

WHEN AQUARIUS MET ISOCIALMEDIA 21C

Once upon a time, incident or crisis communications was a relatively manageable function. It was the age of Aquarius and when something went ‘bang’ the CEOs would yell for the PR-types, provide some one-line answers to bothersome questions like “what”, “where”, “when”, “who” and “why”, and by the time those pesky journalists found out about the event everything was reasonably in place to manage the news process.

Warp-drive to the year 2013 and poor old Aquarius is right in the path of planet-killing asteroid named *iSocialMedia 21C*.

OK, so maybe that’s a little melodramatic. If so, here’s the reality check. A serious aircraft incident at a remote airfield is captured by chance on a smartphone. Within minutes the phone user sends a tweet with a series of images to his followers, one of whom happens to be a radio journalist about 1,000km away. Within 30 minutes the story goes to air and vision appears on the station’s website. The usual discussion at this point focuses on the “how” of dealing with social media. The real issue is not social or instant media, but more importantly, condensing time from the Aquarian 60 or 90 minutes down to just 15 minutes in terms of getting an incident communications process up and running.



In fact, the solution is relatively straightforward and it’s all about having at least some of the basics in place well before the incident occurs.

Note that the following is not a complete list nor should it be construed as a crisis or incident communications plan. It does, however, highlight several of the basic steps and tools required.

1. Compile a list of people inside and outside the organisation with responsibility for managing the communications process.
Time saved: 10 min.
2. A list of stakeholders or stakeholder groups that have potential to engage you on social media during an incident will also come in handy.
Time saved: 40 min.

3. Have a plain English media holding statement. Although the contents may vary, the basic starting points should be to acknowledge the incident, note concern for the welfare of those involved and, as might be the case, indicate regret for any inconvenience caused to others and a promise to provide further details as soon as possible.

Time saved: 30 min.

4. A one-page backgrounder on your organisation may also come in handy if you don't want to spend time explaining what your company is and what it does.

Time saved: 40 min.

5. Be able to switch on contemporary and social media monitoring services. The world may already know more about your incident than you, or it may tell you what you need to correct.

Time saved: 40 min.

6. The question is more important than the answer, so anticipating what the social media community and media might want to know may prove very useful. Having answers ready to go is even more useful.

Time saved: 20 min.

7. Have a media and a key stakeholder (customers, regulators, local politicians, etc.) list at the ready. It's not the sort of task that you want to be distracted with in the midst of an incident.

Time saved: 120 min.

8. Scripts for receptionists and written instructions for employees on how to direct media enquiries will reduce the risk of incorrect or unauthorised comments being randomly provided to the media.

Time saved: 30 min.

Total time saved: At least 5 hours!

Finally, run an incident simulation including how you will respond to social media agitation – it's amazing what you'll learn. And while you're at it, get some expert training if you're the one who has to front the media. Journalists don't expect you to perform like a seasoned newsreader, but some hands-on preparation could make a world of difference.

IMPORTANT: *The above list aims to provide general advice and is neither complete nor meant to supplant a proper incident/crisis communications plan. Every organisation is unique and every incident requires specific and different considerations, so seek expert help in this area.*

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