organizations using for crisis responses. While 60 percent of respondents said they used social media to communicate with their stakeholders daily, only about one-third of them reported using social media during crisis. Of the organizations that use social media in their crisis plans, Twitter and Facebook are used most often; with YouTube being used the least. In these same questions, most respondents answered that they did not use any of these forms of social media with 45.7 and 44.8 percent stating they did not use Twitter or Facebook respectively in their crisis plans.

Question 1.3 asks: “What effects have organizations using social media in times of crisis experienced?” When asked questions regarding what effects they had experienced using social media, most answered with neutral. Over 23 percent agreed that using social media had strengthened their relationships with their stakeholders, while 20 percent disagreed. Almost 23 percent agreed that social media use saved them time while responding to a crisis, but only 15 percent agreed that it saved them money. Areas that were notably higher in agreement was social media’s ability to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders and its ability to inform stakeholders quickly during a crisis, with 26 percent and 27 percent agreeing respectively. Social media also proved to open two-way communication between stakeholders and organizations for 26 percent of responders. Twenty percent agreed that social media helped improve their image after a crisis and 21 percent agreed that social media used during a crisis improved the organization’s image to its stakeholders. Overall, of the responders that either agreed or disagreed
to these statements about what effects they experienced using social media during times of crisis, more agreed than disagreed, providing some insight into some of the benefits of using social media during times of crisis including opening up two-way communication, reaching a wide range of stakeholders and informing quickly.

The results of this survey while not generalizable due to the low number of responses, do lead to some insight into the use of social media in crisis communications today. About one-third of organizations are using social media in crisis communication whether it is in monitoring before a crisis hits or to stay in contact with stakeholders after a crisis. Two-thirds of the organizations reported that they were including social media in their crisis communication plans for their next crisis. Those surveyed provided that Twitter and Facebook were the forms of social media most often used. In previous research, many stated that social media should be used in crisis communications and explained some of the benefits. This survey confirms that the benefits listed in previous research are helpful to some organizations, including saving time and money, opening two-way communication and informing stakeholders quickly during a crisis.

The results of this survey provide evidence that organizations are using social media in crisis communication and what types of social media they are using. It also provides feedback on some of the benefits of using social media in crisis communication. Additional research should attempt to explore further into how organizations are using social media. Interviews with top public relations practitioners at a variety of organizations could be helpful in gaining further depth
in to this area of crisis communication. Additionally, a more detailed survey, possibly with open ended questions along with a larger population may be able to give more insight into how exactly organizations are using social media during times of crisis and why they choose to use it.
CHAPTER VI

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