

rehearsing and managing a crisis over social media



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Social Media Simulations

a white paper from Polpeo – February 2014

Introduction

The first time most brands get to learn the best (and worst) ways to manage a social media crisis is when it happens for real. All the scenario planning, team structures and crisis management plans in the world can't prepare you for the sheer volume of people you have to deal with, or the exhaustion of a team that's been dealing with an angry mob all day, or how that team will react under extreme pressure.

In times of crisis, we turn back to what we know. Armed forces and emergency services men and women know this: in the most extreme situations, your responses to a crisis will be dictated by what you've learned to do automatically, through endless drill, rehearsal, preparation and discipline.

When a crisis breaks, it doesn't break over a single channel. It breaks on news sites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, forums, TV and YouTube. The first reporters to any crisis scene are citizens armed with smartphones and a Twitter account. The first pictures to emerge of the devastating tornadoes in Oklahoma were taken from mobile phones. The news of the Hudson River emergency air

landing was broken to the world by a camera phone picture on Twitter, which was flashed round the world's media in seconds.

We can no longer manage how an issue breaks. It is no more possible to control the message that spreads through social networks than it is to control the medium over which it travels.

What we can do, is control how we respond. And we can practise that response using simulation technology, so that when a real crisis breaks we are rehearsed, drilled, prepared, and have the team discipline to deal with it effectively.

Polpeo has used its combined social media, PR and reputation management expertise to produce this paper to help you prepare for a social media crisis, learn how and why you need to rehearse, and examine the practicalities of managing a crisis breaking on social media.

Why rehearse a social media crisis?

Rehearsing a crisis will give your team confidence to handle a difficult situation and highlight any gaps in policy, process or team management. If you can rehearse a crisis, you can experiment a bit with how to handle it. You can make mistakes in a controlled environment, rather than with the world watching, and you can try different tones of voice to diffuse tension.

You could even test the likely reaction of the crowd to a new product. If you're releasing an ad campaign that could court controversy, simulating the public response on social media will help you formulate your position and response ahead of the campaign breaking.

Practice gives you the confidence to know that, when you're facing the real thing, your teams will know what to do. In a live situation, you don't have time to get every Tweet checked by a lawyer. So it's incredibly important that your social media team or agency is empowered to respond in a way that fits the culture and ethos of the brand, and in a way that isn't just replicating a corporate message on a social channel.

The science of rehearsing

There are six factors that come into play during a crisis – things that really define how a team feels about the crisis, and how they respond under pressure. We call these the 'hot seat' factors:

1. **Speed of response.** In a crisis you have to think quickly, and act quickly
2. **Visibility.** The age of being able to hide behind a corporate press statement in response to a crisis is, effectively, gone. The statement plays its part, of course, but a more human and transparent response will come on Facebook, Twitter, blogs and forums. These are highly visible channels, and the effectiveness of a response is judged on them.
3. **Unpredictability.** It was hard enough for marketing teams dealing with the press through a crisis, but now we deal directly with the public through social media channels. And members of the public won't have an objective view; each will bring a personal agenda and emotion to the issue.
4. **Lack of control.** It is no more possible to control conversations on social media than it is to control

conversations in the home. Corporate control has no place on social pages that are, often, deeply personal.

5. ***This is a new industry.*** That means every action by a company managing a crisis is being watched, scrutinised and analysed. Your peers are learning from your handling of an issue, good and bad.
6. ***The boomerang effect.*** Whatever you do in a crisis could come back to bite you. The temptation is to retreat to a safe place and ignore what's going on, but the public nature of social media means this isn't possible any more.

Fear of failure is probably the biggest threat to handling a crisis successfully. The neuroscience of what happens to us when faced with a crisis determines how we behave. Being in the 'hot seat' completely changes our brain chemistry.

Human evolution means we are the descendants of survivors. We outran our predators, and our brains developed to enable us to survive. This means we are highly attuned to threats. The moment we perceive a threat, we are flooded with cortisol and adrenaline, to ready us to run and to fight.

The brain perceives a social threat in the same way as a physical threat. And all that cortisol and adrenaline might be useful in outwitting a predator, but it's not as useful when we're in front of a computer, responding to an angry mob on social media.

So what does this change in chemistry in response to a threat do to our brain?

Let's first look at a basic model of the mind. System 2 is our rational mind. This is the part of our mind we take to college, the part that reads the manual. Let's say this has the processing power of an encyclopaedia. System 1 is our primitive brain, or "monkey brain" as it is often called. Let's say, relatively speaking, this has the processing power of the universe.

System 1 is finely tuned to threats. And when we face a threat and the brain chemistry changes, a number of things happen:

1. ***Our mirror neurons (or 'social wifi') shut down.*** We can't tell what others are thinking and feeling, and we don't care that much either. We become very inward looking.

2. **Others have mirror neurons too, which respond to our shut down.** This creates emotional contagion (what we might call 'spreading an atmosphere').
3. **System 1 takes over.** Our monkey brain runs the show. This means concentration is difficult because that's what System 2 controls. For example, reading a manual is not what we want to do. We want to react on instinct.
4. **System 1 focuses on the short term,** not the long-term implications of our actions. We will do almost anything for short-term survival in this situation (remember this is what our brain chemistry is telling System 1: survive now, at all cost). Short-term benefits taste particularly sweet in this state and might even be the only options we can see. This isn't the best option in a crisis; rational, long-term thought is required; there are real long-term consequences of our actions.

During a crisis, we need to be calm, have clarity of vision, and be creative in our problem solving. In a threat response situation, this is going to be challenging.

This is the crux of why, neuro-scientifically speaking, an experiential, realistic simulation learning and training model is our best chance of

success. It is the same reason why flight simulators, space shuttle simulators and battle simulation exercises exist.

The key is to reduce the perception of likelihood of failure and thus the perceived threat. We do this by:

1. **Associative learning.** This is the most powerful way to create lasting learning that will endure in whatever circumstances and brain chemistry. The combination of learning plus emotion means there is a kind of 'epigenetic lock' to the learning. It's said that everyone remembers where they were when Kennedy was shot, or when we learned Princess Diana died. These details become unforgettable: the emotion locks them in. This is what we do with experiential learning.
2. **Rehearsal.** Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to create enduring connections when we physically rehearse certain steps or processes. This means that if we practice something, we can programme our brains not to forget it. If we stall a stick shift car, we 'automatically' put it right despite often being in a highly stressful situation at the wheel of a stalled car. This is why pilots train for crash landings using a simulator.
3. **Building team confidence.** Working together as a team is vital: not only must you have confidence in yourself but also

confidence in others. Rehearsing a situation as a team develops confidence through the whole team. This is most obvious in the armed forces and emergency services. Unit cohesion matters.

anxiety = awfulness x probability / rescue x coping

What we are building in a crisis rehearsal is resilience. The confidence to know that you will cope, that your team will cope, that you can do this and that you know how to do this.

The release of anxiety lets you respond to a situation calmly, with courage, and with the confidence to take controlled risks.

Effective preparation

The best way to manage a social media crisis is to plan to avoid it in the first place. Good scenario planning – working out what kinds of crises you're likely to face – and rehearsal really help you when the real thing happens. There's another advantage of scenario planning, too – you might just spot a way to avoid the crisis

completely by taking business action. Broadly speaking, crises can be divided into two categories: those you can't avoid; and those you can, through monitoring what your customers are saying about you, what the problems are you might face, and what the business action is you can take to turn a negative situation into a positive.

Monitoring and social listening tools will also help you filter out the information you need to know about from the background chatter. The beauty of social media is its visibility: it is possible to listen to what people are saying about you in real-time, and take positive action to prevent, or limit, damage.

Some companies (like PepsiCo's Gatorade and Dell) have gone as far as to set up a physical mission control room to monitor real-time tweets, blogs and sentiment to allow them to engage with consumers in real time. For others, a combination of listening tools and humans will provide insight to what people are saying about you, and what issues you need to address.

Build your crisis team to include social media. Most big brands will have a crisis management team in place. But social media must be an intrinsic part of this team, not a 'bolt-on' afterthought. It should

include anyone that you're likely to need during the crisis, including legal (for quick sign-off) and tech support. It should have a clear leader, and usually, it will include representatives from:

- PR and reputation management
- Customer service
- Marketing
- Legal
- Tech support
- Social media and social listening
- Community management

Ensure that social media is fully integrated to all your existing crisis plans, and that the crisis team includes social media crisis handlers (such as trained community managers and social media communicators).

Get the practical things in place. Have a list of who you can call on in an emergency, in whatever time zone you need them. Make sure you know the password to your blog, Facebook and Twitter accounts – it sounds obvious, but the best laid plans fall apart if the only person who has access to your social media accounts is unreachable, or worse – holding the accounts hostage.

Planning your response

The first question to ask is: what does a social media crisis look like? When we talk about a social media crisis, we mean a crisis that has the potential for a real impact on your business. The severity of crisis will determine your response. Agree in advance what constitutes a serious issue and needs a clear escalation path (including to the police or relevant authority in the case of criminal activity or abuse).

Crises are likely to fall into one of four groups:

1. **A serious event that's happening in the real world and unfolding over social media**, for example reported by 'citizen journalists'. This could be a life or death situation, or a real emergency.
2. **A protest instigated by an activist group to bring about a specific result**, such as Greenpeace's social media campaign to organise local protest against supermarket chain, Waitrose, to put pressure on the firm to end its partnership with Shell. (It didn't take long for Waitrose to [abandon](#) the relationship and support Greenpeace's stance on arctic drilling.)

3. **Human error, or a rogue employee.** An employee at UK music store, HMV, [live-tweeted the firing of 60 staff](#) in February 2013, even offering (unheeded) advice to the head of marketing on how to change the passwords to social media accounts. Less serious examples of this might be accidentally tweeting from the wrong account, or an unfortunate typo.
4. **A social media hack**, such as that suffered by the [Associated Press](#) in April 2013, when a group claiming to be the 'Syrian Electronic Army' tweeted from AP's account that the White House had come under attack.

Communicating through the crisis

Managing your reputation. The reputation you have when you go into a crisis will be the one that sees you through it. If you do nothing to manage your reputation during the good times, then you'll have no goodwill to carry you through the bad times. People who trust you already are more likely to support you, and defend you from detractors. Stash goodwill to see you through any difficult patches. The stronger the voice you have in social media (and in your own online communities, blogs and forums), the better your relationships

will be with customers. It is your loyal customers who have a relationship with you who are most likely to defend you.

The reputation with which you enter a crisis is the one that will see you through the crisis

Understand what can be solved by clear communication, and what can't. If a brand is abusing human rights in Bangladesh, no amount of positive PR will help. Be prepared to take some serious business decisions, quickly. For this reason, involve your most senior people early on – it'll get those decisions made more quickly. In May 2013, British retailer Marks and Spencer managed to avoid serious reputational damage after the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh when it became one of the brands signing up to an international agreement [to improve safety conditions](#) in garment factories. The apparent reluctance by other companies – notably Gap and Wal-Mart – to sign resulted in negative press coverage across the board.

Once you've agreed on what action to take, agree your public response, and – importantly – the tone of voice you'll use within your

communities. Make sure it's consistent across all your audiences and channels. Assume that what you say on Twitter will reach the same people as your press statement, or your customer service announcement. Your emailed statements will be posted by interested parties onto Facebook. News media will source interviews from social media. Communications channels can no longer be viewed in silos.

You can't control how a story spreads on social media. In these days of Twitter, mobile phone video uploads and consumers tapping into their online networks, **word of mouth spreads like wildfire**. Every citizen with a smartphone is a reporter. In May 2013, a [BA flight](#) made an emergency landing at Heathrow. The covers of the engines had popped open in flight. Before the aircraft even landed, a passenger had Tweeted a photo of the engines. Within minutes of landing, amateur video appeared on news channels – someone had filmed the smoking plane as it flew over their street.

What you can control, to some extent, is what your employees post on social media about you. Have a clear social media policy in place, and be clear about what is and what isn't acceptable if that employee is publicly associated with your company, and the

repercussions of breaking the policy. (Of course, if your employees are loyal to you, this will be a lot easier to manage. Disgruntled employees won't be nearly so co-operative.)

Social media hydra: censorship doesn't make an issue go away.

Some of the biggest brands in the world have assumed they can control social media by censoring any views they don't like. It's simply not possible – in the way that trying to stop people talking in the pub isn't possible. Yes, you need to moderate your social media channels for illegal activity, copyright infringement, swearing, abuse or inappropriate content. But if you censor your channels – removing user-generated content that criticises you, for example – you'll antagonise your followers and appear heavy-handed. It certainly won't win you any of that goodwill to carry you through the crisis. And as Greenpeace memorably demonstrated with its [Sinar Mars campaign against Nestle](#), taking content down from one channel doesn't stop it springing up on another one.

Know when it's best to walk away. Sometimes, not responding is the best way forward. If the issue is a matter of, for example, safety or abuse, then of course you must act immediately, and be seen to act. But what if the issue isn't this serious? It's very easy to create

your own firestorm by jumping in to a social media community and escalating an issue that, if left alone, would fade out by itself. Check the facts before you jump in. If a customer has complained about a product, check whether that complaint is right before you start apologising and offering a refund, which could open the floodgates. Don't over-react. Not every issue you encounter is a crisis in the making. Be too defensive and you could make the situation much worse, or create a negative situation out of [nothing](#).

Every brand should define what its crises might look like, and prepare to manage them if the worst should happen

During a crisis, every move you make will be scrutinised. Involve all your organisation's communications channels, including – importantly – search. A widely covered issue will show up in search results for a disproportionately long time after the event – make sure you involve your search agency in your communications plan, so that you can take positive action to neutralise negative coverage on search engines.

Your voice on your social channels should stay true and authentic throughout the crisis. Your community managers, PR team or social media managers should already be authorised to make quick decisions and take action where necessary to restore trust.

Monitor the crisis closely. Throughout the crisis, monitor how it is playing out over social media, and keep in close touch with your monitoring team. If something changes, be prepared to respond quickly, and make sure all the parties involved in the crisis team are informed and up to date.

Make sure your tone of voice is appropriate to the issue you're addressing. O2, during its service outages in 2012, used humour to [diffuse tension](#) within its communities (and to respond to abusive messages from users), but was careful only to do so where it was absolutely appropriate. It received widespread praise for the way it handled the issue. In April 2013 UK cinema chain, Cineworld received a mixed response for its [public Twitter spat](#) with a customer. Antagonising the people that can make your life harder isn't a great idea, but showing some personality can be a good thing. Above all, stay true to your brand.

Your crisis checklist

Preparing for a crisis

- ✓ Monitor what's being said about you in all channels, and listen for anything that might spark a crisis
- ✓ Do the groundwork before the crisis breaks. Have some goodwill 'banked'
- ✓ Define what a crisis looks like, and plan for every eventuality
- ✓ Have a social media policy in place for all employees and agencies
- ✓ Build your crisis team to include senior decision makers through the business
- ✓ Involve your agencies in the crisis plan
- ✓ Include search as an important part of the communications mix
- ✓ Be clear about what can and what can't be solved by PR
- ✓ Involve your employees in the process – you don't want them breaking the crisis for you.
- ✓ Be in the social media space already (and be able to access your accounts)
- ✓ Rehearse: hold as full a simulation as you can

Managing the crisis

- ✓ Be prepared to take business action if necessary. Communications can't solve a business issue.
- ✓ Remember: you can't control social media. But you can control how you respond in social media
- ✓ Agree your response and communicate it consistently
- ✓ Authorise your community managers to act on your behalf
- ✓ Don't create your own firestorm. Don't address an issue in a community where no-one knew there was an issue to start with
- ✓ Keep crisis team contact numbers accessible and updated
- ✓ Notify and involve all your third party agencies
- ✓ Have a pre-defined escalation path for serious incidents (and use it)
- ✓ Keep in close contact with your monitoring team
- ✓ Keep the tone of voice appropriate to the issue; and keep it true to your company values

About Polpeo

Polpeo creates realistic and interactive social media simulations for brands and their agencies. It simulates any public social media experience or situation, to let you experience the live drama of a crisis or campaign breaking on social media, and rehearse and test your responses in a closed, safe environment.

Polpeo uses simulation technology to replicate the behaviour of social networks, microblogs, news sites, forums, blogs and video channels. Simulations are run by a team of trained social media managers who mimic the public response to your crisis or campaign, in real-time, so you can see how the public are responding to your social media management strategy. It is the closest thing possible to managing a real situation unfolding on social media. Simulations can be run for groups of between five and 100 people.

Polpeo is an eModeration subsidiary company, co-created by social media agency [eModeration](#), and PR specialist Kate Hartley.

Contact us

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