

# Crisis communications in a digital era

 By [Janine Hills](#)

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Communication is critical to ensure that a crisis is managed effectively and contained, and that the company's reputation is protected throughout. Especially in an era of social media, where the public has many options at their disposal to either rate or slate a brand...

The company's reputation management team needs to ensure this is factored into its strategy and plans.

Organisations need to take a strategic view. Rather than identifying a crisis that flares up on Twitter, for example, as only a social media crisis, the company needs to look at it holistically. We have found, when developing strategies in crisis situations, that issues which originate on social media are filtering quickly to print and broadcast media. The media landscape is currently a melting pot, with social media, online, print and broadcast media feeding into each other and creating an energy that keeps stories moving fast.



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We recommend that the company drafts a set of key messages to drive the engagement, irrespective of the platform, and consistently use these in all communications. Unpack the issues, determine a strategy, set the record straight and don't feel the need to respond to each and every query or question received. A good, solid statement that is real, genuine and connects to the issue at hand and community affected will not only buy you time while you resolve the problem, but will enable people to see the complexity of the matter at hand.

The key is never to lie - be honest, upfront and transparent. Show an appropriate sense of urgency and be clear on what

you are doing to resolve the matter, outline that you are following up and that you will continue to monitor the situation.

Sometimes an incident that starts in the social media arena can be ring-fenced there. We have found that arranging for the parties to meet, offline, in a face-to-face environment to discuss the facts is a very effective way of resolving such a crisis. It is crucial to take the emotions out of the conversation and then move to negotiate an acceptable compromise. The anger and frustration expressed via social media channels needs to be heard; it cannot be discounted. Concerns should be acknowledged and then responded to in a rational manner that guides the matter towards a positive conclusion.

In certain instances, usually only in extreme cases, it may make sense for an individual or organisation to pull out of a particular platform entirely for a short period. Rather take a step back and raise the bar of engagement, take the high ground and use other platforms to engage instead.

After the crisis is over, it is important to review what happened, how it was handled and to learn from mistakes made. If you haven't already done so, create a standard format for your communications people to work from on all social media platforms. If an agency is involved, ensure you have an agreement with them on the format to be used, and on the turnaround time for responses so that your brand is protected. Monitor the responses your posts receive and review whether your tone and message is relevant, and modify if needed.

Conventional wisdom is that social media is to blame for brand crises, but the fact is people have always expressed their anger and frustration with brands: social media have merely given us a platform where it is easily visible. The other side of this coin is that social media also give brands a platform to engage in two-way conversation, whereas other media platforms don't. Effective reputation and brand managers will use this to manage potential crises before they even happen.

## ABOUT JANINE HILLS

Janine Hills is founder and CEO of Vuma Reputation Management and a leader in the field of reputation management, specialising in building organisational reputation from the inside out. Hills and her team have earned the respect of top leaders in the private and public sectors with in-depth knowledge of the telecoms, financial services, mining, power generation, government, engineering and mobile technology sectors.

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