

Crisis and Social Media

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Whenever there is a significant public crisis such as Hurricane Harvey, [people turn to the social web](#), usually Twitter, to gather news, offer help, express irritation, and berate public agencies or corporations and/or politicians. Below are some comments on how to think about social media crises and some tips on how to handle them.

As much as they are a means of personal expression and connection, social media are also tools of discontent and anger. Nothing draws out the public's online irascibility more than an ostensible ethical or operational lapse by an organization that appears to cause someone harm. Nothing gets social posts flying about more speedily or nastily than this kind of behavior. And social media crises are consistently immediate and intense, with invariably incomplete or asymmetrical information about the problem or event between you and the angry public shouting at you on Twitter.

However, organizations often panic needlessly when it comes to being called out on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat for some lapse of judgment or tangible harm. They think the only strategy is to attempt to stop or control the public's disapproval, and that seems (and is) impossible.

Of the organizations I have counseled about how to handle a social media crisis, those who succeed best realize they can't avoid the condemnation or correct every mistaken impression or misconstrued 'fact' online about their behavior or actions.

The best that can be hoped for is a *steady dialing down—not eliminating—of the emotion* around the concern being 'exposed' on the social web.

There are a number of ways of doing this:

1. Become comfortable with the idea that the social web can be like a mob—truculent, blind to truth or facts, and fast to escalate,

but also erratic and easily moved to other concerns. It can be chaos, but also short-lived.

2. Assess whether the criticism being leveled at you is a crisis that requires a full court press (government and media relations, social media updates) or is simply a troublesome issue that will fade as quickly as the social web's short attention span. If the latter, doing nothing but monitoring who is saying what may be the best response.
3. Determine if what is being said about you on social media could have a meaningful impact on your organization or could fundamentally change the way key stakeholders make decisions about you. In that case, communication action may be necessary, but it may still not involve a social media response: For example, direct stakeholder engagement may be what is required (contacting government, professional associations, members personally or by email etc.) not social media posts.
4. Recognize that, in general, people who get upset about something on the social web will calm down if you listen to their problem, respond to their message if you can, offer a solution if you can, and most important, provide a place for their voice to be heard online and off. It is especially valuable if you can be seen to be responding publicly and on social platforms. By doing so you are demonstrating a commitment to transparency and principled problem solving, which social media natives love.
5. Most important, be prepared with your own mini-social media plan that takes into account whether you have an active social presence or not. (A crisis is definitely not the time to launch a Facebook page or Twitter account: It's simply too late, and no one will hear you anyway!) The plan should allow you to respond calmly and promptly, and to be seen to be acting respectfully. For example, you can prepare and have pre-approved social media posts that capture a helpful and empathetic tone, and can serve as an intro to the situation-specific content.

It is important to remember, however, that you can't use social media effectively to counter a social media-based crisis if you haven't built a supportive community on your own Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other platforms, or have no staff experience with the dynamics of social web interactions. Your own social web community can act as a kind of buffer to the negative, making you more immune to accusations, for example, of lacking transparency (often a main charge leveled against organizations in a crisis), unfairness or simply insensitivity.

About the writer: Over the past ten years, Boyd Neil has created and implemented social media and digital strategies for organizations in the healthcare, non-profit, oil and gas, financial, insurance, nuclear, and packaged goods sectors. And he has counseled many clients on managing social media crises and digitally-driven reputation assaults.

He teaches social media at Ryerson University, Humber College and Seneca College, is a respected blogger and speaks frequently on social media trends and strategies including at such leading interactive industry conferences as SXSW and NXNE.

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