the**partners**group

Preparing for and coping with a crisis online

Preparing for
and coping with
a crisis online

White Paper 2
Crisis management
in a digital world

thepartnersgroup

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twenty**five**years
of success & **partners**hips

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PR & marketing communications

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In the new world of social media and mobile technology, communication is instantaneous, incessant and capable of reaching an international audience within seconds. News travels fast and every individual with a mobile device and access to social networks can broadcast their version of the news – we have seen the advent of "citizen journalism".
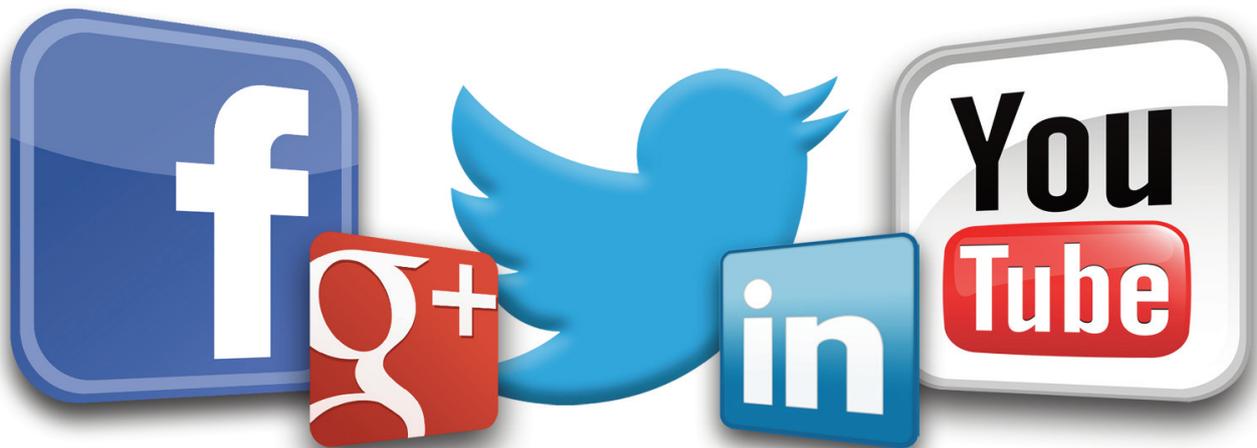
Social media has created new channels of communication that allow the public and key influencers to vent their feelings or fury at an organisation or brand. This means that an issue can very quickly escalate to become a crisis. Even if a crisis does not begin in the social media space, it is likely that people will talk about it here. Rumours about a crisis can circulate quickly via social networks and these can increase the damage caused by the original crisis.

On the flip side, businesses can use social media proactively. It provides businesses with a fast and effective means of communication, which can be utilised in a crisis situation such as when a faulty product needs to be recalled.

If you have not yet embraced social media you are not alone – many businesses are not using it to its greatest effect. However many pressure groups, unions and other special interest groups are well ahead in the social media race with Facebook, YouTube and Twitter being the key platforms. Be aware that your potential adversaries are embracing the real time speed, global reach and level of true engagement these platforms provide.

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A crisis can cause immense disruption, cost a lot of money to rectify and damage your company's image if you end up trending on Twitter or on the front page of the newspapers. In a world where social media makes it easier than ever before for people to publicly have their say, brands are more exposed than ever to public scrutiny and vulnerable to reputational damage in the event of a crisis.

It's often the simple things that cause problems. And there's usually a human element. Someone, somewhere does something, or fails to do something he or she should have done. You can take sensible precautions, such as putting a crisis contingency plan in place, which can help you prepare for when and if the worst happens.

Our first White Paper "Preparing for and coping in a crisis" offers sound advice to small and medium sized companies including our 10 Golden Rules to follow should a crisis occur. This second White Paper builds on this advice and tailors it for the digital world – helping you prepare for and respond to a crisis using social media.

If crisis management is handled badly, long-term damage can be done to an organisation's reputation. This will affect relationships with stakeholders and in turn may affect a business's bottom line. If handled well, a crisis can actually be an opportunity to improve an organisation's reputation – in the real as well as the "virtual" online world.

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Preparing for a crisis

1. **Develop a social media crisis communications plan - and test it.**

   Most companies have a traditional crisis communications plan written for a different era. Smart companies today have developed specific plans to handle online crises. The single most important part of your digital crisis plan will be to identify who "owns" online communications in a crisis. Turf wars between marketing and public relations and customer service departments will be lethal when you face a crisis online.

   A crisis communications plan is a reference tool, not a blueprint. It provides lists of key contact information, reminders of what typically should be done in a crisis, and forms to be used to document the crisis response. It is not a step-by-step guide to how to manage a crisis but it saves time during a crisis by pre-assigning some tasks, pre-collecting some information, and serving as a reference source. Pre-assigning tasks presumes there is a designated crisis team. The team members should know what tasks and responsibilities they have during a crisis.

   Once the plan is in place test it, refine it and test again.

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2. Develop and publish an employee social media policy.

Develop a clear (no more than two pages) policy that encourages your employees to learn and use social media in their personal lives as the first step. This policy should illustrate best practices for differentiating the ever-greying lines between personal and professional activities and establish clear guidelines for appropriate commentary. In a crisis, a well-trained and connected workforce can often be one of the best resources for correcting misinformation and reclaiming the online narrative.

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3. Monitor your brand.

There are dozens of free and low-cost tools available to assist in the work of brand monitoring and crisis warning, from Google alerts and Google analytics to far more sophisticated programs that sort through millions of online updates and posts every day. They allow you to select keywords and will record each time they are used on various social media channels.

The keywords you might want to monitor include:

- **your organisation's name**
- **your product names**
- **famous people associated with the organisation**
- **legislation and policies that affect the organisation**
- **activist groups that hold negative feelings towards the organisation**
- **the industries your organisation is a part of.**

Technology has made it possible for every company to keep its finger on the pulse of the online discourse. Business leaders simply need to begin investing in the listening process.

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4. Develop your social media presence and influence in advance.

Identify the social media platforms that are relevant to your organisation and start listening and engaging in online conversations. A content-rich social media presence will develop credibility and goodwill, which will prove vital in the event of a crisis.

5. Engage industry influencers.

Attract and engage key influencers who will communicate positive messages about your organisation in the event of a crisis.

A crisis by its nature is fast moving and the media (and social media world) will look to third parties for comment so it's important that you can rely on industry influencers to be supportive. This task involves a proactive campaign (prior to a crisis) that communicates effectively with editors, industry bodies, key bloggers, researchers and industry experts. If you have kept them up-to-date with your latest developments and successes they will have a rich store of information to draw upon – leading to informed comment rather than speculation.

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6. Create a central touch point.

Think about creating a separate website for the crisis or designate a section of your current website for the crisis. This should be created in advance, as part of your crisis communications plan and only made live when it is required. Use the "dark site" to present background information, facts and figures and keep it updated with information about the fast-moving crisis – it's the best place to promote your side of the story and you should drive traffic to it via your social media activity.

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During a crisis

1. Don't panic!

It's important not to panic or react unnecessarily. Listen first, and then act. Examine any negative comments in context and understand the conversation that has developed. Check the tone of voice that has been used – it is very easy to sound off on the internet and it may be that someone is making an off the cuff remark. Also investigate how well connected the commentator is - how many followers, number of retweets and likes etc. You would treat someone with 10 followers differently to someone with 10,000 followers. Sometimes doing nothing is the best approach.

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During a crisis

2. Speak up.

Once a crisis hits be quick, be accurate and be consistent.
The aim is to minimise the damage, protect and repair
reputation. Within your crisis communications plan you will
have prepared responses to the most likely crisis scenarios,
which will help you start to communicate.

Social media provides the channels to respond to news of a
crisis without needing to rely on journalists. You can
announce product recalls, respond to criticism and defuse
situations by talking directly to customers to tell your side
of the story. Use social media to correct misinformation
and provide up-to-date information about a crisis as it
develops.

The most important thing to remember is that the quality
of the content and the messages must be clear and
relevant. Be proactive, respond positively and share
information.

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During a crisis

Communication must:

- **explain the facts of the situation**
- **set out what the organisation is doing to address the crisis**
- **show empathy for the stakeholders who have been affected.**

In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, social media managers must be extremely cautious about what is posted. Though all events are different, the first responsibility is to the victims and their families.

Turn off your automated social media feeds - an off-subject or promotional tweet during a crisis paints an uncaring picture.

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During a crisis

3. Keep staff informed.

Inform employees of the event and how your company
plans to respond. You can't forbid employees from using
social media, but you can point out how important it is for
the company's reputation to have a uniform voice and
accurate information.

Intranet sites can also be used during a crisis. Intranet
sites limit access, typically to employees only though some
will include suppliers and customers. Again this helps to
ensure that consistent, accurate information is
communicated throughout the crisis period and beyond.

4. Keep listening and monitoring.

Keep listening to the online conversation and monitor any
hashtags or other keywords people are using to identify the
crisis situation - and then respond accordingly.

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5. Have relevant spokespeople.

Ideally, potential spokespeople will be trained and practice media relations skills prior to any crisis. It is unrealistic for one person to be the spokesperson, particularly if a crisis runs for several days, so make sure the team is fully briefed and consistent messages are communicated.

Remember to use the tools of the trade – social media is all about short bursts of information and conversations, photos, web links and video footage. Film interviews of key spokespeople and post them on YouTube or take photos that show how the crisis is being resolved and Tweet them with links back to your website.

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After the crisis

1. **Think of a crisis as an opportunity.**

   Once you've got the crisis under control, use it as an opportunity to make all the changes you've always wanted to make.

   Look at the big picture. Don't just focus on the immediate problem. Consider wider strategic issues. Look at the organisation as a whole and identify what else needs to be changed.

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2. Make sure it can't happen again.

Once the initial investigation is over, and the crisis stabilised, get an independent view on the underlying causes and put preventative measures in place. You are likely to survive a one-off crisis but the public are unwilling to forgive repeat offenders.

Use the occasion to build the best organisational structure, processes, control systems and information and reporting flows; and to make any cultural changes required to improve transparency and accountability.

3. Capitalise on the cost.

Managing a crisis is expensive. But if you handle it correctly, you can put your organisation in a stronger position than it was before the crisis took place.

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After the crisis

4. Learn from other people's mistakes.

Or better still learn from someone else's crisis without going through the pain yourself. Look at what's gone wrong, and why and how it's gone wrong. Ask yourself whether your business is exposed to the same risks (same geography, same industry, same business issues, same regulator, etc). Assess what you're doing to prevent the same thing happening in your own company and take action before it happens to you.

Act now!

Business leaders agree that the main thing preventing corporate use of social and digital media for reputation management and crisis communications is the lack of experience and knowledge of how to engage online in real time. Even companies with historically savvy digital marketing teams acknowledge that they have failed to maximize their resources and are in danger of succumbing to reputational and possible financial damage in times of crisis.

If you want your company to survive a social media crisis, take advice from experts and begin to level the digital playing field.

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About The Partners Group

Partners is a friendly and professional public relations and marketing communications agency based in York, North Yorkshire - and this year we are celebrating our 25th anniversary.

If you're looking for strategic and creative as well as practical, hands-on PR and communications support - we're the people to talk to.

Services include:

PR consultancy	**International PR**
Partners Pathfinder	**Events PR**
Online PR	**Green PR**
Marketing support	**Public consultation**
Crisis communications	**Leisure marketing**

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We help organisations throughout the UK - and across a range of industries - achieve their objectives. Our roots are in business to business public relations and marketing communications, but our experience spans local, regional, national and international campaigns for clients in the building, property, construction, manufacturing, food processing, professional services, family law, leisure and tourism sectors - among others.

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Comments or queries about this white paper are very welcome.