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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BE READY TO ACT
- COMMS IS MORE THAN SOCIAL MEDIA
- UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE
- ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

WHAT HAPPENED?

On a quiet Saturday towards the end of February residents in a street suddenly received a letter from their local authority telling them of an underground fire. Very quickly the letter was being shared on social media with people concerned about what it meant and why they were now being made aware of it.

The letter provided an update on the fire that had been found under an embankment last summer by homes on Wigan Road, Aspull. The problem was that the letters had been sent to Wigan Road, Atherton which is six miles away. It is worth mentioning that the postcodes between the two locations are significantly different.

This may seem like a small problem, but it caused significant concern among the residents who received the letters. A local councillor spotted the issue and checked things out so that people could be reassured it was sent in error.

What can communication and business learn from the situations?

The situation emerged on a Saturday morning which meant that if the councillor had not taken up the issue, people would have had no way of knowing what was happening and what the letter related to. The councillor came back quickly on social media to say that it was a 'false alarm'. He also explained that the council would be providing updates to clarify the situation on social media.

But by the end of the day, they had failed to provide an update. And by the middle of the next week no mention had been made on the Wigan Council social media channels. A Freedom of Information request has been submitted to find out the details about the way the issue was managed.

It is reminiscent of the Doncaster doctor's surgery that sent a message to all patients telling them they had stage 4 cancer when the text message should have given the details for Christmas out of hours medical support.

With the Wigan situation there was a reliance on social media to reach all affected but as the area has an older demographic, many people would not be on it or would not be using it at the weekend. Problems do occur and errors can happen, but it is how they are dealt with that matters. In the letter incident the failure to counteract the concern has the potential to damage trust or leave people living with inaccurate information.

Systems and processes are set up and when they go wrong a back up response plan is needed to act quickly. This can correct misinformation and mistakes, and it needs to be both online and offline. I will share details from the FOI request when I receive them.

What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Be ready to respond around the clock – I realise this is challenging when budgets are under pressure but moving quickly to current inaccuracies is vital in the modern AI and social media world. Find a system that can work out of hours.
- Correct quickly – the delays in providing a correction on social media meant that word of mouth was being relied upon and that is not reliable.
- Offline activity is vital – we have come to rely on social media as the catch all, and while it does work for many, there are groups being disenfranchised by the fact everything takes place online. Crisis communication must be more than online comment.
- Trust can be damaged by an appearance of disinterest – delays and a lack of response may be due to systems not being in place, but it is viewed as not caring about the situation. Being able to respond swiftly is important.
- Know your audience – as well as this helping to recognise that social media may not be the best channel, it will also prevent mistakes that can damage trust and confidence.
- Admit when things go wrong – it is a simple thing but acknowledging that something went wrong and even saying sorry can go a long way when mistakes happen.

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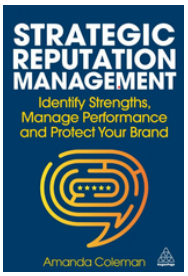

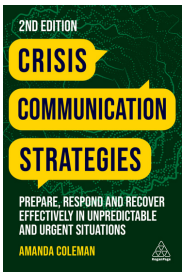

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