RAGAN VIRTUAL CONFERENCE:

Crisis Communications

PANEL

Activating Your Employee Channels to Prevent Internal Crises

TAKEAWAYS

- Most common employee concerns that lead to issues tie back to a crisis of empathy – from health and safety to considerations around parents and caregivers.

- Closing the leadership gap means acknowledging it’s no longer acceptable to be tone deaf. A solid message is useless when not supported by tangible, easily-understandable action plan (including timelines). If messaging isn’t backed by internal action, employees will call it out.

- Consider the cadence of employee surveys – annual surveys may have transformed into quicker pulse surveys during remote work, and they may change again once offices reopen. When issues emerge early in those surveys, communicate them up to set guardrails (if you identify stress and workload as an issue, make sure leadership hears it and the guardrails come thru them).

- Target surveys through the tech where your employees are most active to make them more meaningful and consider the language/verbiage you use.

- Use these channels to make space for employee stories (even the bleak ones) as they allow fellow employees to filter their experiences through those of colleagues.

- Keeping the awareness box open with tool usage as we move away from C-19 means acknowledging that the cadence of push notifications and expectations for engagement with tools will and should shift.

- Keep any remaining digital tool engagement casual… “analog in a digital world.”

- Remember: employees don’t want to go back from the idea that they can participate in multiple digital experiences now that they know how to succeed in remote environments. Keep the crowdsourcing up even as crises seem to subside.

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Practicing Social Media Engagement to Prevent a Crisis from Spreading

TAKEAWAYS

- Your number one goal with holding statements on social media should be to express empathy and move the conversation to DMs. Sometimes having a cookie-cutter statement ready to go isn’t the move. Instead, consider pieces pre-existing language that can then be applied to a unique and customized response.

- How you build your social response team, and where that team lives in your crisis plan, depends on the culture and function of your organization. The scale of the crisis should dictate who is involved. Designate who your key players are in the chain of command. Designate who should own the social listening portion of the plan relative to where in the chain it needs to happen to escalate accordingly.

- Quantify how proactive crisis engagement looks differently on each platform by constructing a scoring system with platform-specific thresholds.

- Engage with your employee ambassadors, industry experts and influencers on social to set expectations for them to be a megaphone for goodwill should the need arise. You can’t just turn that switch on once the crisis hits and have credibility.

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Responding to the Crisis of Inauthenticity

TAKEAWAYS

- Position inauthenticity as a crisis by connecting reputational damage to your company's bottom line using data around customer sentiment paired up with revenue numbers. Communicating purpose and business outcomes should not be mutually exclusive. Consider how many customers made purchase decisions over the past 18 months around brand responses to national crises like C-19, civil rights and racial inequity, LGBTQ+ rights and more.

- Closing the gap between leadership and comms requires some reverse engineering to look at the subset of skills that leaders are now expected to have, which is different from what was required a decade ago. Deprogramming involves managing up soft skills so leadership isn't reading off a card and training them on how to shift from passive facilitation to making space for true conversations to flourish.

- Authenticity with internal comms requires understanding that your first key stakeholders are your employees. Transparency with employees is crucial because no transparency leads to no context, no context leads to no awareness and no awareness leads to decisions that aren't purposeful.

- Remind leadership that it's OK to share what you don't know and what you're working on – always a better move than moving quickly under pressure to create the impression that you know all the answers. Brand should calibrate their response times to zeitgeist conversations depending on the expectations of their stakeholders and audiences… in any event, they should have a comms strategy that takes stakeholders on a journey around their purpose work.

- Remember: any expectation that access to information means people automatically know the story is untrue. This is where leadership voice becomes crucial, speaking in an educational, informative tone consistent with brand identity. They should walk the line between being informed and not being know-it-alls.

- Focus less on flashy headlines and more on the impact of the work contained in the announcement to minimize the likelihood of stakeholders calling out the disconnect.

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Practicing Cool Media Relations Under Crisis

TAKEAWAYS

- Have discussions with leadership around what your company will and won't be willing to respond to before crafting holding statements. Some things may not be true crises and acknowledging them will just increase their visibility. Remember that the first statement is always what the media will run with.

- Bucket recent past statements into categories depending on the issue at hand and conduct an audit of your company resources (industry research, data etc) to stay mindful of the gap between when a crisis hits and when the holding statement can be deployed. Another way to vision this is the creation of issue maps.

- Partnering with legal during that audit of past holding statements and resources will expedite your process, as they can evaluate previous statements to weigh in on their implications and inform how a new statement should take shape.

- Sharing a timeline for when you will share updates with more information in your initial holding statement is a useful control mechanism.

- Minimizing impact of a rogue exec in the media starts with knowing your team. If a CEO is really wild, don't put them in a situation where they are likely to get into trouble. If the crisis is severe, however, and you don't have a choice, you can minimize the exec's blast radius by scripting the message as best you can (though that doesn't win authenticity points). Have a discussion beforehand about the reputational implications of them going off. Think about the environment of the press conference and make sure the exec isn't out there alone – have a COO or wingperson to support. Establishing trust with them beforehand means making sure that they understand the function of PR within an organization to begin with.

- When responding to misinformation and disinformation, resist the urge to respond to the media until you have all the facts and research lined up. Lean to partners, trade groups, and other allies to correct the record.

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Media Monitoring Skills to Stay on Top of a Crisis

TAKEAWAYS

- Like so many aspects of communication, the most important part of building your media list is starting with an understanding of target audiences (based on your data and insights). Once you specify targets, identifying relevant media outlets and building your lists will fall more cleanly into place.

- When creating alerts, set keywords and phrases that may be peripherally relevant to your issue but not directly connected. In Shannon’s COVID-19 example at American Nurses Association, imagine a circle wherein C-19 is at the center and phrases like “vaccination” or “variant” or “scope of practice” float around the main terms.

- The circle analogy can also be used to explain the relationship between automation and media monitoring. Think of automation as less of a set it and forget it tool and more a tool to help you get through info faster- it still requires human discretion to avoid things like false positives for certain alerts but will streamline the monitoring process. It’s about the marriage of technology and talent.

- Keyword and Boolean search strings can require a significant amount of time and investment compared to AI tech like machine learning and natural language processing, which can generate the adjacent/periphery keywords for your monitoring with minimal effort.