Gaining Influence in a Crisis

By Gilles Hilary , INSEAD Professor of Accounting and Control and Marie-Hélène Mansard , Vice President of Communications, Non Executive Director

Complex crises need less "managed" communication approaches.

In March 2014, Malaysian Airlines flight 370 disappeared on its way to Beijing. To this day, the fate of the plane has not been established. The tragedy of the aircraft's disappearance **was exacerbated** by the images of distressed relatives, herded into hotels in Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, being drip fed information, initially via text message. The cold approach was ill-suited to the situation. The media also mixed with the relatives and some of them stormed a press conference desperate for information.

The scenes made for top news around the world and the effect on the company's image was disastrous.

Malaysian Airlines had followed a "managed communication" approach. It was designed as a "one-to-many" strategy. The company was supposed to be an indisputable source of information and to be fully in control. Its traditional press conference approach proved to be challenging in an environment that was extremely fluid, involving a complex web of stakeholders from families to various national governments and search agencies.

An alternative to a managed communication approach is an "influence" one. The organisation that uses it does not claim to have all the answers. It realises that it is only one of many voices and exerts a more fuzzy control over its environment. For example, in the aftermath of the 2001 events, American Airlines' website quickly expressed sympathy for the victims, assured stakeholders that the company was collaborating with everyone and provided contact information for relevant third parties such as the FBI. In some cases, the company dispatched employees who took up residence at **the families' homes**.

This approach is naturally pertinent in the midst of complex crises. For example, eighty percent of Americans expect that emergency responders will monitor social networks, and a third assumes that posting or Tweeting a request for help during a disaster will get them help within an hour. However, it has become more routine with the decentralisation of news reporting. Although most people still receive their news from conventional media, close to two thirds of Facebook and Twitter users now receive it **from these platforms**.

Building influence

So, how do you structure an "influence" crisis communication strategy? The general idea is to leverage assets that have been developed during quiet periods by using a few tools that will allow the identification of emerging crises and the rapid implementation of a coherent response.

Monitor: Be aware of current developments.

Ensure online media oversight, in all languages, especially when your business is global. For example, Dell is able to monitor conversations in 11 languages 24/7.

Mark: Identify communities and networks

Identify communities of interest that have emerged. After-sales support, for example, is usually a topic that generates a lot of social media activity. Being routinely involved in this discussion will help to build a relationship with your customers, which will be particularly valuable in times of crisis.

Identify opinion leaders, then treat them like the most important journalists in your business: provide them with relevant information, invite them to visit your plants or to attend product launch events. Understand that directly

engaging individuals will raise their status and visibility.

Measure: Understand critical relationships and know your ROI.

Prioritise incidents. For example, Cisco identifies five to seven thousands mentions a day but only about **3% are directly actionable**.

Measure results of your campaigns. Metrics such as the number of viewers, followers or posts (classified as positive, negative or neutral) can now be easily tracked.

Manage: Build credibility and stay humble.

Ensure that your team is constituted of both web technologies managers (i.e., geeks who can make things happen) and content managers (i.e., sector specialists who know what should happen).

Prefer indirect channels then direct talk online. For example, over 10,000 Dell employees have completed their Social Media & Communities University program to be brand advocates online.

Adapt the tone of your messages: stay positive, not too formal, but courteous, honest and sincere. If a crisis arises, stick to facts. Try to go viral and emotional. Use images and music to address all dimensions of your communication. Do not use an assertive tone while investigations are still in progress.

Setting up

Establish an integrated center. Naturally, this involves a digital media component. News, bad news in particular, can easily go viral. The picture of BP's CEO on a sailing trip just a few days after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill hurt the already damaged company.

To do this, more and more organisations have set up a "Social Media Command Center". On a normal day, a small crew of community managers with dedicated internet bandwidth, a few workstations, and flat screens, monitors evolving trends. Electronic platforms such as Netvibes or Radian6 provide dashboards that conveniently summarise the social media landscape and complement traditional media analysis. Centers are best located in highly visible spots to ensure that everyone in the organisation feels connected to them. They have the capability to quickly expand and to

implement crisis management plans if needed.

For example, Cisco center is staffed by only 5 core team members. However, a large network of employees, identified as subject matter experts willing to engage interested parties and to report on their experience, provides a significant presence on social media. The center also has representatives embedded within each business unit, support and technical services **to react in case of emergency**.

The financial cost to implement an influence strategy is often modest. Salesforce Customer Company Command Center, staffed by a relatively small team of community managers and social customer support reps, manages over 50,000 brand mentions a month. Cisco has reported a 280% return on investment on their center. However, an influence strategy requires an adjustment to the mindset of many organisations. People have to relinquish direct control, which is not easy.

Gilles Hilary is an INSEAD Professor of Accounting and Control and The Mubadala Chaired Professor in Corporate Governance and Strategy. He is also a contributing faculty member to the INSEAD Corporate Governance Initiative.

Marie-Hélène Mansard is a Vice President in Communications and a Non-Executive Director.

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/gaining-influence-crisis

---

About the author(s)

Gilles Hilary Gilles Hilary was a Professor of Accounting and Control at INSEAD and is now a professor at Georgetown.

Marie-Hélène Mansard Marie- Hélène MANSARD hold several senior management positions in sales, marketing, communication and general management in aerospace, defence and cybersecurity.