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White Paper

The First 24 Hours: Crisis Response in a Web 2.0 World

The secret to managing crisis communications these days is real-time monitoring and real-time response

An exclusive interview with crisis expert Janet Harris,
president and founder, Upstream Analysis

A White Paper from Critical Mention

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The speed of the news cycle has more than quadrupled in recent years. Gone are the days of the day-one crisis story and the day-two follow-up story. Today, with blogs and other new-media platforms—not to mention 24/7 cable news—if you’re in crisis, a new story about you will appear every four to six hours.

Worse, top crisis-communications experts stress that companies are still making huge blunders when responding to crises in this light-speed media environment. Among the biggest mistakes are “keeping quiet and not responding fast enough,” says **Janet Harris** president and founder of **Upstream Analysis**. Upstream is a media monitoring and analysis firm that offers breaking-news and competitive-analysis reports to clients — often those in crisis.

Harris continues: “You can’t be reluctant to get your point of view out there. Especially now, you can’t miss the early signals of crisis, and you can’t take a full day of debate before you finally go out there with a press statement.”

The story can be out of control in hours, she says.

So how can companies and clients prepare for today’s lightning-bolt crises? It all comes down to real-time media monitoring and laser-fast response, Harris says. She shares more answers, tips and inside techniques here:

Why is it so important to respond quickly with your version of the story?

Once a story is out there, it solidifies the truth. Any delay in responding allows the concrete of that story to harden. And if your perspective isn’t there in the first hours after the crisis, it’s almost game over. The idea of what the crisis is about is already embedded—and it’s difficult to go any further or change it.

We saw this in the case of the bank bailout and the AIG bonuses. The public found out how outrageous AIG’s bonuses were—and that it was our money—and that story was out there for a long time. Then, when the head of AIG finally gave his testimony to Congress explaining all about retention bonuses, he offered a pretty reasonable explanation about why the bonuses were sensible. But there’s no way that story was ever going to crack the concrete of the narrative that had already hardened.

What implications does this 24/7 environment have on corporate crisis preparation?

There has to be much more preparation for a crisis than most companies currently do. You need to make crisis PR planning that much more urgent in advance. You need to sit down with the various parts of the organization—from development and operations to marketing—and plot out what could go wrong. Where are your vulnerabilities? And what will your response be?

The hard part is trying to get the different levels of the organization to work out all the different scenarios—even ones they may have never dreamed of. Sit down with the



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different divisions. Spend time getting to know their operations and where their weak points are. Look at the history of the company and the history of other companies to see where the breakdowns have occurred, and start brainstorming.

Figure it out, write it all down—then sit down with the legal team and work out what you're permitted say. Because that's going to be your biggest obstacle once crisis strikes. The fight with legal is not a fight you want to have when the crisis is going on.

If you don't do all of those things in advance, it will be difficult to turn around even a press release in the four hours after the crisis strikes.

What else should communications professionals think about in terms of planning for a crisis?

You should have the right monitoring tools, products and services in place in advance — so you've done the research and know the firms and monitoring services you can switch on and use immediately.

What are the most important things to keep in mind when selecting crisis - monitoring services?

The most important thing is to have a TV and social-media monitoring service, such as Critical Mention. TV is often where stories first show up. You should know about the different TV-monitoring resources out there so that you can go to them quickly. You should also know the different tools for monitoring social networks. It might not be part of your day-to-day monitoring, but in a crisis, social media will become your job. Become familiar with the different monitoring resources out there.

Why does monitoring social media become so crucial once a crisis hits?

Social media will serve as your public opinion poll. The absolute best thing in a crisis would be to know how things are playing out in public opinion. It would be great to go out and do a poll to test different messages and see how people react. But there's no time for surveys like that in a crisis. Social media is almost a stand-in for that. It's not as scientific, but it will give you a flavor for how it's playing out in the public. It's your surrogate public opinion poll.

What are some of the other advantages of a monitoring service like Critical Mention?

I like to use Critical Mention because it allows you to monitor what's going on in real-time, so you're prepared to get out there quickly with a response. That's the real advantage of Critical Mention. Their real-time TV alerts are crucial because the updates are so immediate. You know what's being reported within seconds. For example, I'll often be watching the local TV news at home and I'll see a story. All of a sudden, my cell phone will go off and it's an email alert with the clip from Critical Mention. I can immediately forward the clip to the communications team and key decision-makers in the organization. This kind of technology gives you an instant way to get out there with the knowledge of how your story is playing out.



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What are some of the tools for listening to the chatter online and on traditional media, and what should readers look for in a monitoring service?

There are a lot of vendors out there, and they have their differences. In terms of a crisis, you're looking for speed—something that allows you to get information in real-time. Critical Mention and a few others can give you real-time broadcast updates.

I've worked with Critical Mention for broadcast and others for print and online media to get a quick turnaround of clip reports. For example, it's one thing to know that the AP has a story about your crisis, but it's a lot more important to know whether that story was picked up by 10 media outlets or 100.

You should have relationships in place in advance with these services so you can respond at a moment's notice.

You need to use this information to decide if there's a crisis trip wire. Is there a point at which some negative news is not just a little blip? If it goes further and it's a crisis, you must have info coming in and enough data to track it in real-time. Then, you can see how things are gaining momentum.

Give our readers a specific example of this: How have you used Critical Mention in a real-life crisis situation?

Here's a good example: I was working with a major corporation that found itself in a position where, in order to protect themselves legally, they needed to file suit against another party. The other party was a popular, well-respected non-profit organization. It could have potentially looked like my client was this big company ganging up on the do-gooders.

Going in, we had to know how big the story was and whether or not it was gaining momentum or subsiding. One of the big questions was, did we need to put out a day-two press release? We used Critical Mention to great advantage, tracking the story and its development nationwide—locally and nationally. We looked at the coverage and could tell when it reached the peak of media. What we discovered was that we actually didn't need to put out a day-two press release. It would have extended the news cycle. Instead, the crisis ended there. Because we had that information coming in, we knew the news cycle was ending.

What is the number-one lesson from that example?

Have access to information that allows you to respond properly.

Finally, what are the differences between a crisis and a scandal, and how can our readers prevent a crisis from turning into a scandal?

There's an important difference between a crisis and a scandal. A scandal is often much longer in scope, and you have to view it in a different light. Are there new details coming out through special reports? Has the story changed? Are there any attempts to deny or stonewall?



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For example, a crisis is responding to the swine flu epidemic. A scandal is the members of Congress who cut the stimulus package, and what they cut was funding for response to pandemics.

Another example: The recent Domino's news was a crisis. However: If that was a pattern of behavior that had been covered up over time—that's a scandal.

Scandals are often more linked to individual personal behaviors. Those are harder to predict. You can have all sorts of rules in place about how people should behave, but that doesn't mean they won't behave badly.

However, a crisis can turn into a scandal. That happens when you change your story as it goes along, or you deny it or try to whitewash it. Those things can move a crisis to a scandal. If you avoid those behaviors, you will prevent the crisis from turning into a scandal.

If you're concerned about protecting your organization during crisis—or if you'd like to see what the media are saying about you today—we invite you to test Critical Mention at no charge, with no obligation, for one week. A test drive of Critical Mention will show you how real-time monitoring of social media, TV, print, and radio can help you detect a crisis and respond quickly.

For a free test drive, contact your Critical Mention Sales Representative: sales@criticalmention.com or (212) 398-1141.