

The psychology of communicating during a crisis

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Dustin Eno, an alumni of the MSc in Social and Public Communication, shares his thoughts and experiences about working in the crisis communications industry.



Life is full of unexpected events, where unknowns can rapidly lead to fear, anger, and a need for a target to blame – a way of making sense of what has happened. In most cases, its blame that destroys reputations, companies and the people who work for them.

This cycle of behaviour is dangerous to companies, individuals and organisations with any sort of public profile and it is this cycle that crisis communication aims to manage and redirect.

I was recently on a flight which passed through some turbulence, enough to scare people, and within moments the cabin crew, followed shortly by the first officer, came on the PA system to provide simple instructions and an explanation of what was happening.

Was this necessary? No, but it cost the airline nothing and it had a significant calming influence on those less used to flying. Why? Because it removed the unknown.

I am the COO and Crisis Response Manager at Navigate Response (navigateresponse.com). We provide crisis communications and media management services to companies operating in the maritime sector; our clients range from major container lines, to luxury cruise companies. On average, we respond to one incident a week and we manage every imaginable type of crisis ranging from pirate attacks to oil spills.

Shipping incidents present a lot of unknowns, especially for local populations watching events unfold off their shores and wondering how bad things might get.

Fear, misinformation and speculation spread like wildfire. It's a funny thing about people, we default to assuming that the worst is true. Equally frustrating, we're much more likely to trust a friend (even if they have no experience with what they're talking about) than an expert on TV or the knowledgeable CEO of the company involved.

Social psychology can help to explain why this is the case. Misinformation and speculation is common when communicating with publics, because such communications occur against the backdrop of many other cultural narratives. Conspiracy theories, disaster stories, acts of terrorism – these all represent forms of culturally embedded narratives that people can use to try to orientate themselves within a rapidly evolving situation, particularly when there is an absence of information.

Such narratives are also interesting because they facilitate a hardening of an in-group/out-group distinction – hence the speed with which questions about “how” a disaster happened turn into questions about “who to blame”. This is why issues of trust can become complicated the longer a crisis situation endures.

For crisis communication practitioners, the goal is therefore to ensure that there is no absence of communication following an event, and in doing so prevent the kind of identity shaping where blame can easily occur.

But how is this achieved for large-scale events where the number and range of stakeholders is very high?



In my prior role as the regional head of communications for a government disaster response agency in Northern Canada my job included communicating with the official sources of power – ministers, national news outlets, oil and gas majors, etc., but as demanding as these interests could be, they were never my first priority.

The people and communities directly impacted by the incident at hand were always my first concern.

This triaging didn't come from some sense of duty or altruism; it was pragmatic. By providing information to and connecting directly with the people that had the strongest emotional connection to the situation, I had the best chance of mitigating fear and thereby reducing anger and blame.

Connecting with local populations is an essential part of any crisis communications strategy. Make time for the small town local journalists even when the major networks are calling, establish a local partner who can guide you to the social media groups and other channels of communication favoured by the town, reach out to key figures of the community, host open town hall meetings, post on physical local bulletin boards, etc. Most importantly, return calls from concerned people who think they might be impacted.

Sometimes it feels silly. People really can ask the most unusual questions and have the most irrational concerns, but at the end of the day, most fears aren't rational.

The risk of a plane being brought down by turbulence is virtually zero, the environmental damage of fire retardant dropped from air tankers is non-existent, and the risk of a catastrophic oil spill from a bulk carrier following a soft grounding is miniscule, but for people who don't know such statistics it's still scary and it's still nice to be told what's happening and to be reassured.

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