

Keep calm and carry on: using social media in a crisis

Time and again news stories have broken on social media before mainstream news. Indeed, it would almost be a surprise if live news were to be broken anywhere else.

From the Hudson River plane crash to the Mumbai hotel terrorist siege, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and blogs posted by 'citizen journalists' fed the news networks and provided real-time information on major events. Journalists even first got wind that Gordon Brown was preparing to leave Downing Street to speak with the Queen via Sarah Brown's tweet!

So, if social media is a real-time, de facto source of news how can and should it be used in a crisis? Any crisis communications activity should set out to achieve the following things:

- Provide accurate, timely information
- Build and retain the confidence of staff, customers, stakeholders and media
- And, very importantly, support, maintain or rebuild your reputation.

So, here are some examples of how social media has been used to do just that.

#ashtag

As the ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano grounded planes across Europe, thousands of anxious and angry travellers were unable to get help from overloaded call centres and check-in desks. So they turned to the internet and social media - Twitter and Facebook in particular.

Many posted questions and comments to Twitter about their predicament – lots using the #ashtag to help identify posts as being about the crisis. Within hours, the topic of conversation was so popular that it began to 'trend' on Twitter – and so very soon afterwards airlines also started using the #ashtag to keep customers up to date.

Virgin Atlantic, among others, posted regular updates on airspace closure and flights to its Twitter page in a classic 'holding statement' format: this is the current situation; this is what we're doing about it right now; and this is when we can give you further information.

What's more, airlines used social media to control the source of information by providing links to websites where customers could read the official company information - not hearsay, media speculation or gossip.

Many also used Twitter as a back up customer service by tweeting directly at customers to offer apologies, reassure, and answer questions.

The airlines used social media to communicate generally to a community of people with a common interest and directly to individuals with specific concerns. Can any other form of communications do this?

So, how about social media in the public sector?

Twitter Gritter

When the snows hit last winter, some local authorities across the UK used Twitter to update residents on road conditions and when and where the gritting teams would be out and about making roads safer.

As with the airlines, they used tweets to migrate people from social media to council websites where accurate information could be found.

Some authorities even posted photographs and videos to YouTube and Flickr of their gritting teams in action, and then tweeted links to the pictures.

But using social media in a crisis is not just for the big companies or councils.

Pie mountain!

Brays Cottage is a Norfolk-based pork pie maker. The co-owner, Sarah Pettegree, had baked 200 pies for a big race meeting which was cancelled at the last minute because of bad weather.

Sarah knew she could sell some, but not all, of her pies at a farmers market in the next couple of days.

So she turned to her Twitter following to ask if anyone could help. Back came a reply from a local journalist who ran the story the next day, prompting a queue of customers at Sarah's farmers market stall the day after. All 200 pies sold. Crisis averted.

But what when social media is the cause of your crisis?

Dirty Domino

Domino's Pizza, B&Q and Vodafone have been recent victims of staff going bad and using social media to bring the company into disrepute.

In Domino's case, an unpleasant video was posted to YouTube showing staff preparing pizzas with added bits for the topping (I won't go into detail!). The next day the employees responsible were fired. The day after that, another video was posted to YouTube - this time of the Domino's Pizza CEO apologising and setting out what action had been taken.

The company was also active on Twitter directing people to the new video - again, migrating people to a source of information untouched by external media.

What's good about how Domino's handled this crisis was that they chose to respond using the same communications medium that created the crisis, they fronted up the top man, and they followed the format for a good crisis statement.

What was not so good was that it took them over a day to do it.

Social media has put the pace of crises on fast forward, which means you have to work fast too. Which means planning. For more information on how you can integrate social media into your communications plans, contact Donna Chessum at Tribe.

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