

Crisis Communication

Technology affecting crisis communication

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[This article analyses what crisis communication is and how technology is affecting the way people and businesses communicate when faced with a crisis. The article will discuss how Gregory Vecchi describes crisis communication along with the different stages and goals of crisis communication. Using the current Toyota recall crisis as an example throughout the paper to provide examples of how a company can successfully deal with a crisis. The article will also discuss the different ways the Internet can trigger, facilitate, or help a company crisis according to Alfonso González-Herrero and Suzanna Smith. Finally, this article will discuss how companies can successfully resolve a crisis effectively responding to the crisis according to Hale, Dulek, and Hale.]

Summary

Crisis communication is a growing field of research and study. In business, professionals must deal with crises in a positive manner in order to 'save face' and keep a good reputation for the company. The ways businesses deal with crises are changing due to the Internet. Nearly all businesses or organizations will deal with a crisis, but how an organization handles the crisis sets it apart from all other organizations. Corporations such as Toyota have had to deal with recent crises and the Internet played a role in the management of such crises.

Crisis Communication

Gregory Vecchi¹ defines crisis in *Conflict and Crisis Communication* as a condition where a person identifies an obstacle that inhibits goals and cannot be solved successfully through problem-solving¹. There are different stages to a crisis that generally occur. These stages are "pre-crisis, crisis, accommodation/negotiation, and resolution." These stages are generally predictable and occur in every case of a crisis, whether personal or in business.

During the time when an individual has no knowledge that an event or crisis may occur is considered the pre-crisis stage¹. At this time, life is normal and there is no change in schedule or behavior. Once a crisis occurs, an individual or business will experience low rationality, elevated emotions, and will be unable to cope with the problem. The stage when an individual or business begins to deal with the crisis and manage the crisis is known as the accommodation/negotiation stage. The final stage is the resolution stage when the crisis is over and a solution has been met¹.

In order to successfully handle a crisis, there are four goals of intervention that help assist a person or business in managing crises. The first goal is establishing communication. This goal deals with communication between the communicator and those affected by the crisis. In a business, the communicator can be the CEO, President, Vice President, etc. During this time, the communicator needs to understand the audiences' thoughts in order to develop a relationship in order to end the crisis¹.

The communicator needs to be aware of word choices, tone, and the manner he/she speaks to ensure the information is delivered and interpreted successfully¹. When speaking to the public, the content isn't as important as the emotion behind the words. Speeches should be conscious, precise, and non-judgmental¹. With the recent Toyota recall, the company established a relationship with car owners by understanding the problems and working to fix thus problems.

The next goal is defusing intense emotions. Since people communicate on two levels, a cognitive level and an emotional level, businesses must understand the emotion behind statements that cause a crisis and how to defuse such emotions. The emotion an individual has and feels towards a crisis will manipulate their behavior. Since this is the case, good business and especially PR professionals must understand and address the emotions behind the content¹. In the Toyota recall, the PR professionals had to understand why owners were both mad and scared, and take those emotions into consideration when designing a campaign to reduce the crisis.

Buying time is the third goal. Time is considered an important instrument for professionals because the longer lapses in time, the better chance that stress levels and emotions have decreased¹. During the beginning stages of the Toyota recall, PR professionals bought the company time by not divulging information regarding the different recalls and product issues. Once the company was sure about the problems and causes, the PR professionals were able to give accurate information and provide the media with options to solve the issues.

The final goal is to gain intelligence. This stage is important for ongoing crises or potential crisis in the future. This stage determines harm to individuals due to the crisis, identifies causes, formulates a course of action, and considers opinions and options that will be discussed after the crisis is over¹. Toyota is currently probably developing plans to keep such crises from occurring again and how to regain the trust of owners and potential buyers.

Crisis Communication and the Internet

According to Alfonso González-Herrero and Suzanne Smith², *Crisis Communications Management on the Web: how Internet-Based Technologies are Changing the way Public Relations Professionals Handle Business Crises*, “the most popular way to communicate with customers, investors, analysts, employees, the media, and stakeholders is the Internet”. PR practitioners and corporate communicators must adapt their performance due to the Internet². Using the Internet to communicate between organization and audiences is a topic that is receiving much attention by PR professionals and corporate communicators, but why? The answer is because the Internet plays an important role in crises².

The use of interactive chats, videos and audio files is changing the way corporations address crises. Corporate communicators and PR professionals much now understand that the Internet can cause and change a crisis. The Internet can facilitate companies to do three different things: (1) examine their business environment in search for possible concerns, (2) organize a crisis plan that considers the virtual side of today’s business landscape, and (3) react effectively to crises shall they arise².

Before the Internet, PR professionals used traditional Medias to reach audiences, such as newspapers, television, radio, and magazines². This type of distribution was called “one-to-many” and is shown in Figure 1.

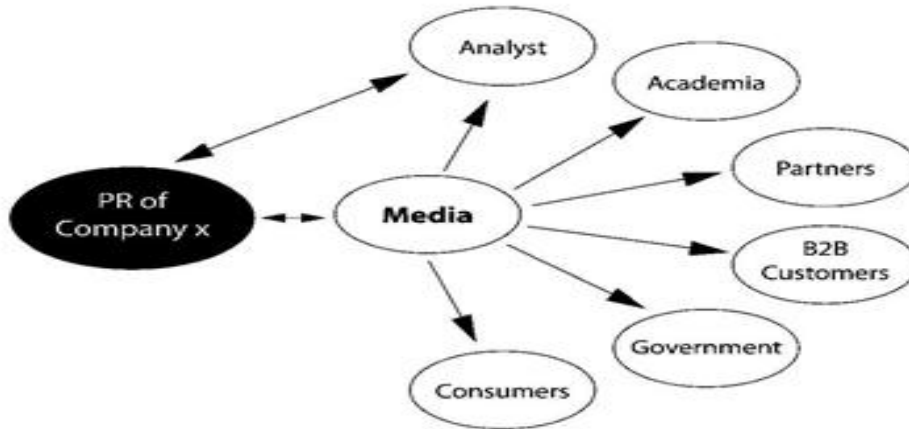


Figure 1: “One-to-many” model of Public Relations²

Due to the Internet, the model has now changed. Blogs, social networking sites, and virtual worlds have replaced the “one-to-many” model. The new model is the “many-to-many” model of public relations and shown in Figure 2².

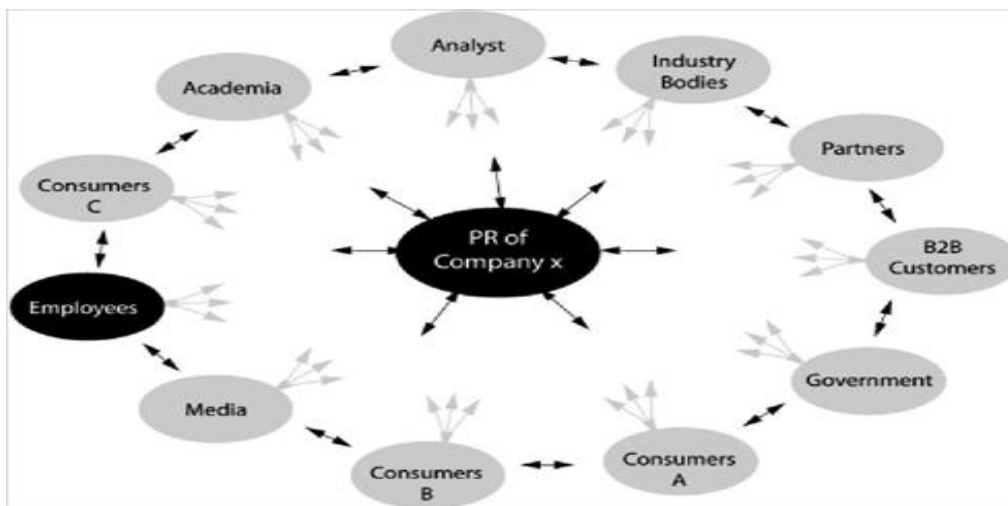


Figure 2: “Many-to-many” model of Public Relations²

The manner in which corporations understand and approach this new system will dramatically change the outcomes of corporate crises. Although the Internet is changing the way PR professionals communicate, most professionals admit that traditional media relations is the main reason for using the Internet².

It is important for professionals to understand that the Internet can be considered a trigger or a facilitator of crises. Oftentimes the Internet can amplify a crisis, acting as a facilitator, and

becomes another media for debates of events that are already occurring. Although the Internet is much faster and occurs in a viral way, as a trigger, the Internet is considered equal to all other mainstream Medias². In the case of Toyota, blogs, social networking sites, and other Internet sites have affected the crisis due to untrue information being posted. A bike company, Kryptonite, suffered from acquisitions from the Internet that cost them half their annual revenue, \$10 million dollars².

The Internet can also be a trigger for a crisis. This is the case of crises started by gossip, hacking, shadow or copy-cat Web sites, web security breaches, and all forms of cyber-terrorism². If the Internet did not exist, these crises would not exist. It is the existence of the Internet that causes these crises². Again, Toyota is currently dealing with such a crisis. Toyota has to maintain and keep up with all the information being posted to the Internet about their current recall crisis in order to resolve the crisis effectively.

Although some professionals disagree that the Internet creates new forms of crises and only accentuates issues, PR professionals and corporate communicators must listen and account for the rumors that appear throughout the Internet². Since rumors appear within blogs and other sites, they stay there and can be considered honest by mainstream media, which in turn multiplies the harmful impact of the crisis.

The Internet can also be used to resolve a crisis. The crisis management team of a company must determine how to use the Internet to interact and exchange information with the media and audiences².

Responding to Crises

Joanne Hale, Ronald Dulek, and David Hale³ describe crises that occur within an organization or company as events characterized by elevated consequence, low probability, ambiguity, and decision-making time pressure in *Crisis Response: Communication Challenge*³. There are three stages in managing organizational crisis; crisis prevention, crisis response, crisis recovery³. For the purpose of this paper, the recovery stage will be the only stage discussed.

During the recovery stage the organization changes their resources and efforts to decrease the damages to the atmosphere, amenities, and public³. In order to recover from a crisis, the company must learn from the crisis internally and “handle” the event externally³.

Communication affects crises within an organization. Failure to successfully communicate in beginning stages of crisis can cause information overload and channel bottlenecks³. This can cause information to not be delivered to media in a timely manner. If an organization has a crisis management team and has a plan for crises that occur, they are more likely to successfully respond and recover from a crisis³. In order to successfully resolve a crisis, PR professionals or corporate communicators must focus on understanding the needs of the audiences¹. It is the job of the business to gratify the needs of the consumers in order to resolve a crisis and continue positive relationships with the consumers¹.

Conclusion

Crisis communication is extremely important for a corporation or organization to understand. Being able to understand the different stages and goals, and being able to work through each stage successfully is important for the reputation and ongoing success of a company. Every crisis can be analyzed and these stages can be seen, if a company successfully handled the crisis. Every company, at some point, will most likely deal with a crisis. The crisis may not be remembered, but the way a company resolved and recovered from that crisis will always be remembered, because the company will either continue to succeed or the company will no longer exist.

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