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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PEOPLE FIRST
- HONESTY IS ESSENTIAL
- UNDERSTAND RISKS
- KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
- PREPARE, PREPARE

WHAT HAPPENED?

The final Testing Times of 2025 looks back at some of the key points from situations, incidents and crises that have happened during the year. There have been many extreme weather events that have sadly led to deaths and serious injuries. It started early in the year with the LA wildfires and has continued with floods and strong winds in the UK. Two horrific plane crashes also focused attention on airline safety with the Washington plane disaster in January and the Air India disaster in June. Incidents involving transport came to the forefront throughout the year with the North Sea boat collision in March highlighting risks offshore and the LNER train incident in October.

One of the most significant crisis types throughout the year has been cyber-attacks. The National Cyber Security Centre said between January, and the end of September the UK had experienced 204 significant or highly significant cyber-attacks. Incidents affecting Jaguar Land Rover, Marks and Spencer and the Co-op have all attracted public attention. But there have been many others. Alongside this, the reliance on supply chains has identified business continuity weakness with the AWS outage taking many services offline.

Finally, there have been many reputationally driven crises from the Astronomer CEO at the Coldplay gig to ongoing issues for the BBC. Tesla was under threat at the start of the year and the CEO at Heathrow also made headlines for his response to the power outage.

What can communication and business learn from the situations?

It is unsurprising that all the events have again proved the importance not just of crisis planning and preparation but also of ensuring the communication is operating strategically as part of the response. Having thought through the risks and challenges that may be faced, creating an outline framework or plan, and discussing what it means for the response will all save time which is vital. In every situation imagery was circulating quickly, and even in the case of cyber-attacks photographs of people responding have been shared. But the plans also need to consider the reputational threats.

News is now being defined by what people share and are interested in online. The Astronomer CEO would have never been an issue 20 years ago but quickly became one of the biggest stories of the year when it went viral. Senior leaders and anyone in fact who works for a business or organisation could be at the centre of the next issue.

Creating strong plans that consider this, how to respond and how to support those affected are all critical. Cyber remains one of the most significant risks for any business or organisation large and small. When they happen, they hit hard, lead to a loss in profits, lead to a loss in confidence and require a review to find a way to continue to operate. Working through a cyber crisis simulation and learning from it is essential.

At the heart of each situation was the need to be honest and open, to share as much as was possible, and to help people understand what has happened. Supporting people has been shown time and again in 2025 to be the most important part of a crisis communication response. In the UK the Public Office (Accountability) Bill is set to be made law next year and this will put additional responsibilities on those responding and importantly communicating about disasters and significant emergencies. It is vital that plans are considered and reshaped ready to be fit for 2026.

What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Keep the focus of your efforts on helping those caught up in the emergency, disaster or crisis. Ensure they have what they need not what you want to give.
- Honesty remains one of the most fundamental principles of crisis communication. Without honesty there will be no trust and confidence in the response.
- Cyber threats are real, and every business and organisation should run a cyber crisis simulation looking at operational and communication requirements.
- Be prepared for the reputational crisis and the impact that it can have. Work with senior leaders to ensure they understand the risks and how they can help mitigate them.
- Recognise that news is no longer just defined by journalists and what goes viral online may be your next challenge to face.
- Plan, plan, plan. It is in the planning that we can talk through the implications, the possible responses, the delegated authority communication needs, and the actions from others to support communication.
- Understand your communities, customers and audiences. Knowing who they are and what they are concerned about as well as what they need will support more effective communication.
- As a communicator, be clear about what is acceptable and appropriate in the communication. Ethical challenges appear throughout the crisis communication processes and should be addressed and not ignored.

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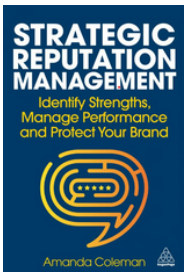

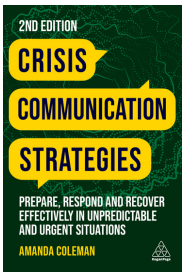

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