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Crisis communications in a changing world

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When Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," he never could have envisioned a time in which local government leaders are thrust into the limelight on a moment's notice. Yet, today municipal officials in communities of all sizes are increasingly becoming characters in real-life dramas played out on the worldwide stage called the Internet. In a wired, socially networked world, news of a flood, sensational crime or scandal travels across the globe as fast as across the street. When trouble strikes, elected officials must respond quickly or risk having their leadership called into question.

More Channels, More Challenges

Many elected officials recall when communities had a few newspapers and a handful of television and radio stations. Back then, focusing communications efforts on those channels would have been adequate. However, according to recent research by Pew, 61 percent of people now get their news online, which includes social media sites. Television remains the most popular news source, but online channels already top radio and newspapers. The report also found 60 percent of consumers use a mix of online and offline media.

Downsizing and competition among news organizations prompted the early retirement of veteran journalists succeeded by less experienced reporters juggling multiple stories and tougher deadlines. In the race for ratings, the old journalistic saying, "When in doubt, leave it out" has been replaced by "Get it first, then get it right." Finally, anyone with a camera, cell phone or computer can become a "citizen journalist" and instantaneously share their version of the story – right or wrong – with the world.

The consequences for crisis communications are far reaching. No longer do press conferences and releases alone reach your constituents, each of whom expects information to be available at his or her convenience via their preferred delivery method.

Survival Strategies

1. Update your communications plan and infrastructure

A clear chain-of-command – with authorized backups – is imperative in a 24/7 world. Expect at



City officials participate in a mock press conference during a workshop conducted by Brad and Janet Ritter at TML's Annual Conference.

least one key person to be on vacation or otherwise unavailable during a crisis.

Identify secondary communications command centers with backup power and access to computers and servers, printers, fax machines and televisions. Prepare "fill in-the-blank" press releases and a "ghost" web page for a variety of potential crises. Learn to create simple online videos. Know how to send twitter tweets.

Binders filled with communication plan components have given way to flash drives, CDs or even business-card sized CDs that are infinitely easier to store and transport. At least on an annual basis, review the plan, incorporate new scenarios, revise materials and update media and community contacts. Consider conducting surveys to determine how constituents want to get breaking news.

2. Create a culture of responsibility

A crisis is like a house fire. The first responders need to start putting it out with whatever is available. Minutes matter in a crisis, too. Indecision and inaction allow the situation to worsen. By communicating first and often, leaders can better manage public expectations and minimize incorrect speculation. Remember, the media, including "citizen journalists," are going to report the story on their timetable, not yours, using whatever information and visuals are available.

3. Assign and train multiple spokes people

The old rule was to have ONE designated spokesperson for consistent messaging, but in a "round-the clock news cycle, that is unfeasible.

Confident, articulate spokespeople are trained, not born. Even the most skilled spokespeople benefit from refresher courses, advanced message development training and rehearsals

4. Monitor communications

Designate several people to monitor coverage of the crisis and its response. Besides traditional media outlets, keep careful track of blogs, facebook, twitter and other social media posts. If misinformation is circulating, quickly counter it in the same forum.

5. Prepare for blaming

The crisis will likely remain underway when the finger pointing and blaming begin. The public and media expect instant answers and fixes, regardless of the problem's complexity. Anticipate the most difficult questions and address them upfront. Make sure responses are appropriate, honest, empathetic and in the public's best interest.

Shakespeare offers some solace to unwitting players on today's world stage. He notes, "They have their exits and their entrances." By effectively managing crises, you may leave the drama unscathed and, perhaps, even earn rave reviews.

Brad and Janet Ritter speak and conduct communications workshops nationwide. This article is based on programs presented at the TML Annual Conference in Gatlinburg. You can contact them at www.bradritter.com.