VOL 57, FEBRUARY 2025

TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PRACTISE EMERGENCY ALERTS
- HAVE A SOCIAL MEDIA PLAN
- CORRECT QUICKLY
- LEARN FROM OTHERS
- LOOK AT THE RESEARCH

WHAT HAPPENED?

The year started with wildfires tearing through Los Angeles, leaving widespread devastation. The fires were being stoked by high winds that came after a significant drought had left the area parched. At one point, more than 200,000 people were under evacuation orders. Authorities struggled to bring the fires under control and, in many updates, explained there was zero containment.

According to JP Morgan, estimates for insured losses were that they would exceed $20 billion, with the total economic losses expected to reach $50 billion. There were lots of discussions about the causes of the wildfires, which included arson, and arrests were made. It was labelled as a once-in-a-generation disaster.

In the initial stages of the emergency, alerts were sent to 10 million phones of residents across LA County, including many who were not affected and did not need to evacuate. This was corrected 22 minutes later but there continued to be glitches in the system sharing emergency alerts.

In the aftermath, it was estimated at least 28 people had died, with many thousands of homes destroyed. By the end of January, the wildfires were replaced with rain that created concerns about flooding, mudslides and toxic ash in the runoff.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

During the situation, the emergency alert system was unreliable and was heavily criticised for raising concerns among people who were not affected. The United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) continues to stress the importance of getting people to heed warnings and to follow the orders, but this cannot be achieved when systems appear to fail. It was compared to the 2020 issues in Ontario, where there was a delay in correcting inaccuracies. The speed of responding to problems is critical.

There is a need to look at research to support the communication response. In 2022, research identified that 70 per cent of people in the US went to social media for information during disasters. So crisis communication plans need to outline the social media response in much more detail, to help when it has to be used.

The University of Notre Dame has also been conducting research that assesses the levels of fear linked to communication about incidents. Where there is talk of people, fire engines and helicopters, it can increase fear and the negativity bias can reduce compliance. It advises adjusting the social media messaging, including talking about the experience of those responding, which supports the legitimacy and confidence in the response. Read it here.

The areas affected included many that were home to celebrities, which attracted more media attention, but it was the stories of ordinary people that had more impact throughout the reporting of the disaster. The impact of comments from Donald Trump, as incoming US President, about getting rid of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) has yet to be quantified.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Emergency alerts need to be practised, reliable and ready to use – they can be taken for granted but, when they fail, the impact is significant. Test them out when running crisis exercises and consider how the information is reinforced through other channels.
- Inaccuracies need to be corrected immediately – the longer the inaccuracy exists, the more damage it can do and, ultimately, it can weaken compliance with actions that are vital for public safety.
- Social media crisis communication plans need to become more detailed and usable – it is not enough to say 'do some social media': be clear what this is and what it means, with clarity on audiences and channels as well as timings.
- Misunderstandings can happen – the talk of a once-in-a-generation event can give people a false sense of security that these things will not happen again. It is a probability and numbers game that is not helpful.
- Research is vital to inform communication – all practitioners need to try to keep up to date with the latest research and how it can help to improve the communication response.
- Climate disasters remain a big threat – it is important to be ready for them; to plan, practise and learn from the experiences of others from around the world.

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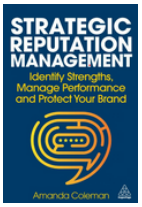

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