

How Has Social Media Changed Energy Crisis Communication?

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Social media has been a game-changer and any company that does not recognise this will be outrun in a crisis. With social media, every citizen has the ability to broadcast images or video and comment on events. There were always witnesses to a crisis, but today these witnesses can make any event public. The media knows this very well. That is why the first coverage of an event is often driven by social media posts. For companies this means they have to be ready to monitor social media and use it as a channel. It also means that the timeline of response has gone from hours to minutes.

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What are the key elements of crisis communication?

After having trained companies in crisis communications in 25 countries on five continents, I have come to the conclusion there are really two elements that are at the heart of communications: care & control.

On care: If something bad happens, you have to be able to express that you care, show empathy. The statement that ‘nobody cares about what you know, until they know that you care’, is even more true today. You have to show that impacted stakeholders are at the heart of your response, and that your company has its heart in the right place. Bad things happen to good companies, and it is the role of communications to show that there is good in you.

On control: Communications have to show what you are doing to take control of the situation. What action are you taking to make right what went wrong, to manage the crisis, to mitigate the impact. If it does not look like you have a handle on the situation, other stakeholders will get nervous, step in, speakout and get involved. That often complicates the response, and makes communication more complex. It also opens up a company to increased scrutiny, at a time when that is the last thing needed.

How should a company communicate, for example, a power outage?

Our WPNT Associate Iulia Borsan from Romania has been dealing with power outages for many years. After being in the front line answering to angry customers, she has come to understand how critical power supply is. Her first advice is to keep the working teams informed so they can properly communicate with angry clients via dispatching, call centre, website or social media. They should have all the available information so that they can reassure customers they are not left in the dark (pun intended). Also, make sure you consider the worst case scenario during an outage. There can be cases where a power outage will strike a hospital or public lighting during cold winter nights. These situations can quickly escalate in ways that had not been anticipated. Finally, always communicate quickly, often and proactively. Don't wait until the angry calls start coming in or until you have all the information. Go with what you have and be honest about the reason behind the situation. Make sure you share the expected timing to resolve the situation.

Examples of good and bad energy crisis communication

Shell did a good job of using social media after the Moerdijk plant fire in The Netherlands. They were quick to provide facts on the event and redirected people to the proper channels for health and safety information. There are also plenty of bad examples out there. For example, the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster in Canada. Here the CEO decided to stay in his office to manage the crisis instead of visiting the town. One thing that all bad examples have in common is that the company representatives or spokespersons are tone-deaf to the events around them. They are not doing a good job of communicating care, they don't listen, they try to hide and they come across badly on TV. That is why my company spends so much time helping business leaders become better crisis communicators.

What lessons on energy crisis communication can be learned from

some of the major events that have already occurred?

The most important lesson is for companies to prepare for the worst case scenario. The stakes are huge. Companies such as BP and VW now know the price of a big crisis. It is necessary for companies to be ready to manage such situations the best that they can. WPNT works with 5 of the 10 largest oil and gas multinationals in the world helping them to prepare for crisis communications and crisis engagement. I have trained thousands of people – and what I have found is that better trained staff will also be better in identifying reputation risks early on. You need crisis savvy people to raise a red flag inside the company, well before an issue becomes a crisis.

Dimitri Schildmeijer is Partner and Senior Trainer at WPNT Communications and Head of the Brussels Office. His CV is available [here](#). WPNT Communications is a global communications skills training firm. The company trains executives and business leaders to deliver impactful speeches, effective media interviews, as well as engaging with stakeholders meaningfully - and managing crisis communications to protect their organisation's reputation. WPNT works for five of the ten world's biggest nonstate-owned oil and gas companies (according to Forbes 2015 list of biggest oil and gas companies). In Europe, WPNT has trainers in Belgium, France, Italy, Romania, the UK and Russia.

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