

Crisis management in the 'always on' era - Keep calm and carry on... or is it that simple?



By [Marie Yossava](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

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The current power/energy crisis has seen power utility Eskom dealing with a seemingly impossible communications task when it comes to managing understandably negative customer/public perceptions. Blame game aside one thing that is certain, is that no one can accuse the state-owned enterprise of shying away from updating the public across an array of television, radio, print and online platforms as well as their social media channels including [@Eskom_SA](#).

Their commitment to this type of social engagement is in fact clear, when one considers that since the Eskom Twitter stream was started in January 2012; in the approximately 1,100 days since it has tweeted a total of 20,100 tweets, equating to an average of 18 a day!

This shows just how much Eskom has used this medium to its advantage. Official spokesperson Andrew Etzinger was also always on hand during the dark days of December and never shied away from the question at hand but rather provided facts in a forthright yet calm and collected manner.

So despite the huge issues at stake regarding South Africa's electricity supply there is a lesson to be learnt from this in the communications sector when it comes to crisis management in the 'always on' social media era when companies have to guard their reputations even more vigilantly.

Global picture

Globally, a recent McKinsey study, among 200 German companies, showed that 90% of them were active on social media but only 25% had a crisis management strategy. That is both surprising and alarming. Surprising, because one would think that all the talk on uncontrollable negative feedback on social media would result in companies being almost overly prepared for a potential crisis. Alarming, since fears about the damage that can be inflicted by a social media crisis are not that far-fetched.

In addition, a recent Burson Marsteller blog referred to a 2013 crisis study that it conducted, which showed that an increasing number of companies now have a digital crisis communications plan in place, up from 28% in 2011 to 39% in 2013. "However, this still means that more than half of the companies surveyed remain unprepared. All of this in spite of a widespread belief that the rise in digital and social media communications has increased companies' vulnerability to a crisis. Although 76% of the survey respondents agreed that a plan was beneficial, only 51% actually had a crisis management plan in place," it stated.

By being 'always on', crisis can become an opportunity

The reality is that social media has advanced rapidly with new platforms and apps coming on to market, and subsequently the communications/public relations sector has had to evolve and become more responsive to the market and swift in their approach.

Communicators and PR professionals have become the custodians of client information responding to opportunities in almost real time. Digital communications is no longer a 'nice to have' but an imperative in a structured communications plan.

A strategy must examine all the channels to reach different audiences and then develop an integrated plan.

Clients are often nervous of these digital channels as they engage in two-way communications and customer feedback

becomes available in the public domain. However, putting strategic content out during a crisis no matter the reaction can be effective in terms of beating deadlines and third-party critiques. You can't control public opinion but you can sway it, if your messaging is succinct, well thought through and backed up by suitable action.

It is not a case of companies and brands responding to individual public concerns but pushing out key messaging and keeping audiences updated. However, public commentary no matter how malicious, also guides a company as to what are the real concerns and to address those issues in future structured content.

It is therefore vital in today's world of expediency that PR agencies advise their clients to examine multiple channels for their communications strategies so that they have established contact with identified stakeholders and are in constant engagement so that during a crisis, the client can demonstrate they are being responsive and responsible.

ABOUT MARIE YOSSAVA

Marie Yossava, founder and owner of Grapevine Communications, embarked on a PR/communications career more than two decades ago. In the past twenty years she has built a solid media relations consultancy, which focuses exclusively on media relations.
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