

January Webinar Crisis Communication in the Age of Social Media Question & Answer

A sampling of questions (and responses) from webinar participants. Questions are edited for brevity. Feel free to email rrkaufman154@gmail.com with additional questions or comments.

I've seen hashtags created or incidents so that media, family and community can follow, and get all the updated information. Do you recommend?

Yes, for these reasons:

- Provides a way to group relevant information for ease of following, finding and sharing.
- Keeps communications organized (and easy to archive)
- Makes monitoring easier, both internally and externally
- Documenting post-crisis (an important end-step within any crisis response)

We had an incident the last day of school of an unverified active-shooter that turned out to be false. How do we best get in front of these types of incidents using social media?

Be proactive. Provide factual information as soon as possible, first to employees and the impacted school's parents that: 1) a threat was received and law enforcement is on scene investigating; 2) students and staff are responding according to the district's emergency response protocols; and 3) we'll provide more information as it becomes available.

As soon as the incident is determined to be false, immediately provide an update to your stakeholder groups with information regarding the circumstances that led to the incident and school's emergency response. It's also advantageous to have law enforcement provide a statement corroborating their investigation and outcome. Then reassure stakeholders of the school's commitment to school safety and security.

Can you hand-pick your social media influencers? For example, can you ask your family associations/PTA or PTO members to pitch in and help? Or, is that manipulating the process?

Those stakeholders and groups that typically are strong supporters of the school and school system are the best third-party endorsers and defenders, especially those who are active on social media. So, by all means, hand-pick, recruit and encourage your supporters simply by affirming your commitment to keep them informed on all issues - good and bad. This relationship will pay huge dividends when your school hits a few bumps in the road.

How do you emphasize to Superintendents that when minutes are ticking by with no response or updates from the district that this is an eternity on social media?

Provide evidence of examples where organizations and school systems have been reputationally damaged due to the delay in communicating to stakeholders in a crisis or incident. To be a trusted leader, build the case through data and evidence, and sound practices. Sometimes it may take more than one conversation, and unfortunately an incident that has a negative impact on your organization, to convince the superintendent or other district leaders to understand the importance of timely information and transparency.

Any tips on managing your emotional welfare while managing and monitoring your social media?

Presumably if the latter is not during a crisis, it can rankle us when we read or see negative comments about our organization or an issue related to our work. Remember, you will always be associated with your organization, so while you may want to respond to “set the record straight” or come to the defense of the organization, it is best to take a step back and consider whether responding is the best for the organization. It may be cathartic to your emotional well-being, but that will be short-lived.

Assuming the question pertains to a crisis or incident response, it is important to acknowledge that as a parent or former parent, as a person with a heart, you will feel a range of emotions in any crisis response efforts, including managing and monitoring social media. As hard as it is, you will serve your organization - and yourself - best if you can keep emotions out of your tasks at hand. Focusing on what you need to do as part of the crisis analysis, response and recovery is priority. Detaching oneself from the emotional rollercoaster for periods of time to focus on your work will also be important. I’m not a psychologist so my response may not resonate with professional advice, all I can relate is what I’ve experienced.

Seek assistance from your professional staff who have experience in this area. I can tell you that we had mental health and grief counselors on our crisis response team throughout the Columbine High School tragedy to help us manage our own emotions, feelings and fears. This is why I required all persons on our response team - including those volunteers who came to assist a day or two or longer - to debrief daily, and each debriefing included a sharing of our own feelings. We were in this together, so sharing our feelings was very important for our own psychological well-being.