Monitoring and measuring during times of crisis

A 10-step guide for PR and Communications teams

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Monitoring and Measuring During Times of Crisis

It's fair to say that the recent years have been a rollercoaster for society, for politics, civil rights, health, and for businesses. While many organisations have arguably been embroiled in crises of their own making, many have been swept up in broader issues that put them in situations where key decisions have to be made and communicated.

COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, ESG and employee issues dominate. Business leaders have realised that in times of uncertainty and crisis, communication is key and PR professionals take the lead in protecting the brand and keeping all relevant stakeholders informed.

When a crisis hits, PR and comms expertise can have the greatest impact because how an organisation acts and communicates can often determine the outcome. While a crisis may not be reversible, shockwaves can be softened, damage can be mitigated and organisations can come out the other side stronger and better placed than before.

In this article, we share what has proven to be the fundamental components communicators need to consider when monitoring and measuring during times of crisis.

These 10 steps are aimed at helping PR and communication teams, and their organisations:

- **Prepare for a crisis**
- **Identify emerging issues**
- **Deal with media and social media news flow**
- **Turn this information into useful insights**
- **Guide their organisation throughout a crisis**

In essence, these first five components are focused on getting ahead of the '**crisis curve'** to get yourself into a situation of action prior to a crisis arising. No one wants to assume the worst. The more planning and preparation that's applied to crisis management prior to a crisis actually occurring, the more focus can be given to proactively managing the situation. The final five will tackle the 'what and how' of monitoring and measurement during a crisis.

1. Understand the main types of reputational crises

Reputational crises come in a variety of flavors, all of them are bitter, but understanding them can help you form the right approach.

- Centered on your business: e.g. product issue, consumer complaint, lawsuit, executive or ambassador issues

- Industry issue: e.g sugar in drinks, data privacy, lack of women in construction, lack of diversity in PR

- External crisis: global issues that any brand may be drawn into, e.g. COVID, Brexit, Environment or societal issues

There's also a saying in strategic planning circles:
There are: **"known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown knowns."**

The things that you can prepare for, the blind spots that you are aware of, and potentially mitigate. Finally, there are the bolts from the blue that can blindside you. The following tips will ensure that you have these bases covered.

2. Understand the typical stages of a crisis

While no two crises are the same, it's useful to have a framework to inform thinking, and to guide approach and process.

There is a wealth of literature on the stages of a crisis, both within the comms/ reputation management community and for direct responders that deal with life-and-death crises.

The stages:

- **Pre crisis**
- **Crisis detection**
- **Crisis probing and prevention**
- **Crisis response**
- **Learning**

Media Intelligence (traditional and social media monitoring, evaluation, analysis, research and insights) plays a vital role at each of these stages. We'll cover some general guidelines and some practical examples below before circling back to bring the stages and tips together.

3. Have a plan

Have a plan, plan ahead.

It's best practice for media monitoring to be: always on; reviewed regularly; informative for its users and stakeholders; a process that informs itself, by providing a wealth of information that can be used to further develop the monitoring and measurement brief. After all, it's far better to detect an issue early, and it come to nothing, than be caught unawares.

The middle of a crisis is not the ideal time to adopt a new service.

PRs are time poor. Media monitoring often accounts for a mere fraction of their day. So it may appear that there's never a good time. But ask yourself, "If a crisis breaks now, do I have everything in place to spot it and get on top of it?"

If the answer is no, now is as good-a-time as any to lay the groundwork.

A great place to start is by creating a simple monitoring framework to capture the right information.

Track your company, key people, products, services, competitors, industry topics, and key industry media. Include anything business related that keeps you or your CEO awake at night! You can activate this list immediately, or just keep for such time as is needed. If you are not sure where to start, begin with your company and a couple of competitors that represent the industry. Resist the urge to focus solely on your own output or organisation.

4. Act fast and iterate with the necessary support

When you enter a crisis, be prepared to act fast and iterate. Your previous monitoring and measurement plans, benchmarks and targets, might have to be changed or be put aside in the short term. Even the deliverables you generate, the cadence that they are delivered with, and the content they focus on, is likely to change.

But don't let perfection be the enemy of the good. It's better to have something in place, even if it's basic. This can be built upon. Test, learn, get the most from the information and move on.

Don't go at it alone. If you are using DIY tools, you may need additional manpower to support you during a peak news time.

Better still, work with a proactive monitoring and measurement partner. Brief them on the situation. Ask for advice.

They should be experts in the field, and this will not be their first rodeo. They should be well placed to guide you on best practices, options and recommendations.

How can they best adapt your current program during this time? Do they offer other crisis specific services and support?

Adapting the service to the situation, rather than carrying on business as usual, will help you generate more value.

5. Monitor with a purpose

Information overload is a trap. Prevent this by setting clear objectives as early possible.

Be as clear as you can be about what you want to achieve from a comms and reputational perspective, as well as from a monitoring and insights perspective.

What information do you require?

This may range from tracking the issue, to who is covering it; who is commentating from other businesses, academia or influencer groups; assessing the impact of traditional and social media and the relationship between them. If you are unsure of the specifics, you need to brief your partner on the outcome you are looking for and ask for their advice.

What will you do with the information?

Perhaps you are educating stakeholders on a developing industry issue or delivering subject matter briefings ahead of an executive interview.

What will you do as a result of that information?

Are you looking to measure and course-correct your performance; consolidate and step-up comms, or even minimise comms; identify and get on top of rogue spokespersons? Setting objectives that you can refer back to helps you focus on what matters, answer questions, and move forward.

6. Go boil that ocean

We often hear the phrase, **“don’t try to boil the ocean”**, but during a time of crisis, that mantra goes out of the window.

Online and social media can make any crisis potentially global. It can be important to review and understand the big picture and technology can help to achieve this at scale.

Having the capability to cast a wide net around the whole topic allows us to understand context, scale, momentum and evolution of the issue.

It also provides an exhaustive sandbox, which is a great place for testing and learning; for uncovering those ‘**unknown unknowns’,** which in turn enables you to uncover new elements of the debate as early as possible.

By monitoring broadly, we achieve a 60,000 ft view, providing a basis for making a decision on who and what is important.

7. Be Specific

When dealing with potentially large amounts of information, it’s important to be able to focus and refine down to monitor and measure what really matters.

This helps to avoid information overload by reducing volume, making the content and associated information more manageable and digestible. It can also serve as an influential, indicative sample.

There are many ways to reduce the overall amount of content, while delivering more substantive and more relevant content, here are just a few.

- **Searching using highly specific terminology**
- **Specifying the proximity of different terms**
- **Specifying the sequence of terms**
- **Tiering media or influencer lists (metrics based or qualitative)**

In practice, monitoring broadly and narrowly is often done in parallel. This provides breadth and focus. A sandbox for learning and a meaningful, impactful sample for measurement. Covering both also provides more possibilities for comparison and contrast.

8. Categorise

Use the technology to structure your data. A good monitoring service/tool should be able to categorise and tag information automatically.

Segmenting your data makes it more useful. It provides more entry points into the data-set, and more ways to filter and drill down into it. It allows for comparisons to be made between elements of your data set. Put simply, breaking the information down into smaller meaningful chunks also makes it easier to interrogate, easier to spot changes, anomalies and nuances.

Referring back to your initial monitoring framework provides a great basis for slicing and dicing your dataset.

9. Disseminate information

Capturing information is only the first step. The next is to get it to your audience in an appropriate, timely and useful way.

Consider a large multinational. It may be facing industry issues, cultural, ethical and political challenges. This information may need to be captured, and sent in different formats, to different teams in differing markets. Some may need a 'data dump', others may need an additional layer of information or insight.

Here it's best to leverage technology and automation for scale. Typically this is achieved using automated real-time dashboards, scenario-based alerts, cadence-based newsletters, and metrics reporting. These formats are ideal for comms teams that are moving fast and are close to the news.

Use curation for an executive audience. This involves distilling the information through human decision making (and AI as it improves).

Delivering editorially selected need-to-know content, perhaps with concise summaries, risk assessments or supporting information. We recommend that they are written for one person in the organisation such as the CEO or Director of Comms, even if the distribution is far broader, to ensure they hit the mark.

10. From monitoring to intelligence

If you can capture, structure and disseminate information, you have the basics well covered. However, it's evaluation, analysis, and insights that turn social and media outputs into business intelligence and positive outcomes.

There's a common myth perpetuated in the marketplace that 'platforms provide insight'. Platforms and tools are just that, tools. They deliver structured content, data, and information.

Insights is a human activity. It takes a level of analytical expertise, a working knowledge of social and traditional media and an understanding of the business situation, to drive insights and recommendations, providing the **'so what', 'what now' and 'what next'**.

Rather than marking their own homework, we encourage organisations to work with an objective third party for measurement and analysis. Third-party objectivity is equally useful for insight work, but for strategic and practical recommendations, this should be combined with an insider's knowledge of the business to deliver viable information to bridge the insights to action gap.

Moving beyond monitoring to intelligence services should be part of the communication teams forward-facing arsenal to inform strategy and tactics, to measure, review and course-correct, and to educate and guide internal stakeholders.

When the crisis dies down, it can also be used as part of the learning process. To adapt approaches, processes and best practice, for the next **"unknown known"**.

Monitoring and measurement is not a cure all.

In most cases it's a very small part of comms team's day. However, adopting the practices in preparedness for crisis will give you a head start. In all likelihood, even the best prepared comms team in the world will miss something, but where solid groundwork is already in place, those missteps can be absorbed.

As the saying goes **"knowledge is power"**, and this process has proved its value time and time again with organisations that understand and leverage it correctly.

Have any questions or wish to learn more about partnering with CARMA for your crisis planning needs?

Get in touch with us today.

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