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INTRODUCTION

Connected consumers can do great things for your brand. They’ll cheer for your success stories, telling millions around the globe that you’re brilliant. They’ll also broadcast your mistakes — doing so at massive scale.

Paula Deen is a prime example of how reputational damage can affect the bottom line. Deen’s troubles started in a small corner of her multi-million-dollar brand, but spread like gangrene — resulting in the disintegration of her business empire. Though the case at the center of it all (allegations of racism and sexism at a restaurant she co-owned) was eventually dismissed, Deen’s reputation wasn’t quite as lucky.

The culinary empress failed to redeem herself, despite tear-filled and televised apologies. The internet refused to forgive and forget. In addition to the social uproar, Deen lost contracts with companies that sold her products, her viewership plummeted, and The Food Network discontinued their relationship.

Your brand’s crisis might not be as dramatic as a star falling from grace, but it can be just as disastrous. That’s why you need to develop a comprehensive plan for crisis management.

This whitepaper combines perspectives from industry thought leaders, in addition to our own recommendations for brand reputation management. We hope it helps.
FIVE CRISIS PREPARATION ESSENTIALS

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to crisis preparation. Each organization is unique, so it’s best to evaluate the needs of your brand and industry to create a customized crisis preparation model. That being said, there are five areas that every organization should cover.

1. ASSEMBLE A CRISIS MANAGEMENT DREAM TEAM

Many companies don’t assemble a designated crisis response team until they’ve already gone through a crisis. But that’s like building the life raft when the ship is already sinking. So before anything else, determine who in your organization will be tasked with driving the crisis management process.

Your crisis management team should include:

CRISIS TEAM LEADER
This is the conductor of your crisis management orchestra. As the leader, they’ll be accountable for deciding the course of action and the rhythm of the group. In a smaller company, this person will most likely come from an existing department. In a larger company, you might hire someone specifically for this role.

CRISIS ANALYST
You’ll need someone who can pull in data from social media and across the web. They’ll monitor the situation in real time, advising the team of spikes in activity and trends. They will use your social listening tools and summarize feedback from your social communities. Typical actions during major crisis situations are to provide summary executive reports for management twice a day for 48 to 72 hours as you work through a critical issue.

CONTENT SPECIALIST
This person will be tasked with documenting the crisis as it unfolds. This will help you:

- develop (or update) your company’s crisis management handbook
- keep track of all the moving parts during a crisis
- conduct internal research if your team needs to develop a Customer FAQ
- escalate information gathering and work with internal Subject Matter Experts (SME’s) in order to rapidly deliver accurate and succinct responses as a crisis situation unfolds

CRISIS COMMUNITY MANAGER
You might have a community manager engaging on behalf of your brand on a daily basis. But, is that person trained to handle engagement in crisis scenarios? Your crisis community manager needs to be able to triage messages as they come flooding in — getting the right issues to the right people at the right time. They also need to be able to handle a barrage of frustration-filled messages, without letting their own passions run high. Social media channels need more TLC than ever during a crisis and your community manager needs to be up to the challenge.

2. CREATE YOUR CRISIS CALLING TREE

Put together a crisis contact list that includes the names, phone numbers and email addresses of department heads and members of the crisis management team. Keep this list up-to-date. During a crisis, the Crisis Team Leader will be responsible for activating different branches of this tree, pulling in more people as the crisis escalates. In addition to the main contacts, you might also want to consider having a backup person for each department. If your CMO is scaling the Himalayan mountains and has no access to the connected world, who will make the executive decision?
3. DEVELOP WARNING SIGNALS

Before a big storm, there are signs. The same is true for crises. And in today’s connected world, many of these signs will emerge through social media. That’s why it’s so crucial to have a social media platform that offers both volumetric-based and influencer-based triggers.

**VOLUMETRIC-BASED**
If there’s a spike in activity around your brand, your alert system will fire off platform messages and emails to let you know something is amiss.

**INFLUENCER-BASED**
If an influential figure — news outlet, reporter, blogger, celebrity, etc. — mentions your brand, that could be the precursor to viral content. Your alert system should monitor for these messages, as they indicate looming viral stories.

4. CREATE A CRISIS SCORING MATRIX

Not all crises will warrant notification of your C-level executives. Some might only require issuing a public apology through your owned channels. Others don’t require a response at all. That’s why it’s important to develop a scoring matrix for your organization that outlines different criteria for different incidents to help you determine the appropriate actions. During a crisis, it’ll trigger immediate actions — a domino effect that helps you expedite and streamline the crisis response.

For small incidents that occur on a frequent basis — customer complaints, for example — your scoring matrix will act as a response guide. For the BIG issues, the matrix can help you decide whether you pick up the phone and call the SVP of PR and how quickly you notify them.

5. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Your Crisis Team Leader should schedule **fire drills twice a year** in order to test the effectiveness of your crisis management plan. Not only will it identify gaps in your process, it’ll help you solidify or modify roles and responsibilities, build the team’s know-how in terms of crisis management, and enable members to work together effectively.

When scheduling a fire drill, make sure that it’s testing your organization’s preparedness under both normal and less-than-desirable circumstances. Your first fire drill could occur during regular business hours. The second drill, however, should take place during off-peak hours — and during a period when a key representative is traveling.

Your brand’s crisis might not happen under ideal terms. So it’s important to be prepared for anything.

A simple example of a scoring matrix is provided on the next page.
Your Crisis Team should sit down to determine criteria that make sense for your organization. Examples can include: Does this affect sales? Does this involve anyone on the executive team? Have any news outlets picked up the story? Your Crisis Team should also come to a consensus on the weighting for each criterion.

When accessing a crisis situation, one key point to note is to always round your score up. If you’re anywhere near the threshold, consider it higher priority. Also keep in mind that every organization will have ‘wildcard’ situations (e.g. when an influential celebrity talks about your brand), which will always be treated as high-priority items.
Some key areas that you should assess and develop a strategy for prior to experiencing a crisis include, but are not limited to:

- understanding the expectations of your key audience groups, including stakeholders, shareholders, the media and the general public
- developing a plan and strategy to effectively meet those expectations in real time
- developing crisis communications strategies, such as: identifying the appropriate communications platforms for different crisis scenarios, developing a crisis hashtag strategy, creating a response flow chart and setting your team up with appropriate monitoring tools

Today’s crises are amplified by social media and today’s crisis realities tend to work against you (for example, things like real-time communication and the viral potential of emotionally charged stories). The most strategic way to give your organization a fighting chance in a crisis is to prepare your team in advance.
BRAND CRISES HAPPEN AT TWO SPEEDS

There are two types of crises: Flash Fires and Rolling Disasters.

FLASH FIRES
These are your social media nightmare stories. The intern who forgot to log off the company’s account. The angry ex-employee who has access to your brand’s native accounts. The list goes on. These crises escalate quickly and massively, but are not likely to have longevity. These stories have high virality potential, but can be extinguished quickly if handled correctly.

ROLLING DISASTERS
These are your website hacks, product failures or compliance issues. As time progresses, updates from news outlets will continue rolling in and more details regarding accountability and impact will unfold, requiring you to stay on top of the situation. Rolling disasters require long-term crisis management.

The way you handle a Flash Fire differs considerably from how you handle a Rolling Disaster. We’ll go into detail on best practices for handling each later. But before you start determining how to handle a crisis, you need to first identify it.

So, how can you tell what type of crisis you have on your hands? We’ve provided a flowchart on the following page to assist.
THE AMERICAN RED CROSS’ DRINKING PROBLEM

The American Red Cross proved a few years ago that you can say a lot in 140 characters. Sometimes, it’s the wrong thing.

Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head's Midas Touch beer…. when we drink we do it right #getngslizzerd

You can imagine how tweeting about getting ‘slizzerd’ can be damaging to a brand that usually prides itself on being ‘honorable’ and ‘humanitarian’. Even worse: the tweet was sent out after normal business hours, when most people were unavailable to mitigate brand damage.

How the brand responded:
The rogue tweet was only live on the site for an hour before being taken down. But rather than hoping that no one noticed, the brand activated their crisis management plan.

Wendy Harman, the brand’s social media director at the time, received calls in the middle of the night about the incident. By the next morning, an official apology was issued from the brand’s account, in addition to a detailed explanation on the company blog.

Fans responded positively and Dogfish Head Craft Brewery even joined the conversation, encouraging their fans to donate to the Red Cross. The situation transformed from a Twitter #fail to an opportunity for doing good.

The American Red Cross story shows the necessity of reacting quickly to a potentially nightmarish situation. If handled well, your Flash Fire will die in the same day it was born.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PUTTING OUT A FLASH FIRE

Knowing Conversation Drivers

A celebrity who tweets about your brand will pack more punch than the ‘Average Joe’. During Mother's Day, for example, 1-800 Flowers tapped superstar Justin Bieber for social promotion. As a result, the brand completely owned social media conversations during the major retail holiday. Influential figures won’t always take to social to say good things about your brand. That’s why your social media management system should offer influencer-based alerts that automatically help you identify and engage early on with conversation drivers.

Get the Big Picture

Crises don’t just live on social media. They can sprout from blog posts, news articles, etc. In order to effectively manage crises, you need to look beyond what your social communities are saying. This is where adopting a social listening platform comes in handy — your platform should look for conversations about your brand across the web as a whole. It should give you a ‘big picture’ view of your organization, products, campaigns and even competitors.

Listen and Act

Today’s connected consumers don’t want you to just listen to their issues, they want you to act. Your social listening platform should not only monitor for conversations, it should allow you to act upon your listening insights. If there’s an issue bubbling up, having listening integrated into an existing CRM system allows you to respond to conversations in real time. Integration allows you to take steps to ameliorate the situation right away, rather than just being a helpless observer.

Acknowledge Your Mistake

Don’t bury your brand’s mistake. The truth will find a way, even if you delete the incriminating tweet. Apologize — the sooner, the better — and offer an explanation whenever necessary.
TELL THE TRUTH

Very often, in a crisis, people will add fuel to the fire by filling in gaps with rumors, suspicions or what they think went wrong. Providing correct information, in a timely manner, is like the equivalent of denying oxygen to a growing fire. With that said, be sure to tell the truth and only the truth. The only thing worse than not saying anything at all is to say something false.

BE HUMAN

People want to hear from people, not brands. This is especially true in the event of a crisis. So in your responses, be honest, sincere, authentic and as human as possible. Humans are more likely to forgive other humans.

DO IT QUICKLY

In September of 2013, a British Airways customer became so frustrated with the brand that he paid for a sponsored tweet to vent to the brand’s 300,000 followers. The airline took nine hours to respond, blaming the delay on their Twitter feed being open “0900-1700 GMT.” News outlets and even competitor airlines commented on the tweet before the brand did — many criticizing the brand for its radio silence.

TACO BELL’S MYSTERY MEAT SPECIAL

In January 2011, Taco Bell was hit with a class action lawsuit that claimed the fast food company was guilty of false advertising, and that the ‘seasoned beef’ in many of its products was only 35 percent beef instead of the legally required 70 percent. The law firm that filed the suit accused Taco Bell of misleading customers regarding the contents of its ‘taco meat filling.’ The allegations quickly sparked media fervor, consumer concerns, as well as endless jokes about the contents of the company’s food.

This Rolling Disaster crisis had all the necessary ingredients to wreak havoc on the brand’s bottom line.

How the brand responded:

Taco Bell immediately came out swinging, and President and Chief Concept Officer Greg Creed issued an official statement that same day calling the basis of the lawsuit “absolutely wrong.” Their crisis management efforts didn’t stop there. A few days later, the company launched an advertising campaign to reassure customers, which included taking out full-page print ads declaring “Thank you for suing us,” with an accurate breakdown of its ground beef percentages.

The swiftness with which Taco Bell responded to the Rolling Disaster crisis, as well as the brand’s willingness to be transparent — yet firm — mitigated what could’ve been a reputational and business nightmare. Customers responded positively on social media, and the lawsuit was dropped a few months later.
BEST PRACTICES FOR HANDLING A ROLLING DISASTER

ACT LIKE ANTIVIRUS SOFTWARE

Antivirus software programs work in two ways: pattern based and anomaly based. Your Crisis Response Team must do the same at the beginning of a crisis.

**Pattern based:**
Compare current situation against a list of common issues/problems (by leveraging the scoring matrix), then proceed.

**Anomaly based:**
Something out-of-the-ordinary is happening, so the team starts activating the crisis plan — listening, monitoring, unsure of exactly what the issue may evolve into but moving early, and reassessing frequently as necessary, escalating when necessary. This may sound counter-intuitive, but if something is acting out of the normal at your organization, you can’t sit idly by and wait for the issue to reveal itself.

USE YOUR CALLING TREE

Notify people on your crisis contact list based on the scope of the issue. The more severe the problem at hand, the sooner and higher up you need to communicate. If it’s a low level issue, deal with it and then notify the necessary parties. If it’s Defcon 5, notify the senior level members of the calling tree and do so quickly using the agreed upon contact methods available to you. Telephone, text, email, pager, smoke signals.

DUTIFULLY GATHER INFORMATION

Find out the who, what, where, how, why of the crisis situation. Your crisis team content specialist should document all information as it comes trickling (or pouring) in. This will be critical for your first report to the team and when you review your crisis response later. During this time, it is also essential to think like an ace reporter. Be clear on the facts, identify the potential areas of investigation and always trust, but verify everything twice, to ensure that your company’s internal Subject Matter Experts (SME’s) corroborate, if the topic is outside of your knowledge and comfort zone.

RELEASE AN INTERNAL REPORT

Your first report to the internal team (consisting of crisis team members and those activated in the crisis communication tree) needs to include answers to at least three of the following questions:

- What is the current state?
- Which teams/departments/units are affected?
- What is known?
- What is uncertain?
- What is completely unknown?
- How long before we figure out the uncertainties?
- What’s the frequency and cadence of additional internal reports?
- Do we need to hire an external PR agency?
- Do we need people to work overtime?
- Do we need to hire a third-party consultant?
- Should we respond publicly?

SAY SOMETHING… QUICKLY

Corporations don’t want to air their dirty laundry; most company policies are designed to prevent disclosure of private information. So the gut reaction for most brands during a crisis is to resist opening up. This only exposes you to additional brand damage.

If you don’t make a statement within the first 24 hours, the public will make one for you — most likely an unpleasant one — and this story will trump any story you release yourself.

Even if it’s only to say that you’re aware of the situation and are looking into it, saying something to let people know you’re taking steps towards a resolution. Doing so can make a difference to your shareholders, customers and key business partners as it also allows them to begin their own preparation as necessary depending on your industry and business model.

AUTHORIZE THE NECESSARY RESOURCES

Maybe you have an internal crisis management team sufficiently equipped to handle crises. But most likely, you’re dealing with something beyond your normal capabilities. Consider having a crisis consultant or PR
team with crisis management experience on retainer to expedite the process. Make sure to appoint a clear Crisis Commander and make them responsible for determining proper escalation of the crisis, looping in the right people as necessary and moving communications along the pipeline.

FIND YOUR FRIENDS

Activate the key audience segments that care about your brand to defend you. A third-party influential figure or a group of advocates who stand up for you will mean far more to the public than anything you say yourself.

FIND YOUR DETRACTORS

Use your social listening to find your detractors and target them individually with counter messaging. If it's an extremely disgruntled customer, engage with them and help them find a resolution.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR EMPLOYEES

Your employees are your greatest untapped resource during a crisis. Guide your employees in their effort to speak up for the company. Not only will empowering your employees to speak on behalf of the brand increase transparency within the organization, it’ll also carry positive messages about your brand into the community in a human and genuine way.

KEEP TABS ON THE SITUATION

Continue monitoring conversations about your brand in the weeks and months following the incident. Stay aware of new stories popping up, old ones dying down, and the general trend of conversations.

LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

Crises are learning opportunities. They show you how you can improve as a brand in terms of marketing, public relations, quality assurance — even operations. During the process your internal best friend is documentation of the facts, decisions and actions taken, so that your team can perform a proper post-mortem and review them later. Within 48 to 72 hours of the close of your crisis, while the facts are still fresh yet after the critical moments have passed, the most mature and successful organizations call out the wins and successes. They’ll also identify gaps and areas for improvement. These self-assessment learnings should be used to mentor and train your team members, to revise your crisis management plans, to establish new business policies that help with clarification whenever appropriate, and anything that expedites proper issue handling.
Lately I’ve been seeing an increasing number of social media crisis management articles written by ‘experts’ in my Google News search. I’d like to start by noting here that anyone who’d like us to think that they’ve got it all wired when it comes to managing crises in social media (or anywhere else for that matter) is full of hot air, because no one has it all wired. We’re all learning — with each and every issue to which we respond. That said, I’m amazed there are still some global brands that are not investing in a social media listening and issue response strategy. That oversight creates brand risk.

Having a solid social strategy to provide effective messaging during corporate crises is certainly a good thing, and focusing on outbound messaging is well and good, but having a process for responding should come first. To have a successful outcome, begin with a plan to fix the problems you find.

“Do good things, before you say good things” should be the mantra of all who seek to protect their brands in social. Focusing on fixing the issue at hand should always come before discussing how to best communicate.

Let’s look at what one effective response model might look like:

**IS THIS A MAJOR ISSUE?**
**WHAT SHOULD OUR RESPONSE BE?**
Not every issue discovered in social is a crisis, nor does every item need to be responded to (contrary to currently popular crisis management advice). However, issues discovered in social may be categorized in a variety of ways to help guide an effective response.

**LEVEL ONE: IMPACT UNKNOWN**
Let’s keep an eye on this and see if it gets any traction. Begin some targeted social media listening and see if anything develops.

**LEVEL TWO: IMPORTANT, BUT ROUTINE ISSUE**
There are negative comments in social that have gained, or are gaining, traction. If your organization made a mistake, or caused this issue, and an apology is called for — make it.

**LEVEL THREE: ALL HANDS RESPONDING**
An immediate response is required. The impact to customers and/or the brand is high. Launch (1) a team to fix the problem and (2) a campaign of listening and responding to let people know what you’re doing to fix the problem.

A basic, but coordinated, issue response program could take many forms, but here’s one way that such a response could flow:

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**DO GOOD THINGS BEFORE YOU SAY GOOD THINGS**

Rick Reed
ISSUE & CRISIS MANAGER
INTEL CORPORATION

Since 1998, Rick has been helping to detect, prevent, and manage product and corporate reputation issues at Intel. Most recently, Rick has been helping Intel to understand the role social media plays in this space. Rick lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his beautiful wife and two tremendous kids who are constantly showing him just how little he knows about preventing and managing crises.

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REPUTATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES FOR THE ENTERPRISE

ISSUE RESPONSE PROGRAM

1. IDENTIFY ISSUE / ACTIVATE ESCALATION PATH / EVALUATE ISSUE / ACTIVATE TEAM

Once an issue has been identified, notification is immediately sent to a defined issue management team at a group email account. The issue management team reviews the initial facts and determines (1) whether there is a team already working on the issue; and if not, (2) determines others to notify and/or involve, such as PR, Legal, or Social Media. If there is no other team currently working on the issue, an initial phone meeting is quickly scheduled.

2. REVIEW FACTS / ASSIGN ROLES

After reviewing the issue in the first issue team meeting, a couple of key roles must be established. First, identify the issue owner. This person is the ultimate decision-maker for this issue. Then, name a single person through whom all issue communication will be approved.

3. SHOULD WE ENGAGE IN SOCIAL?

Also during this first meeting, the PR and social media strategists should determine whether jumping into the social conversation with a direct response will add oxygen to the fire or remove it. Your obvious goal here is to only take action that will make things better, not worse. Part of this decision process is understanding what your organization is doing to fix the problem, then deciding if, and how, to best communicate. Once a decision to communicate has been made, a message delivered early on can help reduce the number of re-tweets about your issue. Something as simple as, “We are aware of the issue and are working to fix the problem,” can help to slow the momentum that would otherwise develop.

4. NAME THE PROBLEM

At the first team meeting, I also recommend that you give the issue a name. Naming the issue and featuring it in the subject line of all subsequent email and meeting requests provides all involved with a visual flag that will stand out in the daily deluge of email that floods both our attention and inboxes.

5. FIND ANSWERS TO STAKEHOLDER QUESTIONS

Assign a team to develop and maintain a Backgrounder or Question and Answer (Q&A) document, for use by PR, Customer Support, and others as required. Of course, “socialized” versions of each approved Q&A will be developed for social media, eliminating the “corporate speak” commonly found in formal corporate communication documents. This Q&A sub-team should report to the single communications point of contact you named above.

6. ONGOING MONITORING

Establish a regular and ongoing online listening program for the issue. Assign a person to lead the effort and report regularly. Revise the Q&A document based on unanswered questions from contact centers and social posts. Distribute the revised Q&A regularly to those responsible for answering questions on behalf of your organization. Ongoing social media monitoring may be a leading indicator for understanding when the issue is over.

7. POST INCIDENT REVIEW

Conduct a post-incident review to understand what went well, how you’ll better respond next time, and improvement recommendations. It’s really not rocket science, but it can be made to seem that way. While an effective issue management program won’t prevent every issue, by following some simple steps you’ll be on your way to reducing the issue’s unintended consequences, and may emerge from the issue with an even stronger brand.
CONCLUSION

Whether it’s an inappropriate tweet or business-damaging scandal, unfortunate events can happen to any brand. Reputational crises, like natural disasters, can’t be avoided. This doesn’t mean leaving your enterprise ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the storm. It means doing your best to anticipate and manage the situation. It’s bracing for impact.

Developing a well-thought-out crisis management plan can be the difference between brand longevity and long-term brand damage. Expecting crises, assigning leadership roles, clarifying your decision making process and learning from every scenario is a proven method for maturing and developing resilience to the challenges that come in the course of today’s social business climate.

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