SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION:

AN UPDATE TO THE 2000 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE & TOOLKIT

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Contents

Introduction

"There's no such thing as bad publicity." This old public relations adage may have had a ring of truth when traditional media outlets were the gatekeepers of information and consumers had no other choice but to get their news from television, newspapers, radio, and other one-way communication channels. However, today's climate of two-way communication, where consumers of news are just as often producers and distributors of news through the Internet and social media, has given rise to the importance of context in media coverage, and of sentiment, over mere mention (Westergaard, 2014). This shift in news dissemination patterns from a more traditional one-way model to today's two-way model likely accounts for why reputation management and crisis communication have become even more important job functions for public relations practitioners in the modern age (Tate, 2013).

Crisis situations abound and bad news spreads especially fast in the online world. One example is the leaked audio recording of Donald Sterling, owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, telling his girlfriend not to bring African-Americans to his basketball games or post photos with them on Instagram, the social media platform. In April 2014, this recording went viral on social media and inspired a litany of criticism from public figures with large groups of followers such as Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, and President Barack Obama. Public outcry was so intense over this incident that not only did the National Basketball Association (NBA) ban Sterling for life, force him to sell the team, and fine him $2.5 million, but Sterling also faced irreparable and widespread damage to his reputation and future business prospects (Garofalo, 2014). Another example is the 2014 shooting of the unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The perception of injustice in Brown's death led to riots and protests in his city, but it was outrage over the media's depiction of Brown that spread

quickly online, launching a nationwide social media protest using hashtag

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown. In this protest, Twitter users posted contrasting photos of themselves –

one depicting a minority stereotype and one rejecting that stereotype – and asked rhetorically

which the media would use if they were to be killed (Stampler, 2014). Both crises represent

important stories that would likely have been front-page news before the Internet. But what

online news sharing has changed, and what is evident in both of these crisis incidents, is that any

person from any part of the world is able to get involved in a story. The stakes for crisis

communication are much greater in today's media landscape because news stories no longer

have geographical bounds (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014).

Educational institutions, like primary and secondary schools, are not exempt from the

high-stakes nature of crisis communication. As Scott Glover (2013) explained, "Schools are

susceptible to a wide variety of crises, from natural disasters like floods, fires or earthquakes, to

threats of violence like school shootings and bomb threats" (p. 3). Schools also face threats of

scandals and tragedies, such as inappropriate relationships between teachers and students or

deaths of students or employees. An idea for how to manage such a crisis operationally, while

useful, ultimately is not enough for schools; today's schools must have a plan in place for

communicating with constituents, the media, and the public in the event of a crisis. The National

Education Association's (NEA's) Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit, developed in 2000,

is a resource toolkit for educators that includes sections for schools on being prepared before a

crisis, being responsive during a crisis, and being diligent after a crisis. The problem with the

guide is that it has not been updated since its development in 2000, and the ways in which

schools should communicate with constituents during a crisis have changed significantly in 15

years. Though there is quality information in the guide about issuing statements, organizing

briefings, and crafting messages in the immediate aftermath of a crisis situation, the guide fails to advise schools on how to communicate with constituents using social media, which is significantly important in modern-day crisis response.

This creative project offers a social media update for the NEA Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit to make it more relevant for school officials who are responding to modern-day crisis situations, and it project comprises three parts. First, the review of related literature establishes the definition of crisis communication, examines how the Internet and social media have influenced crisis communication, and explores how the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) guides public relations practitioners through selecting appropriate messages in a crisis. Second, the content analysis examines the social media crisis communication of four higher education institutions that won Circle of Excellence award winners in the Issues and Crisis Management category from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education between 2010 and 2014. By examining actual social media content that earned recognition for its excellence and effectiveness, the analysis could identify commonalities that effective social media crisis communication share. The commonalities studied were informed by two research questions: what were the form, strategy, and content of Circle of Excellence award winners' social media messages during a crisis (RQ1), and what steps did the institution take (timing, frequency, content, external involvement, and response) that align with the SCCT (RQ2)? The findings from the content analysis form the foundation of the third element, the social media update to the National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit.

Review of Related Literature

When an organization faces a crisis, how it responds is critical. Effective crisis communication can be the difference between the organization surviving a crisis with minimal damage to its reputation and the organization collapsing underneath it. This study of related literature examines what exactly constitutes crisis communication and how social media and the Internet have changed this form of communication in recent years. It also looks to W. Timothy Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2015), one of the leading theories related to crisis communication, for guidance on selecting appropriate messages during a crisis.

Defining an Organizational Crisis

No organization or individual is immune to a crisis. With possible organizational crises ranging in scope from a manufacturing accident that leaves employees injured to an embezzling scandal involving a company's founder, it is clear that no two crises are alike. Because of this variability, it is difficult for public relations practitioners to anticipate and plan for all of the possible crisis situations they may face. However, the impossibility of predicting all potential crisis situations should not be confused with futileness of planning for one. In fact, Coombs (2012) urged crisis managers to spend time identifying which crises their organizations are most vulnerable to and thinking about possible communication strategies for each.

While no two crises are alike, there are some common elements that unite nearly all crisis situations. In examining some of the most devastating crises of the 20th century, including the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, the Tylenol poisonings, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and the Black Monday stock market crash of 1987, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) found commonalities they all share. They suggested that all organizational crises could be defined as "a specific, unexpected, and

nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high-priority goals" (p. 233). To account for possible good that can occur in crisis situations, the three later adapted their definition, saying, "An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals" (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2015, p. 8). Both of these definitions account for the fact that an organizational crisis can be caused by either a singular event or a series of events, and both suggest that a crisis can have a detrimental effect on an organization's goals.

Kathleen Fearn-Banks suggested that the organization's goals are not the only things that could be impacted by a crisis situation; publics, services, products, and the company's reputation could be at risk as well. Offering a slightly different take to the definition Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer developed, Fearn-Banks (2011) defined a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p. 2). This expanded view of stakeholder impact beyond just the organization is a key point of focus in modern research on crisis communication (Kent, 2010). Additionally, Fearn-Banks included the important word "potential" in her definition when talking about negative outcomes, and this suggests that an organization can minimize the negative outcomes and maximize the positive with proper crisis management and crisis communication.

Crisis Communication and Crisis Management

Crisis communication is an integral component of an organization's crisis management efforts, but the two terms, crisis communication and crisis management, are not interchangeable. As Coombs (2008) explained, "Crisis management includes efforts designed to prevent and to detect potential crises, and to learn from crisis experiences. […] Crisis communication has emphasized postcrisis communication and the use of crisis response strategies" (p. 263). Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2001) offered definitions that mostly align with Coombs's but provide more differentiation between the terms:

> Crisis management is strategic planning to prevent and respond during a crisis or negative occurrence, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty and allows the organization to be in greater control of its destiny. The process of crisis communication is the verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its publics (often through the news media) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. (p. 480)

Based on these definitions, it is clear that while crisis management prioritizes prevention and can be done both before and after a crisis occurs, crisis communication focuses more on the actual communicated response and can only truly be done after a crisis occurs. Crisis communication, therefore, is a function of public relations.

Crisis Communication Theory

While most public relations practitioners agree unequivocally with the importance of strategic crisis communication, what actually constitutes crisis communication has been the subject of much research and theory development since the late 1980s. As Coombs (2006) discovered, the numerous studies of crisis communication that have been published can

ultimately be divided into two categories of emphasis: form and content. Research focusing on the form of crisis communication suggests what should be done. For example, many best practices in crisis communication suggest that organizations be open and honest in times of crisis (Coombs, 2015). While these lessons certainly apply to communication during a crisis situation when the stakes for the organization are extremely high, they ultimately are also applicable recommendations for general public relations.

The area of content, however, is unique to crisis communication and is the area of focus for much public relations research because it is more strategic. Coombs (2006; 2015) found that research focusing on content tends to be more rigorous than research focusing on form, and content research examines what is actually said in response to a crisis. One of the leading theories that established a framework in terms of crisis communication content strategy is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs, offers a theoretical framework, bolstered by leading ideas in crisis communication content research, that identifies the best crisis response strategies for each crisis situation in order to best protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2015). As Hilary Fussell Sisco (2012) explained, "The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) adds new dimensions to the research in crisis communication, moving beyond post-hoc analysis and case studies to developing predictive theory" (p. 2). The SCCT, which was developed by Coombs in 1988, outlines one of the first predictive models for crisis communication.

Since its inception, the SCCT has been applied to numerous crisis situations, and as a result, it is a theory that has experienced much evolution. For example, while the SCCT originally defined thirteen different types of crises that it is possible for organizations and individuals to encounter, current iterations of the theory just include ten. Additionally, the

earliest version of the SCCT described ten possible crisis response strategies under three possible postures, but today's SCCT organizes those ten strategies under four postures (Coombs, 2015). Overall, the SCCT provides a framework for crisis communication that any public relations practitioner or business leader could apply in the midst of a crisis situation and is considered to be one of the leading theories on crisis communication in the field today.

Actually applying the SCCT model requires a few steps. The first, and arguably most important, step involves deciphering the type of crisis situation being faced by examining three factors of the scenario. Those factors are the initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation/relationship history (Formentin, 2010). In terms of determining the basic crisis type, the ten types are divided among three levels of organizational responsibility. Victim crises, or those with a very low level of responsibility, are natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence. Accidental crises, or those with a low level of responsibility, are challenges, technical-error accidents, and technical-error product harm. Preventable crises, or those with a high level of responsibility, are human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeeds (Coombs, 2012; Coombs, 2015). The crisis type is an important consideration in determining how stakeholders perceive the situation and the organization's responsibility level (Sisco, 2012). When internal attributions of responsibility are higher, as they would logically be for crises that fall under the preventable category in the SCCT, stakeholders are likely to punish the organization or individual in question more harshly.

While the initial crisis responsibility level does offer a preliminary crisis type according to the SCCT, Coombs (2008) also believed public relations practitioners should adjust according to threat intensifiers, and this happens in the second step of the SCCT. These threat intensifiers are crisis history, relationship history, and severity, and they are defined as the following:

Crisis history lists similar crises an organization has had in the past. […]

Relationship history indicates if the organization has had a record of good works

or bad behavior. […] Severity is the amount of damage inflicted by the crisis,

including injuries, loss of lives, financial loss, and environmental destruction. (Coombs,

2008, p. 266)

Coombs (2012, 2015) explained that crisis history, in particular, acts as an intensifier in a crisis

situation because of the Velcro® effect. Just as Velcro attracts lint, organizations with a history of

crisis situations attract additional reputational damage with each subsequent crisis they face.

Formentin (2010) added to this explanation, saying:

Some crisis types can be moved further up the responsibility continuum based on having

a history of past crises, but if there is no history – or the history is not publicly known –

there is little difference in stakeholder perceptions and therefore less threat to

organizational reputation. (p. 15)

Because threat intensifiers increase the possible reputational damage that the crisis situation can

have on the organization, crises that are found to have an individual threat intensifier or a

combination thereof should be moved up the responsibility continuum. Victim crises with threat

intensifiers should be treated as accidental crises; subsequently, accidental crises with threat

intensifiers should be treated as preventable crises (Coombs, 2008; Coombs, 2015). In other

words, the second step of the SCCT is designed to account for threat intensifiers like crisis

history, relationship history, and severity in order to truly identify the crisis response strategy

that will work best for the organization in crisis (Wright, 2009).

The third and final step of the SCCT involves selecting the appropriate crisis response

strategy to use in crisis communication. After determining the initial crisis type and adjusting for

any threat intensifiers, practitioners choose from ten crisis communication strategies that are

categorized among four basic postures of crisis response; those postures, in turn, are organized

based on their level of crisis responsibility. See Table 1 for details on crisis response strategies.

Table 1

Crisis response strategies by postures

Posture (Overall Goal)	Crisis Response Type	Crisis Response Description
Denial (Remove connection to crisis)	Attacking the accuser	Crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims a crisis exists. The response may include a threat to use force (e.g., a lawsuit) against the accuser.
Denial (Remove connection to crisis)	Denial	Crisis manager states that no crisis exists. The response may include explaining why there is no crisis.
Denial (Remove connection to crisis)	Scapegoating	Some other person or group outside of the organization is blamed for the crisis.
Diminishment (Reduce attributions of control)	Excusing	Crisis manager tries to minimize the organization's responsibility. The response can be denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events that led to the crisis.
Diminishment (Reduce attributions of control)	Justification	Crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received.
Rebuilding (Improve reputation)	Compensation	Organization provides money or other gifts to the victims.
Rebuilding (Improve reputation)	Apology	Crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility and asks forgiveness.
Bolstering (Build positive connection with stakeholders)	Reminding	Organization tells stakeholders about its past good works.
Bolstering (Build positive connection with stakeholders)	Ingratiation	Organization praises stakeholders.
Bolstering (Build positive connection with stakeholders)	Victimage	Organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis.

Note. Adapted from Coombs (2015, p. 145).

The SCCT's crisis responses all have situations for which they are best suited. The three denial strategies (attacking the accuser, denial, and scapegoating) are recommended for victim crises with low organizational responsibility because the organization in question can claim that no crisis occurred or assert that the organization was not responsible for the crisis. Diminish strategies (excusing and justification) are recommended for accidental crises like challenges, technical-error accidents, and technical-error product harm because they work to reframe the ways in which stakeholders perceive the crisis situation and minimize the negative perception those stakeholders have of the organization in question (Lai, 2010). Diminish strategies also work best when there are no threat intensifiers. Rebuild strategies (compensation and apology) contain words and actions that are designed to benefit stakeholders and reduce the negative effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2015). As such, they make sense for preventable crises, like human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeeds, and for crises in which there are threat intensifiers (Coombs, 2008). Rebuild strategies involve the organization showing concern, compassion, and often remorse in response to the crisis, and this acceptance of responsibility can go a long way in repairing the organization's reputation and relationships with stakeholders (Lai, 2010). The three bolstering strategies, ones that seek to improve the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders, are supplemental and should only be used in combination with strategies in the aforementioned postures. As Coombs (2015) explained, "These three focus on the organization, so they would seem rather egocentric if used alone" (p. 149).

Social Media and Changing News Patterns

Recent data from the Pew Research Center suggests that social media is changing the way users consume and participate in the news (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). Social media,

which is an umbrella term used in this project to refer to the most widely used social networking

services (such as Facebook or Google Plus) and microblogging services (such as Twitter), is

defined as:

> Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile
>
> within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a
>
> connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of those connections and those made by
>
> others within the system. (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211)

While Boyd and Ellison are correct in that these services were initially designed simply to

connect users with one another, practically all social media sites today are used at least in part by

people to share information, be it personal photos, organizational updates, or news of interest. As

such, social media has become one of the top sources of news information for Americans

(American Press Institute, 2014; Anderson & Caumont, 2014). Approximately two-thirds of

adults in the U.S. are active on social media, and half of these users have shared a news story,

image, or video on social media (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). As Gitanjali Laad and Gerald

Lewis explained of social media's proclivity as a news source, "It [social media] is a medium of

communication that allows information to be transmitted on a global scale, reaching millions

around the world with relevant messages within a fraction of a minute" (2012, p. 4).

　　　While many believe social media to be a relatively new invention, the earliest iterations

of social media appeared in the 1990s and included sites like Classmates.com and

SixDegrees.com. More modern services like Friendster, LinkedIn, and MySpace launched in the

early 2000s (Digital Trends, 2014). Despite these sites being around for nearly two decades,

social media sites have experienced widespread growth in the past few years (Boyd & Ellison,

2008). Of the adults who report using a social media site, 71% of those are reportedly on

Facebook and 18% are reportedly on Twitter (Duggan & Smith, 2013). As the widespread growth and popularization of social media have significantly impacted the speed at which information is shared and the number of people who have access to that information, it is natural to assume these patterns can extend to crisis situations as well. Research found that in today's online news environment, there is no story that spreads more rapidly than one related to a crisis. According to a study conducted by the international law firm Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP (2013), news of a crisis situation spreads internationally within an hour more than a quarter (28%) of the time and within 24 hours nearly three-quarters (69%) of the time. Further, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook play a significant role in the quick domestic propagation of crisis stories at least 50% of the time. As Laad and Lewis explained about social media during crisis situations, "During a crisis, Twitter reports substantial information exchange, large amounts of conversation and mass coverage of events. Information and pictures move through social media sites at lightning speed" (2012, p. 7). Further, social media can be a resource for people wanting to contribute during a crisis, a growing practice called "citizen journalism" that 14% of social media users report having done (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). When a massive earthquake struck Japan in 2011, first responders looked to social media for guidance and direction on where to go and what to do, and Japanese citizens used social media as a way to connect with family members and friends when their phone lines failed (Laad & Lewis, 2012). Because connection and information sharing are two needs that typically arise during a crisis, it is logical that social media has emerged as one of the leading sources of communication during a crisis.

Social Media in Crisis Communication Plans

Due to the impact social media has had on the spread of a modern-day crisis, public relations experts urge organizations to expand their official crisis response plans to account for social media messaging (Syme, 2013). It is not enough for practitioners to plan to adapt the messages they have developed for print; they must think strategically about how to use social media messages in crisis communication. As Ann Marie van den Hurk said, "It is very important to have a written plan in place and staff trained before a crisis happens; because you'll lack the time to do so once one happens. […] Social media often outpaces itself. It forces organizations to be quick" (2013). This pressure results from the public's expectation for immediate, regular communication, often through the medium in which the crisis first spread. As Jaram Park, Meeyoung Cha, Hoh Kim, and Jaeseung Jeong (2012) explained:

> Before the social media era, companies used to respond to bad news by releasing position statements or public apologies via traditional media within days to weeks. Nowadays, however, the public expects companies to apologize promptly (within 24 hours) and respond directly through social media – the channel in which a crisis occurs. (p. 282)

Despite the public's presumed expectation to communicate with companies through social media during times of crisis, progress has been slow in making social media an official part of many crisis communication plans. A 2011 survey of public relations professionals in the U.S. found that while 82% of their organizations were active on social media at the time of the survey, only 48% had incorporated social media into their crisis communication plans (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). A similar study of public relations practitioners in Indiana found that while 75% of the respondents' organizations were active on social media at the time of the survey, only 35% had included social media in their crisis plans (Ward, 2011). Educational institutions are no

different. While an impressive 59% of crisis communications plans at colleges and universities include social media recommendations, these recommendations are difficult to find in crisis communication plans at primary and secondary schools (Syme, 2012). Therefore, it is the relatively unexplored area of social media crisis communication for primary and secondary schools that will be the focus of this project.

Research Questions

Based on the above research, the following research questions were developed for this project:

RQ1: What were the form, strategy, and content of Circle of Excellence award winners' social media messages during a crisis?

RQ2: What steps did the institutions take (timing, frequency, content, external involvement, and response) that aligned with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

Methodology

The National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit was designed in 2000 to help primary and secondary schools across the country effectively resolve crisis situations. While many of the guide's recommendations about communicating with constituents during and after a crisis remain valid today, because the guide was developed in 2000 there are also areas that are lacking from the original guide. One such area is social media crisis communication, and it was not included in the original iteration of the guide because social media did not exist in 2000. Today's media landscape does include social media, however, so updates accounting for this form of crisis communication are necessary for the guide to be useful to modern practitioners. The goal of this project is to update the toolkit to reflect proven best practices in social media crisis communication for educational institutions.

Content Analysis

Content analysis was identified as the preferred research method for this project due to the method's unique ability to glean knowledge from and find patterns in relatively unstructured data. Defined as "the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings, and laws" (Babbie, 2010, p. 295), content analysis has proven to be one of the most popular data-gathering techniques in mass communication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). As with any research method, content analysis has strengths and weaknesses. While it benefits from being an unobtrusive method (it can be conducted without the use of human subjects) and a relatively inexpensive method, it does sometimes suffer from weak reliability and an overreliance on researcher inference (Chambers, 2013). Content analyses are "most successful when they focus on facts that are constituted in language, in the uses of the very texts that the content analysts are analyzing" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 78). As the purpose of this project was to

analyze successful social media crisis communication activities in order to inform an update to the National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit, content analysis was the ideal choice for research method.

Colleges and universities that had demonstrated effective social media crisis communication comprised the population for this study. Colleges and universities are far more likely than primary and secondary schools to include social media in their published crisis communication plans because they have more money to invest in communications staff (Syme, 2012). And since colleges and universities are similar in their educational nature to primary and secondary schools, they are an appropriate population for this content analysis.

A purposive sample of Circle of Excellence award winners in the Issues and Crisis Management category from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) was used for this project. This group was selected for several reasons. First, CASE is one of the world's largest and most respected educational associations. It represents more than 3,600 colleges and universities, primary and secondary independent and international schools, and nonprofit organizations worldwide (CASE, 2014), which gives its award programs added credibility. Second, CASE assembles panels of experts to judge each Circle of Excellence award category, so there is an element of peer review to the selection of the award winners. Third, Circle of Excellence award winners are considered to be examples of best practices in each category, so the winners in the Issues and Crisis Management category demonstrate best practices that other schools can adopt to be successful in a crisis.

While the Circle of Excellence award program started in 2004 and included a category for crisis communication at the onset, this project examined only the Issues and Crisis Management award winners from 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, giving it a sample size of four.

Award winning schools in those four years were the University of Central Florida, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Amherst College, and Boston University, respectively. At the time of this analysis, little information was available about the Circle of Excellence award winners from 2010 and earlier years, and the use of social media in crisis communication represented a fairly new phenomenon. Limiting the content analysis to the four most recent years ensured there would be sufficient data and ensured the results would be relevant given the current landscape of social media communication.

Previous research has identified form, strategy, and content as key considerations in crisis communication (Coombs, 2015), so this content analysis was intentionally designed to gather data in all three categories. Each school's social media crisis communication activity was analyzed using an Excel spreadsheet and a 17-question coding sheet. All Facebook and Twitter messages that were sent within seven days of the initial crisis event (as designated on the school's application for the Circle of Excellence award and found through a search of the schools' public accounts) and that were related to the crisis situation were included. These messages – along with their platform, date, word count, and text – were entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The Excel spreadsheet also tracked likes and comments for Facebook posts and favorites and mentions for Twitter messages.

Information entered into the Excel spreadsheet was then used to complete a coding sheet for each school. The coding sheet included some preliminary questions but was overall organized by the following categories: timing of crisis response; frequency of updates; content of messages; involvement of students, faculty and staff; and response to external constituents. These five categories align in part with the form, strategy, and content categories recommended by crisis communication experts. Practices related to form were examined through the timing,

frequency, and involvement questions. Practices related to strategy were examined through the content and response questions. And practices related to content were examined through the content questions. To safeguard this content analysis against poor reliability and the overreliance on a single researcher's inference, two coders completed coding sheets for the project. As Krippendorff (2013) explained, the coding process for content analysis should be completed by individuals with the necessary cognitive abilities as well as the appropriate backgrounds to understand the words being coded. Both coders for this content analysis were familiar with crisis communication before agreeing to code the data. In addition, a proper content analysis is said to be one that is reproducible, so coders with the same backgrounds and cognitive abilities should be able to find the same results (Krippendorff, 2013). In order to ensure reproducibility in this analysis, both coders received the same training and instruction sheet, and both coders analyzed the complete set of data.

<center>**Results**</center>

Because the body of this project is a social media addition to the National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit, the content analysis was conducted to determine which social media practices had proven effective and were fit to inform the addition. This goal was to look at the form, strategy, and content of the four Circle of Excellence award winners' social media messages in the content analysis, but the coding sheets themselves were organized by five categories (timing, frequency, content, external involvement, and response). The following discussion of content analysis findings was organized by the coding sheet categories.

Timing of Crisis Response

According to Coombs (2015), "In terms of the form of crisis communications, recommendations are to be quick, consistent, and open" (p. 130). Timing, then, is an important consideration when reviewing the best practices in social media crisis communication. While experts agree that quick response is an essential practice in crisis communication (Ford, 2011; Coombs, 2015), no clear guidelines exist that say exactly how many minutes, hours, or days constitute a quick response. To determine the speed at which these four Circle of Excellence award winners responded to their crisis situations on social media, this content analysis identified each SCCT crisis type and examined the amount of time that lapsed between the initial crisis incidents and the schools' first social media responses.
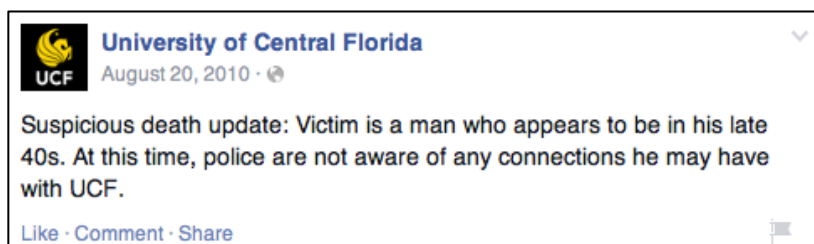
Table 2

SCCT Crisis Types and Initial Response Timing

School	SCCT Crisis Type	Responsibility Level	Initial Response Platform	Initial Response Time
UCF	Workplace Violence	Victim	Facebook and Twitter	Within 1 Hour
UAB	Op. Disruption from Disaster	Victim	Facebook and Twitter	Within 1 Hour
Amherst	Challenge	Preventable	Facebook	Within 2 Days
BU	Malevolence	Victim	Facebook and Twitter	Within 3 Hours

As Table 2 illustrates, the majority (75%) of these Circle of Excellence award winners issued some response through social media within three hours of the initial crisis event. The one school that did not communicate within the first three hours was Amherst College. Amherst's first crisis response came within two days of the initial crisis event. One explanation for this response time discrepancy could be the SCCT crisis type and coordinating level of crisis responsibility. The crises faced by the University of Central Florida, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Boston University all fell into the SCCT's victim cluster, which meant that the schools had a low level of perceived responsibility. The crisis faced by Amherst College fell into the SCCT's preventable cluster, which meant that the school had a high level of perceived responsibility. These findings suggest that the more responsible a school is perceived to be for a crisis situation, the more time the school may need to take to think through its initial response.

Additionally, one common roadblock organizations face when it comes to the timing of crisis response is a lack of complete information. As Coombs (2015) explained, "The primary risk associated with speed is the potential for inaccuracies. […] But speed does not have to mean mistakes, and the benefits of a rapid initial response far outweigh the risks" (p. 131). To determine if a lack of complete information influenced the timeliness of crisis communication

for the four Circle of Excellence award winners, each school's coding sheet included a simple yes/no question: Was all information about the crisis situation available at the time of the school's initial response? The answer to this question was determined by the social media updates sent after the initial crisis response. Two examples of updates that indicate incomplete information was available at the time of initial crisis response, one from the University of Central Florida and one from Boston University, are as follows, but each of the four schools' social media feeds contained similar messages:

University of Central Florida
August 20, 2010 ·

Suspicious death update: Victim is a man who appears to be in his late 40s. At this time, police are not aware of any connections he may have with UCF.

Like · Comment · Share

Boston University
@BU_Tweets

Follow

Some news outlets are identifying the BU student who was killed. Those reports are wrong. The victim's name has not been confirmed.

6:45 PM - 16 Apr 2013

83 RETWEETS 7 FAVORITES

Of the four cases examined in the content analysis, none of them were found to have complete information at the time of the initial crisis response. This suggests that regardless of the type of crisis situation a school faces, the school should not worry about gathering all possible information before issuing an initial response. As more information becomes available in the hours, days, and weeks following the initial crisis response, updates can be issued through social media.

Frequency of Updates

Openness and transparency during crisis situations are two other form recommendations encouraged by public relations experts (Ford, 2011; Coombs, 2015). While openness and transparency can be determined in part by the content of the messages, the frequency at which information is offered to constituents on social media is also worth considering. There are no clear guidelines that specify exactly how often social media messages should be shared in the first hours, days, or weeks after a crisis situation, but looking at how frequently the four Circle of Excellence award winners shared messages on social media following the initial crisis event sheds some light on what has been effective. As illustrated in Table 3, this content analysis examined not only the number of social media messages posted in the 24 hours following the initial crisis events, but it also examined the number of social media messages posted in the first week following the initial crisis events.

Table 3

Number of Social Media Posts in First Week of Crisis

School	First 24 Hours (Facebook)	First 24 Hours (Twitter)	First 7 Days (Facebook)	First 7 Days (Twitter)	Total Messages
UCF	3	3	3	3	6
UAB	8	3	12	12	24
Amherst	1	0	4	3	7
BU	7	6	25	21	46
Average	4.75	3	11	9.75	20.75

While the total number of social media messages sent in the week following the initial crisis event varied wildly (from seven total messages at Amherst College to 46 total messages at Boston University), the number of social media messages each school sent in the first 24 hours was far more consistent. On average, schools sent between four and five messages on Facebook and three messages on Twitter in the first 24 hours following the initial crisis event. These results suggest that a reasonable number of social media posts for a school in the first 24 hours of a crisis is between three and five per platform.

On average, schools sent 11 messages on Facebook and between nine and ten messages on Twitter in the week following the initial crisis event, but the range for these numbers was much larger. The University of Central Florida, for example, sent no additional messages on either social media platform after the first 24 hours of the crisis event, but Boston University sent an additional 33 messages between Facebook and Twitter.

This variation is likely due to the unique circumstances of each crisis situation. The University of Central Florida crisis (a death on campus during move-in day) was wrapped up once the police determined the victim was not a member of the UCF community and the death was self-inflicted. After the school communicated those details and the fact that there was no threat to the community to its constituents, little else needed to be said. The Boston University

crisis, on the other hand, occurred over five days. While the initial crisis event (the bombing at the Boston Marathon) took place on April 15, 2013, the crisis was prolonged by the search for suspects and the lockdown of the city. Pertinent details about school closings, the suspect search, and the memorial service for the graduate student who was killed in the bombing needed to be communicated by Boston University in the days following the crisis. Thus, far more regular communication was necessary. As a result, it is difficult to recommend a number of social media messages for the week following a crisis based on this content analysis, as the number appears dependent on the unique crisis situation.

Content of Messages

Of the three considerations research has identified for crisis communication – form, strategy, and content – it is ultimately content that determines the success or failure of a crisis communication effort. As Coombs (2015) explained, "What is actually said during a crisis has serious ramifications for the success of the crisis management effort" (p. 139). In this analysis, the content of social media messages was examined in several ways. First, it was examined to define average message length. Second, it was examined to see preferred point of view. Third, it was examined to determine the use of SCCT crisis response strategies.

Much research has gone into determining the optimal length of social media messages to maximize engagement, but these standards for word count and character count have not widely been tested in crisis communication situations. While Twitter messages are generally said to be most effective when they are 100 characters or fewer (approximately 20 words), Facebook messages are said to be most effective when they are 80 characters or fewer (approximately 16 words or fewer) (Lee, 2014). In examining the length of social media messages from the four

Circle of Excellence award winners, however, the opposite appeared to be true. Table 4 illustrates these results.

Table 4

Average Word Count for Social Media Crisis Messages

School	Avg. Word Count (Facebook)	Avg. Word Count (Twitter)	Avg. Word Count (Combined)
UCF	20.67	18.67	19.67
UAB	35.17	17.08	26.13
Amherst	17.25	17.00	17.13
BU	63.04	16.33	39.69
Total	34.03	17.27	25.65

The average word count of Twitter messages in this content analysis was 17.27 words per message, which falls in line with industry recommendations. However, the average word count for Facebook posts was nearly double the industry-recommended 16-word maximum. On average, Facebook messages in this content analysis contained 34.03 words. While Twitter does have a character limit of 140 for all messages, Facebook has no such limit. It is reasonable to assume based on these results that in the event of a crisis, messages on Facebook should emphasize thoroughness over brevity.

Unlike message length, one aspect of crisis communication that previous research has largely overlooked is the preferred point of view for messages. Whether public relations practitioners should communicate using the first-person point of view, second-person point of view, or third-person point of view is unclear, so this content analysis sought to determine if there were as one point of view emphasized over the others in the social media messages of these four Circle of Excellence award winners.

Table 5

Point of View Distribution in Crisis Messages

School	1st Person Point of View	2nd Person Point of View	3rd Person Point of View	Total Messages
UCF	0	0	6	6
UAB	4	3	17	24
Amherst	0	0	7	7
BU	16	1	29	46
Total	20	4	59	83

As Table 5 indicates, the third-person point of view was overwhelmingly the preferred tone for these social media messages, as it was used in 71% of all messages. Second-person point of view was used sparingly, in just 5% of all social media messages. And while Boston University used first-person point of view in 35% of its social media messages, overall first-person point of view was seen in just 24% of messages. There are some similarities in how schools used each of the points of view, as well. Messages in which schools made a statement expressing human emotion like concern or sympathy, either on behalf of the president or on behalf of the institution, were far more likely to be written with a first-person point of view. Similarly, messages sharing information updates were overwhelmingly written in the third-person point of view. Information updates logically appear to take priority in the first 24 hours of a crisis situation, and the majority of messages (71%) sent in the 24 hours following the initial crisis events were written in third-person point of view. These findings suggest that third-person point of view is highly appropriate for social media crisis communication messages, but schools can successfully use first-person language as well when needed.

Finally, the actual crisis response strategies used by the four Circle of Excellence award winners was studied in this content analysis. Years of research on the SCCT have been dedicated to matching appropriate response strategies with crisis types, and one goal of this content

analysis was to determine if the recommendations are actually used in crisis situations. In examining which response strategies were used by each school and comparing those to the crisis type, this content analysis sought to determine if there is a connection between using the SCCT and crisis communication success. Table 6 indicates which response strategies were used by each school.

Table 6

SCCT Response Strategies Used By Schools

School	SCCT Crisis Type	Responsibility Level	SCCT Crisis Responses Used
UCF	Workplace Violence	Victim	Denial, Scapegoating
UAB	Op. Disruption from Disaster	Victim	Compensation, Victimage
Amherst	Challenge	Preventable	Apology
BU	Malevolence	Victim	Scapegoating, Victimage

According to Coombs (2015), denial is best used in a rumor crisis; scapegoating should be avoided; compensation is appropriate when there are visible victims; apology is recommended when the organization is at fault; and victimage is best for crises of product tampering, hacking, workplace violence, and natural disasters (p. 148). Based on these recommendations, it is evident that the majority of Circle of Excellence award winners used the recommended message strategies given their crisis type. The one school whose response may have been questionable is the University of Central Florida. While scapegoating, according to Coombs, is never recommended, it may have been effective in this case. By communicating to constituents that the suicide victim was not connected to, and had never been connected to, the school, the University of Central Florida was able to separate itself from the crisis and avoid any perception of responsibility.

Involvement of Students, Faculty, and Staff

Another form consideration in crisis communication relates to who actually communicates on behalf of the organization in crisis. While traditional crisis reporting has faced upheaval due to the rise in citizen journalism practices that social media have allowed, it is unclear if public relations practitioners in educational institutions are also mobilizing individuals (such as students, faculty members, or staff members outside the public relations department) for their crisis communication efforts. To determine whether the citizen journalism model was used

in the Circle of Excellence award winners' crisis communication, each school's coding sheet

included one simple yes/no question: Were any individuals aside from public relations staff

members, school administrators, and official spokespeople involved in the school's crisis

response? Of the four cases examined in this content analysis, none of them were found to use

external voices in their crisis communication.

Constituent Engagement

Crisis situations often come with heightened emotions, both for the organization facing

the crisis and its constituents. Organizations sometimes receive negative feedback or criticism on

their handling of a crisis situation, and social media is a popular place for stakeholders to

publicly air these grievances. While some research cites benefits for companies that respond to

constituent complaints on social media (Xia, 2013), whether educational institutions facing a

crisis actually include this as a crisis communication strategy this is unclear.

To determine how the four Circle of Excellence award winners engaged with their

constituents on social media, this content analysis examined all incidents of response on Twitter

and Facebook. Twitter engagement was measured for the one-week period of analysis using the

site's advanced search feature. Table 7 compares the number of mentions each school's Twitter

account received (using the @ symbol) to the number of responses each school's Twitter account

sent.

Table 7

Schools' Responses to Constituents on Twitter

School	Original Twitter Messages	Twitter Mentions	Twitter Responses	Mentions That Received Responses
UCF	3	1	0	0
UAB	12	3	0	0
Amherst	3	16	0	0
BU	21	130	2	1

Facebook engagement was measured for the one-week period of analysis using each school's public wall. Table 8 compares the number of comments users left on the school's original posts to the number of responses each school posted to those user comments.

Table 8

Schools' Responses to Constituents on Facebook

School	Original Messages	Comments	Responses	Comments That Received Responses
UCF	3	70	5	7
UAB	12	5	4	80
Amherst	4	47	0	0
BU	25	887	2	0.2

Overall, Facebook appears to be a more popular platform for constituent engagement than Twitter; however, these results are heavily influenced by two of the schools. While Amherst College did not engage with constituents on either platform (no responses on Twitter or Facebook) and Boston University engaged equally on the two platforms (two responses on both Twitter and Facebook), the University of Central Florida and the University of Alabama at Birmingham both engaged with constituents on Facebook (with five and four responses respectively) but not at all on Twitter.

The nature of the schools' responses is worth mentioning as well, as there were some commonalities in the ways Boston University, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham chose to engage with constituents on social media during their crises. Of the 11 total engagements that took place on Facebook, three (27%) functioned as information updates, seven (64%) functioned as clarifications of school policies, and one (9%) functioned as a correction of false information. Of the two total engagements that took place on Twitter, one (50%) functioned as a clarification of school policy, and one (50%) functioned as a promotion of related student work.

This content analysis of the four Circle of Excellence award winners' social media crisis communication work identified several best practices in the areas of form, strategy, and content

that was used to inform the body of this project, the addition to the National Education

Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Body of the Project**</p>

The following social media update for the National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit was designed for inclusion in the guide's fourth section, the resource toolkit. The resource toolkit was previously organized into 33 sections, ranging in topic from talking points for teachers to media interview tips for parents, from press memos to guides on assembling a crisis team, and each included an about section, description of the resources, and samples for school officials to use. The following social media update, titled "Communicating on Social Media," represents Tool 34 in the toolkit.

Tool 34 – Communicating on Social Media: Tools for Administrators

About the Tool

This tool provides information about social media platforms Facebook and Twitter and gives administrators advice on using these platforms. Social media can be a powerful force during a crisis. If used poorly, it puts schools at risk of angering their constituents and facing widespread public criticism. If used properly, social media can help schools to communicate important information quickly to keep students, parents, alumni, and others safe. Social media provides schools with a forum for public statements. And it gives individuals the power to comment, sympathize, offer help, ask questions, and connect with the school in crisis.

Be Prepared: Understanding Crisis Types

As discussed in Book 1, today's schools face many different threats. These threats range from natural disasters like tornadoes or hurricanes to scandals like teachers falsifying test scores. Any one of these threats can turn into a full-fledged crisis at any time. It is impossible for busy administrators who are running a school to also take time to prepare for all of the potential crisis situations their school may face.

Because effective crisis response depends on the type of crisis being faced, it is important for school administrators to have a least a basic understanding of, or a resource that organizes, crisis types and appropriate responses for each. This easy-to-follow diagram sorts school crisis situations into three categories, gives examples of possible crises in each category, and provides tips on social media communication for each:

What type of crisis is the school facing?

Victim Crisis	**Accidental Crisis**	**Preventable Crisis**
In a victim crisis, the school is not perceived to be responsible. The school is considered just as much a victim of the crisis as students, teachers, and other constituents.	In an accidental crisis, the school is perceived to be minimally responsible. The school's leaders may have taken actions that led to the crisis, but they did so unknowingly.	In a preventable crisis, the school is perceived to be highly responsible. The school's leaders deliberately acted in a way that led to the crisis, and they knew the risks when they acted.

Examples:
Natural disaster, fire, death of community member, school shooting, wildlife disturbance, flu outbreak, rumor, damage from stranger

Examples:
Forgetting to report suicide threat that results in death, accidentally losing student on trip, holding class on snow day results in crash

Examples:
Declining to punish student for illegal activity on campus, hiring convicted sexual predator, falsifying test scores on state reports

How Do You Respond?

- Recognize that your constituents may be feeling scared or worried. Communicate accordingly.
- Information calms fears. Post an update about the crisis on social media as soon as it's safe to do so. Within hours is best.
- Post often in the first 24 hours. Ensure constituents get the latest news on social media as you have it.
- Rise above. Remind people that the school is a victim too, but don't get bogged down by self-pity. Tell stories of students coming together or ways you're compensating victims of the crisis.

How Do You Respond?

- Recognize that your constituents may be feeling confused or critical of you. Communicate accordingly.
- People will look to you for information, so post an update on social media quickly. Within hours is best. If possible, have people hear the news directly from you.
- Be open to feedback. People will want to help you avoid similar mistakes in the future, and they will have opinions on how to do so.
- Move forward. Justify your actions if needed, but don't deny the problem. Focus on how you'll do better in the future, and communicat that.

How Do You Respond?

- Recognize that your constituents may be feeling angry with you. Communicate accordingly.
- Unless the crisis is time-sensitive, take time to formulate your response. Preventable crises afford a bit more time for that initial statement, but the stakes are higher because the school is at fault. Think it through.
- Fix the problem. And tell your constituents exactly what you're doing to fix it. Don't be afraid to investigate and fire the person at fault.
- Apologize. People like to forgive, but they need to be asked for their forgiveness.

Facebook vs. Twitter: Which Should Our School Use?

Ideally, both! Facebook and Twitter are the two most common social media platforms for schools to use, and many use both to communicate during normal situations as well as in a crisis. Why use both? Well, Twitter and Facebook reach different audiences. Facebook users tend to be older while Twitter users tend to be younger, so many schools use Facebook to communicate with parents, grandparents, and other family members and Twitter to communicate with students and young alumni. In a crisis situation, you want your school's social media messages to be seen by as many people who have a stake in what's happening as possible, so communicating on both Twitter and Facebook is highly recommended.

Take Action Now: In order for social media crisis communication to be effective, schools must have a social media presence established before the crisis. If you wait until a crisis happens to set up a Facebook page or Twitter account, it will be too late. Setting up and maintaining a Facebook page and Twitter account for your school are easy two steps you can take now that will pay off if a crisis hits.

Even if your school never faces a crisis, having an active social media presence now will allow you to do some positive public relations. Share stories and photos of positive things happening at your school. Give a glimpse inside a faculty meetings (if those meetings are positive). Share photos of teachers volunteering on the weekend. Tell a story about a student that tugs at the heartstrings. Having an ongoing presence on social media does take some time to manage, but it ultimately boils down to three simple steps:

- Designate a faculty member or staff member to manage the accounts.

- Set a goal of posting original content two to three times each week.

- Ask your parents, students, faculty, and other constituents to follow the school's accounts.

When a Crisis Strikes: Five Things to Do in Every Crisis

No two crises are the same. While each crisis has its own set of circumstances and has unique communication needs based on the type of crisis that it is (victim, accidental, or preventable), there are still a few rules of thumb for social media crisis communication that apply to all crises. Whether you are dealing with a bomb threat or the death of an administrator, here are five things your school should do any time a crisis hits.

1. Figure out what you know and what you do not know. A lack of complete information should never stall your school's response on social media. Regardless of the type of crisis you are facing, your parents, students, community members, the media, and others will look to you first for a response, but if they do not hear from you, they will seek out information from other, possibly less credible, sources.

The first thing to do when a crisis hits (after ensuring all students and faculty members are safe, if applicable) is convene the crisis response communications team. In addition to the social media manager (if separate), that team should include the following roles:

- Spokesperson
- Media coordinator
- Information-communications coordinator
- Media monitor and research director
- Clerical and systems operations coordinator
- Liaison to law enforcement
- Liaison to victims' families and counseling units

- Computer systems and web page technician

- Volunteer coordinator

- Liaison to elected officials and manager of special events

- Donations coordinator

The purpose of this meeting is to determine what information is known, what is believed to be true but not yet confirmed, and what is not yet known. Ensure everyone is on the same page about the initial statement. Determine which social media platforms that initial message will go out on (it should be in accordance with other communication efforts, like email and a website update), and set a time for that message to be sent. Set a time for the crisis response communications team to reconvene, or simply set up a group text message where members of the crisis response communication team can share updates with one another, plan subsequent messages, and troubleshoot issues that arise.

2. Know that time is of the essence. Probably the most important rule of thumb in social media crisis communication is that quicker is better. While the timing of the first social media message depends in part on the type of crisis being faced (victim crises, for example, require a more immediate initial message than preventable crises), schools should strive to post an initial statement or a holding message on social media as quickly as possible in all crisis situations. Within one hour is generally recommended in Book 2 of this guide for victim crises or crises in which there is concern for student safety. Research suggests that statements can acceptably come between one hour and 48 hours in accidental and preventable crises, but the longer your school waits to speak out, the more it will appear that you are ignoring or failing in your attempts to resolve the crisis.

If a crisis happens during a school break or in the middle of the night, or if a crisis is so complicated that it may take more than 24 hours to issue the initial statement, consider issuing a holding statement through social media. A holding statement informs people that you are aware of the incident and are working to learn more. Journalists with immediate deadlines will often use a holding statement in the first posting of their story. If there is no statement, holding or otherwise, from the school, reporters will still post news of the crisis but get their information elsewhere. Holding statements buy you a little time to investigate the situation.

A sample holding statement, for Sample High School, might be "Sample High School is working to confirm the reports of <basic crisis description>. Details to follow as they become available."

3. Keep your promises. A timely initial response in a crisis situation is important, but so is regular social media communication following that initial response. Especially if you issue a holding statement and promise more details to come, it is essential that you follow through on that promise and keep your constituents informed as details become available.

Generally in the first 24 hours of a crisis, between three and five updates on each social media platform is appropriate. After those first 24 hours, though, use your best judgment on the number of updates to post. Regular updates are strongly recommended as long as a crisis situation is being resolved and as there are changes to school policy resulting from the crisis or opportunities for people to offer feedback or support victims of the crisis.

4. Focus on the message. There are several important points to keep in mind when crafting a good social media crisis communication message. Here are a few tips to ensure your message is effective:

- Know your platform. Twitter has a limit of 140 characters per tweet, so messages must be shorter on that platform than on Facebook. If you have a longer message (statement from the school, news story, etc.) you need to share on Twitter, post a brief description and then link to the full content on your website. Try to stick to between 16 and 20 words on Twitter. Longer messages are acceptable on Facebook.

- Use the right voice. Try to avoid second-person point of view when writing social media crisis communication messages. The use of "you" is rarely seen in effective education-related crisis responses, likely because it can sound accusatory or like the school is blaming or otherwise involving the reader. Take ownership of the crisis by using first-person point of view ("us" and "we" language) or remain objective by using third-person point of view. If a crisis is unfolding as social media messages are being sent, stick with the third-person point of view. But if the school is recovering or coming together to react to the crisis, first-person point of view can be impactful.

- Get the words right. Know the type of crisis you are facing and be sure to use the right response message. As outlined in the diagram above, each type of crisis has a recommended response. It is okay to communicate that the school is a victim in victim crises (a technique called victimage), but positive messages of praise for stakeholders (ingratiation) and support for victims (compensation) tend to be more effective. In accidental crises, it is okay to offer some justification for the actions that led to the crisis (justification) if there are no serious damages or injuries, but denial of the crisis is not recommended. Messages of compensation

and the organization's past good works (reminding) can be effective in accidental

crises. With preventable crises, messages of apology are essential. In some cases,

apology may be the only way to restore a relationship between the school and its

constituents, so it should be used. Table 9 provides a sample message for each of

these possible crisis response techniques.

Table 9

Sample Messages According to Crisis Response Technique

Crisis Response Technique	Associated Crisis Type	Social Media Message Example
Victimage	Victim	*Crisis Situation: Arsonist destroys school building, but there are no injuries)* "Sample High School is devastated to announce that we lost Fairbanks Hall to an arson last week. There were no injuries, but we did lose treasured items and spaces. We are working on a plan for classes the rest of this school year, and together we will rebuild our school and come back stronger than ever."
Ingratiation	Victim	*Crisis Situation: Arsonist destroys school building, but there are no injuries.* "Sample High School is forever indebted to the firemen and firewomen who responded to our call this weekend. These men and women worked tirelessly until all traces of the fire in Fairbanks Hall were destroyed, and they helped us dig out a few treasured items from the rubble. We are truly grateful for your service."
Compensation	Victim/Accidental	*Crisis Situation: Arsonist destroys school building, but there are no injuries.* "For the students who lost textbooks, school supplies, and laptops in the Fairbanks Hall fire, Sample High School has set up a supply sharing program with our neighbor school, Other High School, and a scholarship fund for families in need of financial assistance to replace lost items."
Justification	Accidental	*Crisis Situation: Coach accidentally loses student on trip, but student is quickly found.* "Chaperones on Sample High School's recent trip were helping two students who had contracted food poisoning and were unable to monitor the group as closely as usual on Friday. The chaperones asked students to stay together in the hotel while they sought medical attention for the sick students, but John Smith left the hotel to explore the city. He was gone for an hour but then returned on his own to the hotel."
Reminding	Accidental	*Crisis Situation: Coach accidentally loses*

		student on trip, but student is quickly found. "Sample High School has taken students on life-changing trips for more than 75 years, and our chaperones work hard to ensure there are no serious incidents on our trips. While one student did wander off during the school's most recent trip to Chicago, the chaperones took immediate action and he was reunited with the group within an hour."
Apology	Preventable	*Crisis Situation: Hiring convicted sexual predator.* "Sample High School recently learned that John Dow, then the head coach of our girls golf team, had been convicted of sexual assault against a minor. Upon learning this news, Mr. Dow was immediately released from his coaching contract, and James Smith, the athletic director, was placed on administrative leave pending an investigation. Sample High School would never intentionally put our students and athletes in danger, and we are deeply sorry for the stress and pain this situation has caused."

5. Respond to people, but use sparingly. One benefit of social media is that it allows users to get involved with organizations and with stories. In crisis situations, however, this user engagement can mean very public criticism, negative feedback, and meanness directed toward a school. It is important for schools to understand when to engage with constituents during crisis situations and when to simply let them express their feelings without feeling compelled to respond.

There are three scenarios during a crisis situation in which you should consider engaging with a user on social media:

- First, engage if there is a vital information update to share. If someone responds to something you post on social media based on old information, it could be helpful to respond to that message with the latest update. Even if you have a later social

media post that shares the update, it is a nice gesture to share that with the user directly.

- Second, engage if you need to clarify a school policy. If a user criticizes the school for not immediately releasing the names of the victims, for example, it would be appropriate to respond and clarify that names will be released after the victims' families have been notified.

- Third, engage if a person is sharing false or damaging information. If there are allegations of a sexual assault on campus and users are speculating about the offender's identity when it has not yet been confirmed, the school should weigh in and clarify that to avoid any false rumors circulating.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This creative project was designed to give members of the National Education Association an easy-to-follow guide for social media crisis communication. Though the National Education Association developed a thorough Crisis Communications Guide & Toolkit in 2000 for its members, the original guide lacked any mention of social media crisis communication, which was likely due to the timing of its publication. The goal of this project was to design an update to the original guide that would reflect the latest best practices pertaining to the form, strategy, and content of social media crisis communication.

The result of this creative project has both professional and practical benefits for public relations practitioners. The content analysis contained within the project advanced the study of social media crisis communication by identifying and synthesizing some proven best practices from colleges and universities that have recently navigated crisis situations. And the body of the project outlined a practical guide for social media crisis communication that can be used by members of the National Education Association who need guidance but cannot afford to hire public relations expertise when a crisis hits.

While there were strengths to this project, there were also limitations. First, the study of social media communication was limited to activity on Facebook and Twitter. While those two platforms were extremely popular among schools and individuals at the time of this research, the social media landscape changes constantly, so it is possible these two platforms may eventually lose their popularity. Second, while colleges and universities were selected as the population for this project's content analysis because they are educational institutions that appear to be similar to primary and secondary schools, there are differences between primary and secondary schools and the colleges and universities that informed this project. The purposive sample was selected

in part for its convenience and in part for its availability of complete information. However, the content analysis may have been even more relevant if primary and secondary schools were studied.

Although this creative project offers original recommendations to schools on social media crisis communication, more research in the area is needed. Future content analyses could focus on the actual words used in these social media messages or on the types of comments schools received on social media during crisis situations. Future research could focus on schools that exhibited poor crisis communication on social media and identify what about their responses were lacking. And additional research could be done to further differentiate crisis types and determine if different approaches have been successfully used among crises with the same responsibility level. This project contributes to the overall body of work in social media crisis communication, but there is infinitely more public relations practitioners could understand about this vital content area.

Evaluation for Ashley Crockett-Lohr Creative Project

Evaluator: Alicia LaMagdeleine, Assistant Head of School, University High School of Indiana

Brief discussion of evaluator's credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

For the past three years, one of my primary areas of oversight has been marketing and communications. I have also been a part of crisis response plans from various roles within the school (mentor, teacher, Director of Diversity) throughout my career at University.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

I am involved in decisions related to the public voice of the school on a daily basis, from written communication to in-person messaging at our daily community meetings. If there is an issue at our school, I am often called to represent our comment on it.

Ms. Crockett-Lohr has been my colleague for the past two-and-a-half years. As our Communications Director, she reports directly to me.

Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

The pervasive nature of social media has radically changed the landscape of communication in a short period of time. The availability of 'news-in-one's-pocket' and 'information on demand' has increased the pressure on schools to be in front of their own messaging. Students, parents, and many other constituent groups want to feel included and connected to the daily life of educational institutions via social media. Ms. Crockett-Lohr's work has created a clear plan for schools to follow in terms of a social media response to crises, times when the importance of responsive communication is at its highest.

Evaluation of the student's approach

Using the NEA's existing Crisis Communications Guide and Toolkit was a solid launching pad for Ms. Crockett-Lohr's work, and her analysis of effective uses of Twitter and Facebook at institutions signaled out for their excellence in issues and crisis management helped her to focus on strategies proven successful. In choosing to augment the existing Toolkit, Ms. Crockett-Lohr has not only provided a much-needed update in terms of social media relevance, but she has also emphasized the point that social media should be one part of a comprehensive communication plan, rather than a stand-alone or ad hoc endeavor. The flow chart outlining her plan with the common language of Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory is particularly helpful in understanding how different crises require different messaging.

Evaluation of the body of the project: Quality, Depth of Treatment, Coverage

a. Quality

The proposed addition to the NEA's Crisis Communications Guide and Toolkit is clear and concise. The steps Mrs. Crockett-Lohr outlines are easy to follow and direct in their application. The examples she provides are appropriate and well reasoned. Consider creating a chart that pairs each broad crisis category with example responses for further evidence.

b. Depth of treatment

The depth of treatment is appropriate. While other social media outlets could be considered (i.e. Instagram, Linked In, or YouTube), Twitter and Facebook are by far the most prevalent text-based social media platforms today. Whether they will maintain their dominance, however, is uncertain, and a decline in their use may warrant further updates to the Toolkit.

c. Coverage

Excellent coverage of the topic overall. The work is thorough in its consideration of social media planning, usage, and follow-up as a crisis communication tool.

Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)

Given the range of threats to which educational institutions are susceptible, combined with the emotional connections such institutions create with their stakeholders, the development of suggested social media usage during crisis is a much-needed resource for schools. Not only does little information exist to guide schools through social media communication in general, but the additional vulnerability a school faces when they mishandle a crisis situation makes such a resource all the more valuable. If the NEA does not implement Ms. Crockett-Lohr's proposed actions in a revised Toolkit, I hope many schools find a way to incorporate her suggestions in their communication plans.

Evaluation for Ashley Crockett-Lohr Creative Project

Evaluator: Dana Altemeyer, Coordinator of Communications, Marketing and Public Relations, Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township

Brief discussion of evaluator's credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

Dana Altemeyer hold a B.S. in Elementary Education with a French minor and M.S. in School Counseling from Butler University in 2004 and 2007. She is a Nationally Board Certified Counselor. Dana completed a principal preparation program at the University of Indianapolis in 2011. She has served as a teacher, counselor, and building administrator in public school systems in Indianapolis. She is a doctoral student at Indiana University Bloomington and currently works as the District Coordinator of Communications, Public Relations, and Marketing in the MSD of Lawrence Township in northeast Indianapolis.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

I know Ms. Crockett-Lohr through the school public relations network, and reached out to her when I entered the field in the spring of 2014. My current role is serving as the district Public Information Officer and spokesperson. Having served as a building administrator, I can view the content from an implementation perspective.

Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

Development of the toolkit is a great undertaking for a district just learning to harness the power of social media as a public relations tool. It breaks down what is and is not appropriate and categorizes crises depending on severity and importance of response time. It is very fundamental and would best serve the social media novice. I have been surprised at the number of educators that have not harnessed the power of social media to communicate and market to their families all of the positive things happening in their school/district. When there is a crisis, trust has already been established and there is a loyal following.

Evaluation of the student's approach

I think Ms. Crockett-Lohr's approach to this topic was comprehensive. She lays the groundwork, defining crisis types in easy-to-understand language as well as sharing benefits and drawbacks of different social media platforms. It would be interesting to include Instagram as a tool, as many students are moving away from Twitter towards this more visual platform.

Evaluation of the body of the project

a. Quality

The project is high quality and is clearly organized for the reader. It is transparent and recognizes that despite being responsible for communications, the professional will not always have access to all of the information and it recognizes to importance of communicating truthfully in any given situation.

b. Depth of treatment

While very appropriate for a social media novice, I would suggest digging a bit deeper to address other media students/families use to communicate: Tumblr, Vine, Blogging, Wikis, YouTube, etc. I absolutely agree that Facebook and Twitter are truly the "backbone" of a building/district social media platform.

c. Coverage

Ways to drive engagement may also be worth including. What can users do to drive up impressions? Examples include use of hashtags (#BREAKING) and incorporation of media such as photographs or even links to additional information. Some of this is included, but not specifically under driving up analytics or impressions. Without the data to support the social media, you are still just another person with an "opinion about your social media presence."

Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field

Ms. Crockett-Lohr's work is thorough and absolutely relevant. Communications professionals cannot afford to ignore 21st central communications platforms as powerful as social media. Educators tend to hire from within. In my case, my background is not in communications, public relations, journalism, or marketing. I just happened to have developed a social media presence for my former building that was very strong (it became the model for IPS) and had a knack for it. That is not always the case and guidelines for communications would be very beneficial to have had.

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