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PRSA STRATEGIES & TACTICS

Making a Connection

Employee Communications Special



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Fact: Virtually all communications professionals working in the 21st century will deal with a crisis at some point in their careers.

Why? Because crises are inevitable in an age of social media. Two-thirds of CEOs in a recent PwC survey said they had experienced a crisis in the last three years; more than half had already experienced at least two in the last three years. In a separate Deloitte study, 87 percent of executives cited reputation risk as more important than any other strategic concern.

Crises are a fact of business life. Thanks to social media, coverage is immediate and ubiquitous, with crises large and small, real and not, getting equal play on the internet. One of the most overlooked and underutilized resources available to a company during a crisis is the collective voice of its employees.

Employees may be willing, but it's up to the company to make sure they're also empowered to express a point of view about the crisis, and come to the company's defense in an authentic, timely way. That requires cultivating a communications culture, even in the face of disengaged employees. A recent Gallup poll found that 51 percent of the full-time American workforce says they are not engaged at work.

This article will share general crisis communications principles and examples of how companies can empower their people to act as employee evangelists.

The production

While there are many communication roles in a crisis, for the purpose of employee engagement, think in terms of a theatrical production. In a play, there are many functions and roles, all interdependent, with common goals and objectives. The immediate crisis response is similar to a short-term showcase, while ongoing employee engagement activities have more in common with a long-running production.

The players may change and the crises may differ, but the underlying relationship with employees and the discipline of empowering them with communications tools, processes and context all support the durability and power of the show (your business and brand).

The crisis playbill

The players and backstage crew must work seamlessly toward a common goal, following a set of stage directions that enable them to share the boards, while feeding lines to one another. Sometimes things go awry and the players must innovate — even ad-libbing lines or going off-script — to keep the play moving forward.

Like a great script, a solid employee

communications plan gives associates the tool kit and the confidence to improvise when needed within an acceptable framework. *(See the table below for a roster of the many similarities between players in a real-life vs. staged drama.)*

The rehearsals

The natural inclination for many companies in crisis is to send messaging to employees and ask them to spread the word. But it only works if employees have been prepared, and if a discipline exists that allows them to do so effectively.

Ideally, employees speak with an authentic voice, sharing key messages

without sounding like corporate shells. This requires companies to give employees *permission* to speak, and then, that employees are familiar with the organization's social media policy, know where to get and how to use company-provided tools, and understand the rules of engagement.

The time to do this is not as a crisis emerges. Rather, it's when employees can rehearse techniques, and learn and grow under low-risk conditions. Many companies have successfully introduced social media training, engaging employees on a wide range of events, including brand and product launches, job/hiring

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Role/Element	Title	Responsibilities
Executive Producer	President/CEO	Ensuring the effectiveness and positive outcome of the crisis response
Director	Head of Communications	Creating the strategy and supervising communications and message delivery to all stakeholders and audience members
Casting	Head of Employee Communications	Providing employees with the right messaging and vehicles, and ensuring their needs are met
Actors	Employees	Authentically delivering key messages and providing feedback during a crisis
Stage Directions	Communications Channels	Delivering timely, relevant messaging and related tools to stakeholders
Props	Communications Vehicles	Packaging critical content to reach target audiences in relevant formats
Script	Crisis Plan	Building the discipline and framework for efficient message delivery during a crisis
Lines	Key Messages	Shaping the major points during a crisis response

opportunities, charitable activities, blood drives/fund drives, social/family outings and recognition events, awards and contests. The most proactive companies have educated employees in truly innovative ways, gamifying much of the training.

The script

With the discipline of employee engagement in place, each crisis response will have its own strategy, objectives and key messages.

Like any script, a player's lines are open to personal expression. That's

what makes it authentic. The best time to master messaging is during rehearsals, where failure has minor consequences, not during a crisis, when failure can have catastrophic consequences.

Every crisis response involving employees requires that context (the environment in which the play is delivered) be provided. Employees need to understand the background of the issue, the facts of the case and the urgency around timing. They also need to understand what to do if they get drawn into a more extensive debate — particularly online — and where to direct those who require more information with deeper insights.

PepsiCo's "Pride" campaign is a great example of a program that helped employees combat the social heat. Lacking insights and proof points, employees

were uncomfortable responding to concerns from friends, family and followers about the company's soft drink and salty snacks portfolio. After launching a focused global employee engagement plan, employee confidence and willingness to discuss the issues increased by more than 30 percent in six months.

The company shared information about R&D efforts to reduce sugar and salt, re-formulate using new low-calorie natural sweeteners, and develop new brands and products (Quaker Oats, Tropicana, Gatorade) that promoted healthier lifestyles. Employee pride in the company and its product portfolio increased measurably.

The stage direction

Channel management is an important component of employee engagement. Effective companies fine-tune channels for reaching internal audiences on an ongoing basis, continuously auditing the efficacy of existing channels. A key part of DuPont's employee and leader engagement strategy — during the 20 months between announcing its intended merger with Dow and the transaction close — was an audit and rebuild of its employee communication channels.

The core objective was to ensure speed, continuous feedback and robust analytics that would enable actionable, informed decisions about content and channel reach. As delays in the regulatory review process and related rumors

surfaced, this core capability proved to be critical for issues management.

- Do internal channels actually reach the intended audience?
- How do employees engage with content?
- How easy is it for employees to Like, share and rate content?
- What communications gaps need to be filled?
- Are there informal channels that co-opt official ones?

Personal and other channels from the intranet to town hall meetings, team huddles to bulletin boards, and texts to blogs should all include a feedback loop. Effective programs reach out quickly during a crisis, regardless of how remote the location or inaccessible the internet or intranet is.

Deploy every tool (prop) at the company's disposal to engage employees: intranets, articles, newsletters, blogs, video clips, emails, social media badges and hashtags. One never knows which message, vehicle or channel will resonate with an individual and trigger the inner-employee evangelist.

The reviews

Feedback loops are critical to the success of all communications — particularly crises — and require monitoring media and different stakeholder groups. Asking employees to review crisis response efforts, and soliciting ideas for improving the quality and timing of response efforts, will yield immediate benefits. Communicators need to know:

What will make us better, smarter and faster the next time?

Perhaps the most important element in managing a crisis is installing an early warning system to avoid a crisis in the first place. In many cases, managing emerging issues can contain a potential crisis. Employees represent the first line of defense. They have a potentially global listening post with an ear to the ground, and the first to hear rumblings of discontent.

Establishing a dialogue with employees becomes even more critical from this 360-degree perspective, where associates have a role in detecting and sharing information about emerging issues, pushing out key messages during a crisis and reporting on recovery programs and successes. Open, ongoing employee communications is a proven approach for earning rave reviews for effective crisis management. ■■



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