
Appendix E: Sample Crisis Communications Plan



Although it's true that you can't anticipate everything that may come your way, there are certain times that you know controversy may strike. So, as much as possible, be prepared for the possibility that you may be expected to deal with a controversy. Below is a sample crisis scenario and communications plan.

Scenario: You are the Director of Communications at a local non-profit. Your organization has three social media brands: one that targets teens, one that targets twentysomethings, and one that targets your corporate audience; all three brands are managed by your Senior Manager of Social Media. You know from target research that your teen channel actually skews a bit young—generally you reach young people between the ages of 11 and 14. In a rush to schedule and post a great deal of content before the weekend, your Senior Manager accidentally schedules a tweet meant for your twentysomething audience to go out via your teen channel; the tweet goes out on Friday night and no one at the organization sees it until Monday morning. The tweet includes a suggestive picture of a bed with rumpled sheets and reads: “Fridays are the best—stay up all night getting frisky and spend the next day in bed (getting frisky).” Several parents and community members who follow all of your channels see this and flood your office with angry calls and emails.

How can you address this crisis?

Get the facts straight. Speak to the Senior Manager of Communications and ask him/her to walk you through exactly how the tweet scheduling process works. Have him/her show you—step-by-step—how they scheduled the batch of tweets and what went wrong; was it carelessness? A bug in the third-party system they were using? Create a plan for ensuring that this doesn't happen again, whether it's a promise to be more careful, a plan to stay away from batch scheduling, or an upgrade/change in the third-party scheduling system. Then find out why the Senior Manager didn't realize the tweet was public throughout the weekend; presumably, part of his/her job is to maintain control of the accounts, even during off hours, so he/she should have realized their mistake more quickly and deleted the tweet immediately. Understand how and why the tweet was overlooked for so long and create a plan for ensuring that this does not happen again.

Assess the damage. A rogue tweet, while never a good thing—particularly when it's been live for so long—isn't the worst thing that can or will happen to your organization. Be prepared to address the flood of angry messages from the community but also realize that this situation will resolve itself quickly.

Address what you can. Delete the tweet immediately and send out an “oops, our bad” message. It should be lighthearted and written to the audience—young teens—so nothing serious or heavy. You don't want to make a bigger deal of this than you need to or draw additional attention to the original tweet. If anyone replied to the tweet, respond to them with the same “oops” messaging.

Craft a response or statement. Because of the relatively minor nature of this crisis—it is bad, but it certainly won't shut your organization down—simply create a “party line” that everyone on staff is aware of. You will be the primary spokesperson, but it's important for your staff—particularly anyone who speaks publicly on behalf of your organization and may get questions about this issue—be made aware of what the organization is saying about this issue. The party line should include:

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- 1. An apology.** You realize that each audience you reach is different and must be treated with care and respect, particularly with regard to issues of sex. Your organization apologizes for the inappropriate nature of the tweet.
 - 2. An explanation.** There was an issue with the way you sent out bulk tweets that has been discovered and remedied. While your organization has never had a misplaced tweet, you recognize that this is not acceptable and have taken steps to ensure that it will never happen again.
 - 3. A plan.** You have changed the third-party Twitter client that you use and made sure that your social media brands have more of a buffer between them. You have also ensured that *all* social media will be monitored regularly, whether during work hours or after hours.

Speak with one voice. As the Director of Communications, you will be the organization's representative on this issue and will speak to angry community members if they call. You will also educate those staff who speak on behalf of your organization and prep them to answer any questions that may come up during their travels.

Lean on your advocates. In this case, your advocates are those people who have active social media channels with messaging similar to your own. Continue to tweet and retweet their messages so as to show to your followers that you have advocates and like-minded people in the community.

Keep communicating. Your social media presence cannot and should not close up shop because of this crisis. You've already deleted the errant tweet and sent out an apology tweet; the rest of your social media messaging should continue in a business-as-usual fashion.

Learn from your mistakes. You have already made some changes to your internal social media policy...that's very important. This crisis was completely avoidable and, hopefully because of the changes you've enacted (and the stern conversation you've had with your Senior Manager) this mistake won't be repeated.