Crisis management: Fighting fire with fire

Thanks to robust new technologies, there's no longer any reason for organizations to claim they had no way of notifying their affected stakeholders of impending or immediate disaster.

By Anne Sceia Klein

By the time you finish reading this sentence, were your company or institution to suddenly experience a major catastrophe, you could have already notified tens of thousands of employees, other stakeholders, and all of the major news media — not only about the event, but also what actions your organization was taking that directly affect them and what they should do.

And if the organization on whose board you sit is not in position to turn that hypothetical into reality, perhaps it is time the directors and senior management sat down together and reviewed your crisis management plans with a view to updating them.

Since the advent of the 24/7 news cycle, organizations no longer have the luxury of spending hours gathering information and preparing statements for their employees and the press. When your organization is in crisis, you need to be able to reach and mobilize your constituents fast. More like immediately! Which means that you can't rely on yesterday's technology and tactics. They may well hinder your organization's ability to reach its audiences as quickly as you may need. Furthermore, counting on the news media to get your message to your key audiences can be slow and unreliable, while your message — if it gets through at all — will probably be incomplete and possibly incorrect.

Not so long ago, two to four hours used to be considered an adequate period of time in which to issue a PR statement or response. No more. Modern-day technology has killed the luxury of time. The Golden Hour for responding is now always "now."

At the Push of a Button

Fortunately that very same technology can also be the salvation of those organizations that make the effort to use the tools available to them. Call it fighting fire with fire, but there are Web sites and software programs that make it possible to send blast email, faxes, voice mail, and text messages (even all at the same time) virtually instantly to virtually anyone in the world. Newer tools include blogs, dark Web sites, microsites, intranets, wikis, listservs, podcasts, vodcasts, and others. Each can spring to life with your message practically at the push of a button. (See below for a glossary of these terms and tools.)

Call it "push" technology as opposed to "pull" technology. What that means is this: In a world of instant communications, you use technology

Anne Sceia Klein is the founder and president of Anne Klein Communications Group, a national public relations counseling firm based in the Philadelphia region (www.annekleincg.com). With 40 years of PR and marketing communications experience in corporations, financial institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and agencies, she is a nationally recognized public relations counselor and strategic planner. She is an accredited member and a fellow of the Public Relations Society of America. She lectures frequently on all facets of public relations, especially crisis and environmental communications, community outreach, and media relations.

to your advantage to push accurate, credible information as quickly and directly as possible to your myriad internal and external stakeholders instead of waiting for them to pull it from traditional newspapers, broadcast news outlets, and Web sites.

To respond effectively these days, communications professionals, senior management, lawyers, consultants, and even boards of directors need to clearly understand the public's and the media's demand for speed and accuracy in communicating during a crisis. And they need to have a well-honed crisis communications management system in place that addresses those demands.

Advance Preparation

This means planning, creating, revising, and getting management and legal approvals for responses to pending or anticipated issues or incidents before they occur. It means preparing needed statements,

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news releases, graphics, sound bites, videos, etc. and formatting them in a state of readiness for the various Web sites and mobile devices. Then, when needed, you can launch the appropriate messages or responses and manage inquiries in a matter of minutes, even before emergency teams are fully mobilized. The technology and know-how to do all this already exists.

At the most basic level are services that enable you to send emails, text messages, faxes, or voice-mail messages, or a combination of those, to one or more lists of recipients that the service enables you to compile and maintain. The advantages of these services are simplicity, speed, and low cost. The simplicity can be a disadvantage, though, because such systems are not as feature-rich as more sophisticated services.

More advanced are systems like the one the U.S. Coast Guard used during its mobilization and response to Hurricane Katrina. In addition to the messaging functions mentioned above, such systems incorporate preformatted Web sites that provide public and media access to up-to-the minute press releases, photos, and even video clips, and provide channels for response and inquiries. They also provide the means for internal communication so the response team can work quickly and collab-

oratively on authoring, approvals, distribution, and response management, no matter where the team members happen to be.

The system used by the Coast Guard is not a government venture. Rather it is a commercial product available to any organization that needs it. And because it uses a Web interface, you don't need an IT staff to operate it.

Mass 'In-Touch' Capability

One major corporation has already loaded its entire database of employees into this system so communicators, using text, voice, email, fax, and Web site communication, all integrated into one control center, can stay in touch with all 29,000 employees in case of a major event.

With hurricane season looming, about 20 universities or individual campuses are using this system to prepare to notify their students and campus community members of closures, traffic alternatives, etc. in the event of an impending major storm.

A big advantage of systems of this type is that they can be operated from any location that has Internet access. For example, the Coast Guard was able to maintain full operation of its communication function during Katrina, even though its New Orleans command center was destroyed.

Even more robust versions of this type of system are available that can link an entire worldwide organization, with numerous locations and multiple communicators, together in a comprehensive Internet-based crisis management and communications system.

No More Excuses

The important point to remember is this: Technology exists that can be used as an early-warning system to your employees, stakeholders, neighbors, customers, etc., in emergency situations. There's no longer any reason for administrators to claim they had no way of notifying their affected communities of impending or immediate disaster.

The same systems can and should be used to communicate with all of your key constituencies, such as government officials, regulators, neighbors, community leaders, customers, bankers, and financial exchanges. In this instant news world, they all demand and expect information. You can't afford to ignore them or let them get possible misinformation from other sources.

As a director serving on an organization's board, you may well wonder what all of this has to do with you and your duties. The answer is simple. Wherever and whenever your organization faces potential legal liability or litigation, you as a director share

in that responsibility. Therefore, it is essential that you be aware of all the technological advances that, used properly by management, can enhance your role as a good corporate citizen and lessen your risk of becoming a target of legal action for failing to maintain good communications during a crisis.

A Crisis Tools Glossary

Because new technologies breed new words at an ever-accelerating rate, here is a glossary of terms for directors who may need help speaking and understanding the new language of technocrats:

Blast email is a form of mass email that can easily send as many as 1 million emails per hour.

Blog, short for **Web log**, is a Web site where entries are written in chronological order and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries.

A **corporate Web log** is similar to a blog except that it is published and used by an organization instead of an individual to reach its organizational goals. CEO blogs serve a similar purpose.

A **dark Web site** is a communication portal held in reserve that can be quickly fed with content and "turned on" in response to a particular PR crisis.

An **intranet** is a private computer network that functions as a private version of the Internet to securely share part of an organization's information or operations with its employees.

Listserv, a registered trademark of L-Soft international Inc., is often used as a generic term for any email-based mailing list application.

A **microsite**, also known as a **minisite** or **weblet**, refers to an individual Web page or cluster of pages that are meant to function as an auxiliary supplement to a primary Web site. Typically they are used to add specialized editorial or commercial information.

A **podcast** is a specific type of **webcast** that, like radio, can mean either the content itself or the method by which it is distributed; the latter is also termed **podcasting**.

RSS is a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content such as blog entries, news headlines or podcasts. RSS feeds may contain either a summary of content from an associated Web site or the full text.

SMS, or **Short Message Service**, also called **text messaging**, is a means of sending short messages to and from mobile phones.

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Streaming media is multimedia that is continuously received by, and normally displayed to, the end-user while it is being delivered by the provider.

Vlogs are **video web logs**, similar to **blogs** except that they concentrate on videos rather than textual material.

Vidcast or **vodcast** is a term used for the online delivery of on demand video clip content.

Web feeds allow software programs to check for updates published on a Web site and/or links to content on a Web site. Web feeds are used by the weblog community to share the latest entries' headlines or their full text, and even attached multimedia files.

Web syndication is a form of syndication in which a section of a Web site is made available for other sites to use.

Wiki (from the Hawaiian for quick) is an online resource that allows users to add and edit content collectively.