



Social Media in Business Continuity Planning

Social media has obliterated traditional communication with its inventiveness and convenience. Long before an event is reported by reputable news agencies, for example, users of Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms are circulating the specifics in real time.

Facebook reports it has 955 million active users as of June 2012; some 543 million of those people use Facebook mobile applications. Twitter, like Facebook, also boasts a massive user base of 500 million. Social media users are spinning an ever-expanding web of content and sharing it globally, which is helping to shape public opinion. All of this is being done, for better or for worse, with great transparency.

Social media is a powerful tool that can produce desired results when harnessed properly within a strategic plan. In business continuity planning, it has the potential to revolutionize crisis communications and strengthen an organization's resilience.

Communications professional John Carson is a social media advocate who says "the ubiquitous term 'social media' can be redefined in one word: interaction." For the business continuity planner tasked with proactively preparing organizations for worst-case scenarios, social media can play a vital role in communicating more effectively. At its most basic, social media allows an organization, as Carson explains, "to discuss an issue or topic relevant to more than one person in a real-time process."

Social media is useful for getting short and important messages to a wide audience. In contrast, crisis communications plans used to be constructed during emergencies with little transparency. Organizations would tightly control messages and use hierarchal structures and protocols to ensure credible information was distributed properly. However, the existence of social media now requires greater transparency in communicating to stakeholders because the news will leak out no matter how tightly information is controlled. In this sense it is better to use social media within the communications plan to retain control of the message.

Social media can be customized to fit any organization's needs. There are areas of business continuity planning that would certainly be enhanced by applying social media. Here are a few:

Horizon Scanning and Risk Management Practices

Using social media tools like Twitter and Google Alerts can preemptively detect potential political, environmental and technological incidents. Monitoring can assist in revealing risk environments. It also allows organizations to track what clients, employees, and focus groups



are saying online, thereby enhancing knowledge of the organization itself, its personnel and how it runs. The old adage, knowledge is power, is certainly true in this case.

Exercising

Carson recommends understanding and outlining what specific crises could happen to an organization and preparing a social media response in advance. “For example, a fast food chain could prepare a draft web page that details how to deal with food poisoning, or the disciplinary action taken against rogue employees who post Internet photos of themselves messing around with customers' food. That way, once one of these bad PR situations happen, the company in question can immediately tweak that draft page, launch it, and go into crisis communications mode,” he says. This is also an effective time to have employees use social media in crisis mode as they would in an actual emergency.

Maintenance and Awareness Building Activities

Encouraging employees to use social media platforms can create a natural and robust transparency that supports business continuity planning and collaboration. It also demonstrates an organization's legal obligation of duty of care to those employees prior to and during an incident. Using social media to promote business continuity planning is a way to maintain employee trust as well as trust from members of the public. However, Carson warns that social media training must be given to employees in advance. “One danger is giving the social media keys to the kingdom to an intern, or someone who doesn't have the communications skills that existed far before social media came along. The person/organization running your Twitter account, blog, Facebook group etc. represents you as a brand, and one wrong step or remark will be jumped on immediately and picked apart very fast indeed. The damage to the brand's reputation could take weeks, months or years to rectify,” he says.

Some Considerations When Implementing Social Media

When social media is not managed properly, it can cause severe damage to an organization's greatest asset: its reputation. Carson gives the following example: “If a major cloud software company goes down, or a national cellphone carrier suddenly cuts off thousands of customers, the first place that people turn to in venting their displeasure is the main social media channels, such as Twitter and Facebook. They are angry, they want their friends and followers to know they're angry -- but above all, they want the company in question to know they're angry. They want an immediate response, not to be ignored... The worst thing a company can do is be silent,” he says.

There are various privacy, security, and intellectual property risks when using social media. As a first step, understanding the context in which the organization creates and uses its social media strategy will help protect an organization. There should be strict guidelines and policies regarding social media and employees should be

“Social media is taking away a lot of the privacy that once existed, and like it or hate it, this will continue. Just be aware that what you post online might be seen by people it's not intended for, whether that's the target market, customer or even a competitor. You can't control social media, but you can manage and advise your employees to at least respect it, especially if they are very active in their personal accounts.”

John Carson,
Communications
Professional



trained and educated in these policies. Ensure appropriate legal, I& IT, and human resources departments contribute to these policies. Some organizations even go so far as to ask their employees to sign an agreement acknowledging they know and understand social media guidelines.

Despite the dangers that lurk when using social media, it could do your organization more damage to simply ignore its presence and power. Social media can support business continuity planning by engaging employees, clients, and members of the public in preparing for crisis situations, of which effective communication will play a key role. Social media may be the determining factor of your organization's successful recovery. Further evidence to this point is preeminent leader in business continuity training and certification in Canada, DRIC, now includes social media in its professional practices and framework. Social media is changing the communications landscape and how organizations prepare and respond to critical situations.

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