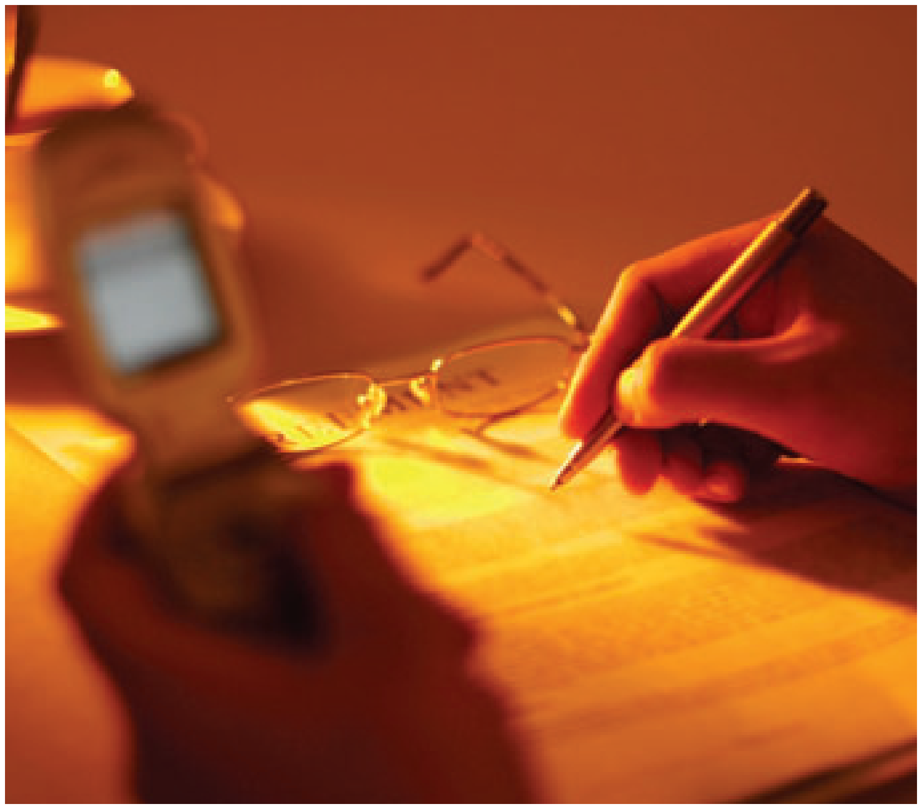
PLANS AND EXERCISES
TO BUILD A TIMELY COMMUNICATION RESPONSE

BY REGINA PHELPS

When asked what areas need to be improved after any disaster, inevitably companies will often list "communications" as one of the most important areas for improvement. "Communications" is, of course, a broad topic, however, there is one comment that is probably heard more than any others: "Communication needs to be more timely."



Is that your experience? When surveying our client population, we often find that timeliness is one of the biggest issues. Over the years, we have developed plans and exercises specifically to help companies develop a more timely response. The goal of this article is to share some of the ideas that have been the most successful.

Our strategy is two-fold: develop some simple communication tools, and then exercise them.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

The Communication Matrix

Corporate Communications teams usually have some type of "crisis communications" plan in place, but often the plan is limited. One aspect of the plan that is often missing is the identification of stakeholders and pre-approved message templates.

A valuable tool for any team to develop is what we call a communication matrix. The process to develop one is simple:

- Identify all of the stakeholders that you will need to communicate with after any incident.
- Name the internal "owner" of that communication relationship.
- Specify what tools will be used to communicate with each stakeholder.

This simple matrix is so powerful, it helps to immediately speed up communications. This is a great task to do as a "whiteboard activity." Simply get your team into a room with a large whiteboard or flip chart set up with three large columns. In the first column, have the team list every possible stakeholder that you are likely to communicate with after an incident. In the second column, note the communication owner. In the third, list what tools are likely to be used to reach each stakeholder.

It might look something like the chart on the following page.

Communication Templates

The second critical planning activity is to develop initial communication templates for each of the stakeholders. These are pre-written "scripts" that contain the basic outline of what information might be needed, and then could be quickly modified with current and pertinent information during an incident.

What should you have pre-written before an incident? What should be in each script? A good place to look for answers to these questions is to read your hazard risk assessment and determine what likely events could occur, then prepare messages accordingly. Another strategy is the one that we most often recommend: Write basic theme messages for two types, or "styles," of events:

- It happened only to you. The incident only happened to you and the rest of "the world" is fine. Imagine such events as a fire, workplace violence situation, water pipe break, etc.
- It happened to everybody. The event is widespread or regional in nature, and many people are affected. This could include earthquakes, hurricanes, severe winter storms, etc.

Once the templates have been written, get all of the formal approvals now, before an event occurs. Pre-approval may need to include legal counsel, senior management, investor relations; your company may require other approvers. As part of this process, decide in advance who will have the authority to approve the modified messages at time of disaster. Because the basic templates will have been pre-approved, this should be a short list. Then, at time of disaster, modify the template and have the agreed-upon individuals approve the message to go out. This should signficiantly decrease your time to develop the messages and get them out the door!

EXERCISE THE PLAN AND THE TEAM

Communications exercises can be done for just the Communications team, or as part of a larger Incident Management Team exercise. Begin by sitting down with the team to determine what they want to get out of the exercise experience. This conversation will help you to develop the specific exercise objectives for the team, which will allow you to design the exercise around those objectives. For example, if the team is interested in validating their communication matrix and new templates, your objectives might look something like this:

STAKEHOLDER NAME	RELATIONSHIP OWNER – NAME AND DEPARTMENT	COMMUNICATION TOOL
Employees	Human Resources	Employee hotline Website Notification System Company email Facebook/Twitter
Clients	Individual Buiness Units	Website Client email Facebook/Twitter
Board of Directors	CEO/Communications Team	Phone Email
Regulators	Individual Business Units	Email Phone
Investor Community	Investor Relations	Website Email Facebook/Twitter
Suppliers	Purchasing	Email Phone

Assess the ability of the communications team to develop timely communications:

- Validate the communication matrix: stakeholders, owners, and tools. Note areas for improvement.
- Utilize the new communication templates. Assess tools and process for timeliness. Note areas for improvement.
- Assess the abiltiy of the team to monitor and respond to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Digg. Note areas for improvement.

Once you have designed the communications objectives, now you can select an exercise narrative. Create a realistic scenario that will deliver the kind of results you are looking for in the objectives. To best exercise the Communication team, it should be a "public enough" event to create issues that may impact the company reputation and brand (both internally and externally), and create media interest in the story.

One important aspect of the exercise is the actual simulation. To achieve these objectives, the exercise will need to be fully simulated in order to really push the team to respond in real time. What does this mean? Two things will make it feel realistic to the team:

- Use a Simulation team for the Communication team to interact with. The Simulation team can act as the media, the investor community, and other key stakeholders. This gives the Communication team someone to have to talk to.
- Use live media injects to force the team to respond to these "media" inputs. This can include radio broadcasts, television (i.e., video) clips, newspaper or web articles, Facebook and Twitter feeds, or blogs.

EXERCISE DELIVERABLES

There are a variety of specific exercise deliverables you might want to have your team develop. This list would, of course, be developed as part of creating the exercise objectives. At a minimum, I would suggest the following activities as part of your communication exercise:

- Create employee hotine message.
- Create employee text message (SMS).
- Create company website message.
- Prepare press release.
- Prepare for a press conference.
- Create Facebook,Twitter and/or other social media response(s).
- Create client message.
- Create investor relations message.

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Employee Hotine Message

A very reliable form of employee communication is the use of a hotline. These phone numbers are usually toll-free and are ideally hosted out of state (especially for areas prone to regional disasters such as earthquakes). Employees would call this number to find out simple information (such as if the office is open or closed) and basic employee instructions.

A great way to exercise this is to have a "dummy" voice mailbox set up to act as the hotline during the exercise. The message is developed and then recorded, so everyone in the exercise can then dial in and hear what has been recorded. It is great practice for the team to actually record the message as well as prepare it. The advantage of using a "dummy" voice mailbox is that you aren't changing the real number, thereby avoiding a potential "War of the Worlds" situation if someone not in the exercise were to hear the message.

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Employee Text Message (SMS)

If using a notification system, SMS might be the best and most reliable way of communication after a regional disaster, however, it takes practice to provide enough information in 140 characters or less – the length of a standard SMS message. Although these should already be in the pre-approved templates, modification may be required. A goal in any exercise would be to have the Communications team develop SMS messages for employees participating in the exercise, and then send them.

Company Website Message

How are updates posted on the company website? Which team makes the changes? If a dummy webpage can be set up, it is great practice to change the page to reflect the company's status during the exercise. If that isn't possible, ask the team to develop the message and then post it on a status board in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

Press Release

A formal press release should be developed for the exercise, either in response to media inquiries or just as a matter of course. This release should be developed, approved through the agreed-upon channels, and distributed to the team in the exercise. Having pre-approved press release templates should speed up the process.

Press Conference

This is a great conclusion to any exercise. The pre-identified company spokesperson gets up before a group of "reporters" to read the company release and take questions. Where do you get these "reporters"? The Simulation team – who the players have been interacting with – make great reporters. Ask each of them to have two or three questions ready about different aspects of the exercise. After the spokesperson delivers the statement, the reporters spring into action, asking all types of questions. This is good practice for the spokesperson. If it's possible, videotape it so the spokesperson can see their performance for their own personal development.

Facebook,Twitter And/Or Other Social Media Responses

Social media has exploded as a means of communication. Often, your employees are Tweeting and Facebooking before the Communications team knows what hit them. Being skilled at getting on top of these sites is critical. Although many media outlets now scan employees' Facebook pages and Tweets (and other similar sites) for information, ideally, you want those media sources to be looking to your Communications team for the "inside scoop."

Develop Twitter messages and Facebook postings (or other forums that you find) during the exercise. Post these messages on the communications status board in the exercise so everyone can see what you are developing in real time.

Client Message

What are the main messages to clients? What are the talking points for sales staff and all client-facing call centers? Go back to your communication matrix. You should have called out all of the owners and the tools. Develop several of these in the exercise and deploy to the business units that would be using them to ensure that they are getting what they need. If you don't provide the talking points, they will likely make them up themselves – not an ideal solution for customer communication. Post all client messages on the communications status board in the EOC.

Investor Relations Message

If you are a publically-traded company, sometimes you need to get a message out to "the Street" rapidly. This is usually an intergrated response between Investor Relations, Legal, and your senior management. Timeliness is important. Use the pre-designed templates and modify them in the exercise. Assess their effectiveness and post in the EOC.

GOING FORWARD

What are the qualities of good communications during an emergency? You could sum them up in four key points:

- Show concern and demonstrate compassion.
- Be transparent and forthright in all communications.
- Cooperate with all responders.
- Demonstrate resolve to overcome the situation and get back to some semblance of normal.

However, even if these are done, but not done in a timely manner, they will not achieve the type of results that the company is looking for after a major incident. Work with your team in advance to develop the plans and tools, then exercise them regularly to produce the communication results that you desire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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