

## **The Impact Of Social Media on Crisis: Be Ready Yesterday**

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I'm getting ready to participate in a panel discussion on "The Impact of Social Media on Crisis" this week. Having worked through several crises suffered by clients lately, here are some pieces of advice that remain front and center:

1. Social media is just a tool in the communication toolbox...ultimately, what matters is the magnitude of the crisis, the level of emotion involved and the readiness of the organization to respond. Having said that, the likelihood that that your big announcement gets leaked ... or spread more quickly ... via social media is very high. This means crisis plans, statements and systems to deliver the message need to be ready...yesterday. Consider getting key messages and generic statements ready (and by ready, I mean, agreed upon by senior leadership, the Board, the attorneys and the PR people) for the top 10 issues most likely to affect your organization.
2. If you have cultivated a following on social media, and you've trained your key audiences to look for information there, social media can be helpful in getting your message out on breaking issues. But you need to do the work upfront if you're going to use social media as a crisis communication tool. Along with that, make sure you have a clearly-communicated social media policy, and consistent messaging that is easy to understand.
3. Social media is an important research tool. Once the word is out, how many people are calling with questions or comments? Are they re-posting and re-tweeting, and what is the tone of the commentary? Is it a handful of people or is the issue gaining momentum via discussion on social media? Your internal audience can be helpful here – are people asking them questions about the issue? Train them to report back on the feedback they're collecting. When we think about how people typically respond to issues, we focus on the opinion leaders ... usually about 8% - 10% ... who are able to influence the other 90% who are leaning in one direction or the other and who are looking to opinion leaders for guidance. There are, typically, about 2% who are the "zealots" who have loud voices but short attention spans. Look carefully at who is responding – social media can magnify the voice of the zealots and make them seem more influential than they actually are.

4. Know the environment in which your crisis is playing out. Is your issue a stand-alone, one-time issue impacting just your organization, or are you part of a bigger “round-up” story that has the attention of the media – and therefore, your key audiences? If it is the latter, be prepared for renewed interest (and mentions) every time there is a new occurrence in your industry. Look for the triggering events that are likely to draw even more attention the crisis at hand. If your issue is a trend in your industry, or something very unusual, or has high emotional appeal, be prepared for the possibility of attracting national media. If this is the case, have a “media on campus” policy along with designated employees ready to enforce it.
5. Call in strategic counsel to give your organization perspective. The lawyers represent the court of law; the public relations/communications professionals represent the court of public opinion. Both perspectives are important. It’s difficult to know how much to say; when to respond; when to pull down negative comments etc. It’s imperative to have outside perspectives as you make those difficult calls.