CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Sudden Impact

An analysis of five commonly held beliefs about managing crises that erupt online

BY JAMES DONNELLY

Crisis management professionals typically like to operate within protocols that have proven effective over time. Therefore, in the face of revolutionary change, we strive to set early anchors from which we can operate with a degree of confidence. Such may be the case with many of the principles established recently on online crisis management. It might be time to start re-examining some of those foundational beliefs and build additional structure around them.

In 2000, the first printed edition of "The Cluetrain Manifesto" provided revelations on the Internet's probable impact on markets and organizations. Most of its "95 Theses" were on target — markets are conversations, hyperlinks (and networks) will subvert hierarchies, connections between new markets and companies will change and companies must connect through the voice of the new marketplace.

One decade later, many organizations are just now catching up with the impact of networked communities on business and reputation. A recent blog post by Tammy Erickson in the *Harvard Business Review* pegs "last year, around the first of July" as the pivotal moment when social media finally became serious business. Welcome to the party, late adopters.

From the start, the PR profession debated and analyzed the significance of "The Cluetrain Manifesto" like scientists arguing over the Large Hadron Collider. In practice, however, PR professionals are probably only marginally ahead of the adoption curve — digital/interactive strategists and social networking jobs have grown quickly only during the past two or three years.

Also within the past few years, empowered networks have taught us about the new requirements of online crisis management. What has been learned so far has been quickly codified into core beliefs. Since the networked world is in its relative infancy, we must continue to expand our thinking on each of these beliefs and adapt to the changes yet to come.

Here are the five beliefs:

1) Companies need to prepare for threats that emerge through online social networks.
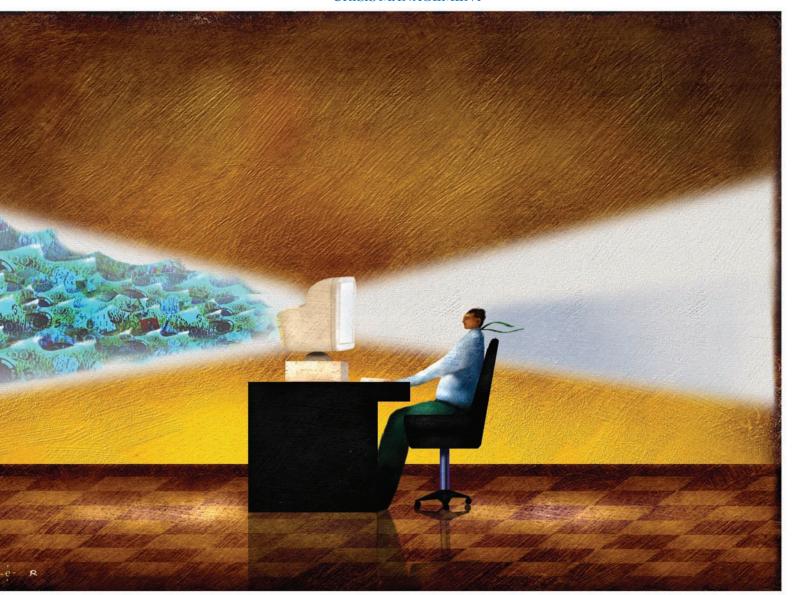
This is true for most companies, organizations, brands or services. But how should a company prepare? Most dialogue on this topic centers on the required tactics: building static Web pages, creating a YouTube channel, engaging with others on Facebook and Twitter, using search-engine optimization and more.

While these may be the right tactical solutions, they require a strategic framework. For example, before setting the table, you need to have an idea of what you're cooking for dinner. Likewise, companies need to determine how networked they'd like to be if a crisis strikes and compare that with how networked they are today. Here is a summary of key strategic questions that need to be considered before establishing any dark site tactics:

• Is it easy for online audiences to understand our company's values and philosophies by scanning information that we make available online? Do they believe that we live by our values?

• Do we know which online audiences matter to our business and to key stakeholders? Do we have a sense of the prioritization of these audiences?

• How is our company currently perceived by online audiences? Do we need to do anything to improve those perceptions before a crisis strikes?

• Are we actively connecting and building relationships with online priority audiences? Should we be?

• Do we have systems in place to monitor the opinions of the online target audiences? Can we compare these current opinions against any benchmarks?

• Do we have executive-level appreciation and endorsement to engage with online audiences if a crisis strikes? Or is it possible that we'll have all the right tactics in place but will need to struggle to get quick approval to post, tweet, podcast, etc.?

2) Today, online groundswell requires a response in minutes, not hours.

We know that today anyone can broadcast information (and distortions and rumors). This has created the need for more nimble crisis management systems. Speed does matter.

However, perhaps in a rush to be expedient, online groundswell is often misdiagnosed. There's a lot of noise out there, and the noise is growing exponentially.

"We're being attacked on the blogs!" may not always necessitate immediate response. Sometimes, it is better to be deliberate. Indeed, we have seen some companies self-sabotage by saying too much at the moment that the negative attention has subsided.

Before cracking open the crisis plan, companies must assess:

· What type of scrutiny is this? Is it credible? Is the scrutiny clever enough to gain any traction online?

· Are there tangible underlying factors behind this scrutiny? Is it sustainable? Is there misinformation in the criticism?

· Is there a significant event that's impacting your business, reputation or brand?

· Do we know how you'll answer the questions being posed? Does this require any adjustments to your operations?

3) Online social networks are great listening posts and should be monitored.

Every minute, crowdsourced opinions provide lurid feedback that would make a focus group blush. There's an obvious benefit for companies to stick a stethoscope to a computer monitor and listen to the online pulse. However, it's easy to get carried away by taking every criticism to heart.

Charlene Li, founder of Altimeter Group and co-author of "Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies," recently promoted the idea of socialgraphics, a discipline to better understand specific behaviors of targeted customers. This approach can also apply to monitoring for emerging crises. It is more efficient to segment audiences and focus on the opinions that matter or those that can gain widespread traction. Thus, when scrutiny begins to rise above the din, ask:

· What audience is prompting the attention and velocity of this crisis?

· Is this just crowd-kvetching?

· Is it a lone-wolf blogger with an agenda? Or a determined detractor, trying to bring attention to his or her own agenda by slinging an arrow at your company?

· Will this situation negatively affect the online and offline audiences that are important to your business?

4) In a crisis, companies need to have an online voice that resonates with the marketplace. Corporate-speak and press releases are not welcome on social networks.

How have companies organized around this belief? Unfortunately, some companies are hiring the young, hip and plugged-in to be the direct interface, because that is the lingua franca of social networks. We've seen jobs available only to those with large Twitter followings. But that seems more like an attempt to strike the right accent, not the right voice.

Particularly in a crisis, social networks want to hear from an authentic voice — ideally from someone with institutional knowledge to share, or a perspective on if the company is handling the situation in a way that is consistent with its values. In other words, they want authenticity. It's better to find those

people within a company and give them the time and resources to communicate properly with these communities. This may require an orientation or some coaching, but it is a better approach than seeking a virtual hired gun.

5) Addressing your crisis with online audiences is not a one-time event — these are relationships that need to be maintained.

Though conventional wisdom says it is wise to continue cultivating your online relationships after you manage a crisis, this decision depends on three things:

· **The type of crisis**. If the crisis is a finite event — a pencil recall, for example — then it's possible to build special recall microsites, Twitter feeds and Facebook pages to disseminate information broadly. During that time, the company needs to be active on each of these new channels. But if the recall has been successful, then the company can choose to let those channels expire rather than awkwardly continuing these relationships.

· **The online audiences' receptiveness to connect more with the company**. Some audiences want to know a lot about a company during a crisis, but their overall interest in carrying on the relationship may wane once the crisis is over. That same pencil manufacturer may continue doodling online, but that doesn't mean that people will continue to engage.

· **The company's comfort level regarding social networks**. There are plenty of companies that still have not tried online networking. After they've managed a crisis, these same companies may feel compelled to keep connecting in ways that may do more harm than good for their reputations. Like people, organizations must first be true to their tendencies.

The impact of social technologies on reputation management is a story that continues to be written. As such, it's probably premature to use permanent ink to capture any beliefs about online crisis management. A sharp pencil with a fresh eraser might be the best tool at this stage. ■

James Donnelly is senior vice president, crisis management, at Ketchum, with broad experience in issues/crisis management, crisis training, communications training, corporate public relations and global corporate communications. Check out www.jamesjdonnelly.com for ongoing dialogue and resources on crisis management and communications coaching.