Fight Viral with Viral:
A Case Study of Domino's Pizza's Crisis Communication Strategies

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Abstract

Domino's Pizza was embroiled in a viral crisis situation when two rogue employees posted videos of adulterated food on YouTube in April 2009. Tim McIntyre, Vice President of Communications, was part of the internal team that delivered the company's crisis communication plan through Twitter and YouTube. What makes this story so compelling is the social media aspect of both the crisis itself and the strategy for managing the crisis. Using a case study approach, this paper assesses Domino's decision to integrate the same medium that sparked the crisis into the strategies to manage the situation, and it questions the efficacy of best practices and principles of crisis management in the age of social media.

Keywords: Domino's Pizza; crisis communication; social media; YouTube; Twitter; case study; public relations

Overview and Background

The way in which companies communicate with stakeholders during a crisis event is rapidly changing with the 24-hour access provided by the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Public relations practitioners and other communication executives are struggling to craft messages and maintain control of the flow of messages within this dynamic landscape. As Schiller (2007) explains, in "times of crisis, while corporate communication executives are preparing manicured statements, customers are [simultaneously] blogging, e-mailing and posting photos out of rage and desperation because the very people who should be listening to them aren't" (p. 16). Bell (2010) asserts that stakeholders become "interpretive communities in organizational crisis contexts," capable of cultivating an organization's reputation through information they receive in cyberspace (p. 148). Social media allow stakeholders to control when, where, and how "reputational meanings are born and disseminated" as "an organization's reputation is built on the stories formed by stakeholders and spread within networks" (Aula, 2011, p. 28, 30). Nowhere is this dynamic between organizations and their publics more apparent than on video sharing sites, such as YouTube, that encourage citizens and bloggers to be the co-producers of messages.

Burgess and Green (2009) explain that YouTube users engage with this medium "as if it is a space specifically designed for them and that should therefore serve their own particular interests" (p. vii). This can have enormous positive or negative impacts for organizations involved in crisis management, including but not limited to the inability of boundary spanners to monitor the vastness of this space; malicious users who might create a crisis; and the leveraging capabilities of this platform to enhance a brand during a crisis. Just as consumers can use this social medium to create a crisis for a company and interpret an organization's reputation throughout, so too can an organization use this medium to manage a crisis and improve its reputation. Patrick Doyle, President of Domino's Pizza, would come to understand this dynamic as his brand suffered a devastating blow when two employees uploaded a vulgar video demonstrating their grotesque adulteration of food.

Bob Garfield (2010), a writer for Ad Age Blogs, recounts in an online article how this incident began. On Easter Sunday in April 2009, two Domino's employees who were bored "working in a North Carolina store figured it would be just hilarious to post a video of themselves, defiling sandwich ingredients" (para. 2). The duo created five videos in total, one of which showed an individual sticking mozzarella cheese up his nose and then blowing the cheese on a sandwich, among other unsanitary and stomach-turning activities. An estimated 1 million people viewed these videos before they were pulled two days later.

During the first 24 hours, Tim McIntyre, Vice President of Corporate Communications, surveyed the situation and determined that the videos were not a hoax. He then began to communicate internally and externally with "relevant audiences at that time [including] our social media people, our head of security, senior management team," according to Amy Jacques (2009) in an article published in The Public Relations Strategist (para. 4, 7). McIntyre collaborated with the consumer watchdog organization GoodAsYou.org, which first alerted Domino's of the employee video, to identify the rogue employees as Kristy Hammond and Michael Setzer. By Tuesday, according to McIntyre, the company was responding to customers' queries on Twitter about whether the company knew about the situation, what the company was doing, and why the company had not issued an official statement (Jacques, 2009). By Wednesday, Patrick Doyle, President of Domino's Pizza, recorded an apology that was then uploaded onto YouTube.

During this event, bloggers and journalists alike captured this crisis in articles and case studies, offering step-by-step timelines[1] (Jacques, 2009; Peeples & Vaughn, 2010) and criticisms of Domino's responses (Beaubien, 2009; Esterline, 2009; Gregory, 2009; Vogt, 2009; Weiss, 2009; York, 2009). What follows in this case study is an analysis of Domino's crisis communication strategies, using a blend of best practices for crisis management from the principles of public relations management crafted by Arthur W. Page and from an academic perspective as the framework for analysis. From a communication perspective, according to Jaques (2008), case studies "are generally a narrative of events which are critically examined in relation to recognized public relations theories and models in order to fully appreciate what happened and to consider alternative strategies and outcomes" (p. 194), and are written to provide practical value to managers and practitioners alike who are struggling to manage and control the flow of messages in the viral/digital landscape (Coombs, 2008; "How Social Media," 2009; Oneupweb, 2007).

Research

The Arthur W. Page Society is a professional organization for executives in the public relations and communication industries. Named after one of the first public relations executives to work for a Fortune 500 corporation (AT&T), this organization is charged with the goal of "embracing the highest professional standards; advancing the way communications is understood, practiced and taught; and providing a collegial and dynamic learning environment" ("Vision, Mission & Goals," n.d., para. 2). According to the Society's website, the following principles are designed to guide public relations practitioners' actions and behaviors and exemplify Page's philosophy of public relations management: (1) Tell the truth; (2) Prove it with action; (3) Listen to the customer; (4) Manage for tomorrow; (5) Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it; (6) Realize a company's true character is expressed by its people; and lastly, (7) Remain calm, patient and good-humored ("The Page Principles," n.d.).

These principles are similar to the 10 best crisis communication practices Seeger (2006) generated, based on the work of communication scholars and expert practitioners:

Process approaches and policy development;
Pre-event planning;
Partnership with the public;
Listen to the public's concerns and understand the audience;

Honesty, candor, and openness;
Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources;
Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible;
Communicate with compassion, concern and empathy;
Accept uncertainty and ambiguity; and
Messages of self-efficacy.
Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) extend Seeger's best practices, incorporating social media tools by making social media engagement a part of risk and crisis management policies and procedures; incorporating social media when scanning the environment; being a part of rumor management to determine appropriate channels; and using social media to communicate updates in an interpersonal manner (pp. 119-120).

Compiling and synthesizing these practices is not an easy task as "crises and disasters are relatively unique in nature, inherently dynamic, and unpredictable" (Bell, 2010, p. 151). These practices, according the Seeger (2006) "do not constitute a plan, but are the principles or processes that underlie an effective crisis communication plan and effective crisis response" (p. 242). Given the nature of crises, these practices will unfold and evolve differently within each situation.

Taking a situational approach to crisis communication, Coombs (2004) offers the Situational Crisis Communication Theory as an explanation for how organizations select a crisis response strategy. Essentially, a crisis triggers attributions of responsibility to the organization from stakeholders, along three dimensions: 1) whether the crisis has happened before or will likely happen again; 2) whether the event was controllable or uncontrollable by an individual or the organization; and 3) whether the crisis occurs within the organization or external to it. In this case, Domino's as an organization was not directly responsible for this crisis, as the event occurred internally at the hands of employees, and this type of crisis had never happened before.

Based on stakeholder attributions, an organization will respond communicatively by cycling through a four step process: 1) observe events; 2) interpret information for accuracy and relevance; 3) choose a strategy among alternatives; and 4) implement the solution (Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005). Ideally, the strategy chosen will be aligned with the best practices and principles articulated above and will follow the four step process. Did Domino's follow the best practices outlined by Seeger and the Page principles? What were the brand's overall actions, decisions, and strategies for managing the crisis? In the case of Domino's, it was not the consumers' attributions of responsibility to Domino's that triggered the strategy. Rather, what triggered Patrick Doyle's decision to deliver a video apology on YouTube was the medium itself, which begs the questions, How did social media impact or influence the decision making process?, and What crisis communication lessons were learned in the process?

Strategies and Execution

This first Page principle—Tell the truth—begs a series of questions about whose truth needs to be told and about what in particular. In crisis situations, multiple truths or social constructions of the event(s) are vying for attention simultaneously: in general, customers, the company, its employees, and the media. In the case of Domino's, particular watchdog organizations like GoodAsYou.org and Consumerist.com were also constructing versions of the event. The truth that Tim McIntyre, VP of Communications, wanted to convey was that this incident was "a rogue act of two individuals who thought they were being funny. That they do not represent this brand. That they do not represent the 100,000 people who work every day at Domino's Pizza all over the world" (Flandez, 2009, para. 6). The truth that Patrick Doyle wanted to articulate was that "We didn't do this. We're sorry. And we want to earn your trust back" (Peeples & Vaughn, 2010, p. 3).

However, in wanting to be honest, open and candid (Seeger, 2006) about the situation, Domino's needed to take responsibility. However, taking responsibility had the potential of exposing the organization to lawsuits and other legal vulnerabilities (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012), including freedom of speech and copyright claims. In order to mitigate the consequences of being truthful and minimize the damage to the organization's reputation, the company collaborated and coordinated with credible sources (the watch dog organizations and local authorities) and partnered with the public to observe and interpret the events, so as to not "act too hastily and alert more consumers to the situation it was attempting to contain" (York, 2009, para. 5), and to not "add fuel to the online fire" (Levick, 2009, para. 5). Unfortunately, a consequence of following the principles and best practices was that a 24 hour lag occurred. Because Domino's hesitated, customers began tweeting about whether the company actually knew what was happening and questioning what it was going to do about the videos. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) point to the fact that "The power to communicate remains with the communicating organization and their behaviors and narrative content, not in the technology" (p. 120).

A second challenge in telling the truth in the digital age hinges on additional questions (Roberts, 2010): Where in cyber and virtual spaces does an organization tell the truth and with what social medium or platform? York (2009) brought this to our attention in her online article, asking "why Domino's has been lambasted for a lack of social media presence. After all . . . the brand is on MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and most visibly on Facebook with nearly 300,000 fans" (para. 18). There is a big difference, however,

between how emerging social media are used for marketing and how they work in a serious crisis situation . . . Companies that fail to integrate their marketing efforts with their online crisis response plans before a crisis hits are letting their antagonists have free reign. (Levick, 2009, para. 2-4)
The first message acknowledging the crisis was uploaded onto the corporate website on the day after the offending videos had been posted, but the message hardly yielded any hits. Domino's did not reach its most popular audience through this social medium.

According to McIntyre, prior to this event,

[the crisis team had a social media plan] already in place. We didn't want to just jump in without a strategy. We wanted to do it right. So the irony for us was that we have a plan and we were going to implement it only a week later, so we ended up having to jump in [during] a crisis, which was the opposite of how we wanted to do it. (quoted in Jacques, 2009, para. 10)
However, after listening to the customers/publics' tweets, the company was compelled to speed up the implementation of the social media plan. A decision was made to

[change] course and [respond] with a viral video . . . [that] featured all the elements of effective crisis communication. The company president apologized. He thanked the online community for bringing the issue to his attention. He separated the company from wrongdoers and announced their prosecution. And he outlined steps that Domino's was taking to deal with the issue to make sure it never happens again (Levick, 2009, para. 6).
This strategy and decision to fight the crisis' viral nature using YouTube was the tipping point that allowed the company "to cull user-generated content from social networking sites and use the platform for distributing information back to users" in order to prove itself with action and to communicate with passion, concern and empathy (Veil et al., 2011, p. 114). Levick (2009), in an online article for Bloomberg Businessweek, stipulated that "Domino's not only demonstrated concern for its customers, but also an understanding of the critical importance of reaching out to a target audience on its own terms and in its own preferred space" (para. 7). This strategy and decision also suggests that Domino's has the ability to manage the crisis for tomorrow: "This crisis happened online. It had to be dealt with online. By learning that lesson under fire Domino's broke new ground and opened a new chapter in the ongoing evolution of crisis communications" (Levick, 2009, para. 7).