Crisis and the Internet

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to share my research with you today at this prestigious international conference. The Internet has emerged as a valuable tool for organizations to communicate with their publics. This presentation will discuss the opportunities and challenges of integrating Internet technologies into crisis communication. The Internet provides a controlled way that organizations can frame a crisis, explain corrective action, and provide information to both publics and the media during a time of uncertainty.

This presentation will cover three lines of crisis and technology research. The first part will report the results of an eight-year analysis of organizational use of the Internet during a crisis. The findings suggest that organizations continue to rely on old “logics of action” rather than embracing the two-way interactive active potential of the Internet.

The second part of the presentation will present the results of a study analyzing the use of the Internet in one specific type of crisis: product recalls. The research study examined 60 different product recalls of children’s’ products using dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002), media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986), and instructing information theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Sturges, 1994).

The final part of the presentation translates the study findings into suggestions for how public relations managers can integrate new communication media into their mix of communication tactics in crisis and risk management.

Overview of Crisis and the Internet

Crisis and risk communication have emerged as some of the most highly developed and frequently published topics in the public relations journals (Kí & Khang, 2005). Over the past decade, public relations researchers have provided valuable case studies of how the Internet helps and hinders organizations in their crisis communication (Coombs, 2000; Hearit, 1999; Martinelli & Briggs, 1998; Witmer, 2000). Another line of research (Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Perry, 2005) has longitudinally tracked the integration of the Internet into crisis communication. This line of research found that approximately half of all organizations studied are using a mix of traditional and new tactics to communicate about a crisis.

Taylor and Kent (2007) reflected on what has been learned over the last seven years in order to provide taxonomy of mediated crisis responses. A taxonomy is a system of principles that helps scholars and practitioners to understand a phenomenon. The taxonomy offered here is developed from over 100 Internet responses to crises over a seven-year period (1998-2005). The article takes a “best practices approach” to crisis communication by highlighting exemplar crisis responses in a seven-year period. Over 175 crises emerged and over 100 organizations have integrated the Internet in their responses. The next section of the paper discusses the features of best practices of these crisis responses that we identified in our article.
Best Practices of Mediated Crisis Communication

Best Practice #1: Upload Traditional Tactics to the Web site

Traditional media relations tactics can be adapted for use on the organization’s Web site during and after a crisis. Perry et al. (2003) and Taylor and Perry (2005) identified traditional media tactics that now are used in mediated crisis response. They found that transcripts of news conferences, news releases, fact sheets, question and answer formats, memos/letters to relevant publics, and transcripts of interviews with organizational leaders appear with varying frequency in crisis communication. These traditional tactics are tried and true crisis communication tactics and adopting them for crisis response is quite reasonable. The strength of integrating traditional crisis tactics into the Internet response is that such tactics have already been approved and are ready for rapid dissemination. Uploading PDFs of printed material to the organization’s Web site requires little extra time and effort.

Best Practice #2: Integrating Innovative Tactics

The interactive potential of the Internet provides new tactics for crisis response. Perry et al. (2003) and Taylor and Perry (2005) identified four new media tactics that offer the organization in crisis more interactive ways to communicate with the media and public. The first crisis tactic made possible by the Internet is the two-way, interactive communication feature. It allows an organization to solicit feedback from public to respond to an issue via the Internet. Feedback encourages dialogue and interaction between the organization and its stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Two-way communication also allows an organization to more effectively manage conflict, improve understanding, and address stakeholder concerns.

A second new communication tactic, connecting links, allows an organization to directly connect visitors to other relevant sites, additional information, or resources to improve understanding and demonstrate a good-faith effort to fully inform the stakeholders. In October 2004, Merck & Co., Inc. announced a voluntary recall of its VIOXX arthritis medicine. It provided links to other Web sites that contained additional information for “patients and health care professionals.”

A third new media tactic, real-time monitoring, provides timely monitoring that may be necessary or helpful for the media or public to follow a crisis hour-by-hour or minute-by-minute. Real-time monitoring has also created the ability to reduce delays in reporting and response time.

A fourth tactic now possible because of the Internet is video/audio effects. The ability to post video or audio feeds affords organizations the ability to use satellite images, taped or live video, high-resolution photography, and audio effects to Internet visitors.

Today, with the mix of traditional and new communication tactics, organizations can provide much more comprehensive crisis communication. Organizations can include video/graphics, audio, downloadable forms, and real time monitoring of the crisis. They can create opportunities for dialogue by asking people to call in, e-mail, or write to them.
Best Practice #3: Reducing Uncertainty During Product Recalls

During a product recall, consumers have increased uncertainty and the need for answers. One product recall, the Batmobile, provides an exemplar of how innovative features of Web site design can help an organization communicate with its customers. In April 2003, the Consumer Product Safety Commission issued a joint news release with Mattel, Inc. The news release announced the voluntary recall of Mattel’s Batmobile toy vehicle. The Batmobile had been produced with two very sharp rigid plastic rear tails that could puncture or lacerate children. By April 14, 2004, 14 children had reported injuries from the plastic tails. Of the 14 injured children, four required medical treatment. The recall announcement was made on the Consumer Product Safety Commission’s stationary and provided contact information for the CPSC and for Mattel. The CPSC news release included many innovative tactics including a detailed graphic of the Batmobile, the 800 numbers for both CPSC and Mattel, and a link that could be sent to friends informing them of the Batmobile recall. Web site visitors were also provided with a series of questions and pictures to look at to ascertain whether or not their toy was part of the recall. The link “click here to determine if your product is affected” brought the visitor back to Mattel’s Web site. Visitors could download an instruction manual, order replacement parts, call a Mattel customer service representative, browse through Frequently Asked Questions, and use their postal code to locate a dealer in their area with replacement information.

Best Practice #4: Using Your Web Site to Tell Your Side of the Crisis

Organizational Web sites are controlled communication channels. When an organization posts information to its own Web site, it bypasses the news filters of the media and can communicate directly to the visitors of the site without the limitations inherent in the information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). Direct, unfiltered, controlled information provided via Web sites to interested parties is especially important in crisis situations. Organizational Web sites offer unlimited access to a “soapbox” and provide the organization the forum to tell its perspective on the crisis. Organizations can write as much as they want with no editing by the media, and they can provide supporting materials such as pictures, documents, speeches, interviews, white papers, fact sheets, and news releases to support their arguments and explanations.

Practitioners might ask, “is it really worth the effort to use the Web in my organization’s crisis response?” The answer is yes. Caldiero and Taylor (2009) measured how much of the content from 10 fraud-related news releases actually ended up in newspaper coverage of the crisis. They found that the full quotes attributed to CEOs and organizational leaders featured in the news release appeared in 12% of the news stories about the crisis. Partial quotes provided in the organization’s news releases appeared in 28% of the news stories. Caldiero and Taylor (2009) concluded:

If an organization includes no direct quotes from a spokesperson in its crisis communication, no direct quotes will be used in news media coverage. It is like the lottery; in order to win, you have to buy a ticket. Organizations that do not buy a ticket—that is, do not respond to a crisis through their Web site—could lose all possibility of framing the crisis. (pp. 20-21)
Best Practice #5: Create Different Web Pages for Different Stakeholders

During times of crisis, there are many key stakeholders that require information. Organizations should identify which target publics need which information. Once the information needs of the publics is noted, then Web sites should be tailored for each group.

Best Practice #6: Work with Government Agencies during The Crisis

One way that organizations can manage their crisis is to work directly with a U.S. government agency. Government organizations have a mandate to serve the public interest. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Federal Drug Administration (FDA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) regularly post information about public health and potentially harmful products. The auto industry regularly works with the National Highway Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to provide information for automobile owners. General Motors, Ford, and Toyota announced recalls of their vehicles during the study period. The Security and Exchanges Commission (SEC) regulates financial information and reporting processes. Its Web site provides organizations an opportunity to fulfill their SEC mandated obligations while at the same time keeping negative information off of their own Web sites. Many financial reporters read the EDGAR database for new SEC filings and use this government Web site as the starting place for reporting financial news stories. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also works with organizations during product recalls. Every country will have their own government agencies that can be called upon to help in the crisis.

Product Recall and Internet Communications

The next study that I would like to share with you describes the opportunities and challenges of integrating Internet technologies into product recall crises. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is charged with regulating and enforcing laws that safeguard American consumers. The CPSC maintains a Web site to inform consumers about dangerous products. The CPSC Web site acts as an electronic clearinghouse of information for consumers. This paper explores how 60 organizations experiencing a product recall crisis integrated technology into their recall announcements. It is forthcoming in Tim Coombs and Sherry Holladay’s, Theoretical and practical developments in crisis communication: Defining and advancing an emerging field.

The CPSC: Using Technology in Crisis

Congress created the CPSC in 1972 in response to the growing consumer activism movement that demanded that manufacturers make safer products. The CPSC works with consumer product organizations to protect the public. It is:

charged with protecting the public from unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from more than 15,000 types of consumer products under the agency’s jurisdiction. Deaths, injuries and property damage from consumer product incidents cost the nation more than $700 billion annually. The CPSC is committed to protecting consumers and families from products that pose a fire, electrical, chemical, or mechanical hazard or can injure children. The CPSC’s work to ensure the safety of consumer products - such as toys, cribs, power tools, cigarette lighters, and household chemicals - contributed significantly to the 30 percent decline in the rate of deaths and injuries associated with consumer products over the past 30 years. (www.CPSC.gov)
Research Questions

How are organizations using their Web sites in a crisis? What types of instructing information is provided during a product recall crisis? Are organizations using their Web sites to provide additional information to help consumers during a crisis? Previous research in crisis communication suggests that the way that an organization responds during a crisis will influence its relationships with its publics after the crisis. Additionally, Sturges and others have noted that crisis responses are not merely directed at affected publics, rather, they are also intended for third parties that have potential influence over the organization. To further test these conclusions, two research questions were posed:

RQ1: What types of instructing information is included in the joint CPSC-organization product recalls posted on the Internet?

RQ2: In what ways do organizations integrate new communication technology features on their Web sites that supplement the CPSC announcement?

Method

The researcher studied product recalls appearing on the CPSC Web site. Each year, the CSPC supervises the “voluntary recall” of hundreds of consumer products. These recall notices are posted on the CPSC Web site and are easily retrieved through key word searches. These joint recall notices provide an opportunity to study instructing information and other Internet crisis response tactics and strategies.

Sample

The researcher selected Infant/Child Product recalls (not including toys) as the unit of analysis. Infant/Child Products were selected because infants and children are vulnerable publics. Infants and children have no choice but to use the products purchased for them by their parents. Consumer product organizations should theoretically take great care in creating and marketing products to be used by infants and children.

The timeframe for the study lasted from February 1, 2006 to February 1, 2007. This period was selected because the CPSC often requires that companies keep their recall announcement in the public domain for a one-year period. In total, there were 60 recalls of Infant/Child products during this one-year period.

Procedures

To answer RQ1, the researcher examined the joint news release issued by the CPSC and the organization in crisis during the sample period. The CPSC/organization news releases follow a specific format. Coombs (1999) found that during a crisis, the more information an organization communicated about the crisis, the more people believed the organization could have prevented the crisis. Thus, amount of information is key to rebuilding relationships. Too little information and the public may feel that their safety is at risk. Conversely, too much information communicated about the crisis many mean that affected individuals believe that the organization could have avoided this incident. As Coombs notes, strategic ambiguity may be the middle of the road response.
To evaluate the instructing responses, each release was coded in three ways: 1) the description of the incident or injury, 2) the number of incidents/ injuries, and 3) the organization’s remedy for people who own this particular product.

The joint CPSC-organization templates are lean communication tactics (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) and communicate only the most basic information to the public. The template of recall new releases varies little and thus limits the amount of information that the organization disseminates to its public about the recall. Thus, the researcher assumed that the organization involved in the recall would send its publics to its Web site for additional information. At the Web site, the manufacturer has the opportunity to show compassion and corrective action to the public and thus is a logical way to add richness to the recall. To answer RQ 2, the researcher followed Web site links from the joint releases back to the organization’s Web site to see if their product recall received additional attention, pictures, content or dialogic features on the Web site. Additional information, pictures, or interactive features would provide evidence that the organization was using new communication technologies to enrich its outreach about the recalled product.

Results

RQ1 sought evidence about the types of instructing information that is included in joint CPSC-organization product recalls. The findings show that 60 child/infant products were recalled in the study timeframe. The child products recalled ranged from high chairs, strollers, cups, clothes, and jewelry specifically for children. Some of America’s most famous brands appeared on the recall list including Graco, Lands End, Jordache, and Reebok. These products were sold at retailers ranging from Family Dollar and Wal-Mart to Neiman Marcus and Macy’s. Table 1 shows that the most common recalls involved products that poisoned, strangled, choked, tripped, burned or lacerated users. It appears there are many different kinds of risks to infants and children.

Of the 60 recalls, 38 organizations recalled their products before any incident or injury was reported. Of the 22 organizations that had incidents or injuries reported, the instructing information in the joint news releases showed that there were a total of 383 reports of incidents. Twenty-one children were injured and sadly, two children died from these recalled products.

One of the major parts of Sturges’ and Coombs’ discussion of instructing information is for “stakeholders should be told if there is anything that they can do to protect themselves” (Coombs, 1999, p. 120). The joint news releases were examined for remedies. Fletcher (2003) noted that “the remedy that manufacturers prefer, rather than a refund or product exchange, is an in-home repair kit” (p. 177). Five different recall remedies appeared in this sample of recall crises. Contrary to Fletcher’s observations, refunds actually appeared to be the most favored remedy with 34 of the organizations recommending that consumers either return the product to the place where they brought it or return it to the manufacturer for a refund. Sixteen organizations offered to replace the recalled product. Ten organizations provided the consumer with information how to fix the product at home. For instance, several sweatshirt companies warned that the drawstring on their “hoodies” could strangle a child. The manufacturers recommended that parents cut out the drawstring to minimize risk. Nine manufacturers offered a repair kit that could be ordered online or by phone. Two organizations recommended that parents bring the product to the retail store so that store employees can help them to fix the product.
RQ 2 inquired about the ways that organizations were supplementing the instructing responses on their Web sites and adding richer, dialogic features to explain the crisis and its remedy. Because of the lean nature of the CPSC template, the researcher examined each organization’s Web site to understand if, and how, the organizations were including additional information that might feature compassion and reputation issues so important to maintaining and rebuilding relationships after a crisis. Forty-seven of the manufacturers included a link to their Web site in the joint news release suggesting that visitors go there for more information about the recall. The researcher visited each of these Web sites to look for evidence of the first two parts of instructing information—the basic information about what happened and the corrective action (Coombs, 1999). Both of these strategies are necessary to rebuild relationships after a crisis.

Organizations experiencing a product recall crisis are missing the opportunity to rebuild relationships with consumers. The results show that 45 of the 48 of the organizations (94%) did nothing more than post the lean CPSC joint news release on their Web sites under a link named, “recall information”. Often times, these recall notices were hard to find and the researcher had to search for the link to the recall notice. Only three organizations (Reebok, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, and Oriental Trading Company) used their Web sites to add background information. What makes these three recalls similar is that they all involved lead charms that could be easily swallowed by children. Table 1 shows that poisoning is the most frequent reason for a recall during this study time. Their additional information is detailed below.

*Child dies after swallowing a Reebok charm.* In Spring 2006, a child in Minnesota died after swallowing a “gift with purchase” Reebok charm bracelet. The charm, made of out lead, poisoned the child. Reebok’s response met two of the three criteria of instructing information proposed by Coombs (1999). Reebok’s message focused on corrective action. It noted its efforts to communicate with the public about the danger associated with the charm bracelet. Reebok also noted its outreach efforts to medical professionals and emergency rooms. Finally, Reebok promised to “conduct a comprehensive review of our quality control programs. The findings of this review will determine what, if any, additionally safety measures need to be incorporated in our operations in the future” (www. reebok.com).

*Shirley Temple charms contain lead.* Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment (TCFHE) also recalled a gift with purchase during the study. They also featured supplemental information for consumers on its Web site when it recalled 750,000 “gift with purchase” charms from Shirley Temple DVD movies. The charms contained high amounts of lead that could easily poison a small child. Following the link on the joint news release, the company posted an additional message to its customers on its Web site. This message explained what the organization was doing to inform the public about the risks of the charms. It also used this open letter to “thank our customers and our consumers for their patience and support during this voluntary recall. Please know that we remain committed to ensuring the safety and quality of our products” (www.dvdcharmrecall.com). This message was followed by the joint company CPSC recall announcement.

*Beaded charm bracelets pose poisoning danger.* The third organization that added instructing information to its Web site was the Oriental Trading Company. It provided a link on its homepage and brought the visitor to a page that was named, Safety News. The announcement explained the risk and then told the visitor, “we would like to emphasize Oriental Trading
Company’s commitment to providing quality merchandise safe for the enjoyment by our customers and once again request that you immediately discard item No. 24/1582 beaded heart photo charm bracelet”.

Discussion

Product Recalls Follow the Letter but Not the Spirit of the Law

Why did so few organizations bring additional instructing information into their product recalls? The first answer may lie in the relationship between manufacturers and the CPSC. The CPSC rarely brings a company to court over a recalled dangerous product. Instead, as Fletcher notes, the CPSC walks a fine line balancing many relationships. For instance, it was nearly abolished by two presidents and “the commission has been exceptionally vulnerable to the politics of consumer product safety” (Fletcher, 2003, p. 172). Because the CPSC has no input on product development, it can only regulate through a post hoc manner. The CPSC relies on the manufacturers to self-report injuries and incidents. The Consumer Product Safety Act of 1972 prohibits the CPSC from revealing damaging information about specific companies and recalls. Instead, it can only speak about the “process of recalls” and suggests consumers with questions fill out Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the specific companies.

The second answer may be in the way that each company controls how much information it will releases about the injuries, incidents or remedies. Companies have the power to shape the exact wording of the recall, select remedies, and chose how much or how little additional information to add to their CPSC news releases. Manufacturers are following the letter of the law when working with the CPSC on a product recall, but, they are failing to live up to the spirit of the law in their communication with publics.

Missed Opportunities in Using Technology to Improve Product Recalls

This chapter is based on the assumption that crises happen and that an organization’s ability to recover from a crisis is dependent on their actions and communication during and after the crisis. This study of recalled infant and child products shows that organizations fail to use their Web sites and new communication technologies to provide instructing information that will help parents reduce uncertainty and regain their trust in the organizations that make cribs, chairs, or clothing for children. The very nature of the joint CPSC-manufacturer Internet recall notice is too narrow, too rigid in format, and too lean on instructing information to really be useful to parents. Additionally, organizations are failing to add supplemental information on their Web sites to help visitors understand the true nature and risk of the products.

It appears that organizations are indeed meeting the letter of the law by working with the CPSC on a recall notice. However, over 90% of the organizations studied in this research project fail to live up to the spirit of the Product Safety Act of 1972. Organizations that take the path of least resistance and merely post the recall release on their Web site are not doing what they need to do to rebuild relationships with publics. They are missing an important opportunities to use communication technologies to enhance crisis communication and, ultimately, enhance relationship building.
Conclusions for New Communication Technologies in Product Recall Crises

This study has provided evidence that shows that organizations in a product recall crisis rarely meet what Coombs (1999) called the requirements of instructing information. Instead, they respond with minimal information that is negotiated with the CPSC. Sturges (1994) argued that information communicated during a crisis may have the objective to appease third party interveners. Given the findings of these 60 crises, this conclusion seems to be accurate. Organizations are doing what they have to do to meet the guidelines of the CPSC. They are doing nothing more.

When a child is harmed or dies, the manufacturer needs to accept responsibility and do more than just place the joint CPSC news release on its Web site under a small, hard to see, link. The manufacturer should recognize that its consumer public is at risk and needs a variety of information vehicles to learn about the recall and the remedies. The Internet news release by the CPSC and the organization gives the impression that manufacturers are accountable and responsible to their consumers. Yes, the content of these releases fails on many levels. When organizations work with the CPSC but downplay the seriousness of the crisis, no one wins. The public is at risk, the CPSC is ineffective, and the organization is not held accountable for its actions.

Organizations can and should enhance their use of technology during a product recall crisis. Media richness theory, instructing information, and mediated dialogic theory provide useful frameworks for bringing in richer, more useful communication with publics during a crisis. The fact that 94% of the organizations experiencing a product recall crisis failed to add any additional information on their Web sites or integrate any dialogic features suggests that many organizations fail to see the value of incorporating new technology in crisis response. This is a missed opportunity and can be easily corrected once organizations understand the value of technology in crisis response.

Lessons Learned About Mediated Crisis Response

There are many things that an organization can do to prepare for a potential crisis, communicate during a crisis, and rebuild relationships with publics after a crisis.

Before Any Crisis

1. Create links to a “Press Center” or “News Room” that are clearly marked on the home page. Journalists and visitors should be able to immediately find your Press Center from the homepage. Do not hide the Press Center or News Room inside another link.

2. Archive previous news releases and provide a key word search engine that sorts the search term results by relevance. For instance, if a reporter inputs the term “CEO resignation,” all news releases that address the CEO resignation should come up in reverse chronological order.

3. Upload general fact sheets, backgrounders, high-resolution photos of the organization’s leaders, PDFs of annual reports, and update contact information to include addresses and phone numbers of organizational spokespersons. The best way to think about this information is: what would a reporter need to write a story about our organization. Make it easy for the reporter or visitor to learn more about the positive things about your organization.
4. Assess your organization’s risks and identify worst-case scenarios. What could go wrong—product recall, layoffs, terrorism, etc.—and brainstorm what can you prepare today to shorten your response time tomorrow.

5. Create draft communication tactics that can be used in the event of a crisis. Write templates of organizational materials that can be quickly edited to meet the requirements of the crisis.

6. Consider how the innovative crisis tactics might be integrated into the crisis response. Which links to pages within your Web site might prove useful during a crisis? What graphics might be uploaded to help the media better understand your organization? Do you have the technology/bandwidth to provide streaming video if needed? Can a million people in one day successfully navigate your Web site?

7. Speak with the legal department to gain agreement about the role of public relations function during a crisis. Advocate for a significant role for the public relations function and be able to explain that what the organization does during and after a crisis is crucial to its recovery. Gain agreement from the legal department that public relations will use the organization’s Web site for communication during the crisis.

8. View your Web site through the lens of a media representative who needs information quickly. Ask an intern or friend to visit the site and find the answers to simple questions. Make any necessary changes so that all visitors can easily find the information they seek.

During a Crisis

1. Upload traditional communication tactics to the Web site as soon as they are approved.

2. Clearly mark any tactics specifically dedicated to the crisis. Keep the crisis information separate from other organizational materials.

3. Specify the exact times and dates of next update so that reporters know when to expect new information.

After a Crisis

1. Return to the pre-crisis configuration of your Web site.

2. Create a two-way communication option that solicits visitor opinions and provides answers to questions. Feedback loops such as 1-800 numbers and e-mail addresses provide valuable information about how the public responded to your crisis.

3. Create an archive of your mediated crisis response for evaluation (and possible future use). Create a list of what your department did well and what you can do to improve future crisis response.

Final Thoughts about the Internet in Crisis Communication

Organizations respond to crisis and integrating the Internet into their traditional responses is an easy and effective way to communicate with publics. Future research should explore the
effectiveness of different responses and measure if and how public opinion shifts when an organization employs the Internet in its communication.

As public use of the Internet grows, expectations for Internet use in crisis will also grow. Not incorporating an Internet component into an crisis response may someday be synonymous with the dreaded, “no comment.”

Bibliography


