

## Taxonomy of mediated crisis responses

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Received 1 November 2006; received in revised form 1 November 2006; accepted 20 November 2006

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### Abstract

This paper examines how organizations integrate the Internet into crisis communication. The findings of a 7-year longitudinal study provide a taxonomy explaining how mediated communication creates new possibilities for crisis response. We translate the study findings into suggestions for how public relations managers can integrate new communication media into their mix of communication tactics in crisis and risk management.

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*Keywords:* Crisis, Internet, Mediated, Public relations, Risk, World Wide Web

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Crisis and risk communication have emerged as some of the most highly developed and frequently published topics in the public relations journals (Ki & Khang, 2005). Over the past decade, public relations researchers have provided valuable case studies of how the Internet helps and hinders organizations in their crisis communication (Coombs, 2000; Hearit, 1999; Martinelli & Briggs, 1998; Witmer, 2000). Another line of research (Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Perry, 2005) has longitudinally tracked the integration of the Internet into crisis communication. This line of research found that approximately half of all organizations studied are using a mix of traditional and new tactics to communicate about a crisis.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on what has been learned over the last 7 years in order to provide a taxonomy of mediated crisis responses. A taxonomy is a system of principles that helps scholars and practitioners to understand a phenomenon. The taxonomy offered here is developed from over 100 Internet responses to crises over a 7-year period (1998–2005). The article takes a “best practices approach” to crisis communication by highlighting exemplar crisis responses. The article will conclude with lessons for practitioners who are responsible for crisis and risk communication in their organizations.

### 1. The Internet in crisis communication

The Internet and World Wide Web emerged in the mid 1990s as tools that organizations could use to communicate with the media and publics. Today, almost every organization has some type of Web presence that they use to communicate their brand, image, products, and services. One of the major benefits of the WWW is that it is a controlled channel. The Web offers organizations the opportunity to communicate their message without media imposed filters.

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Given that the Web allows organizations to frame messages and reach publics directly, one would expect organizations to use their Web sites for a variety of public relations functions. Research bears this out. Organizations are using their sites to make announcements, promote products, post annual reports, advertise job openings, and publicize their good deeds (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000). Because of the flexibility of the Web, organizations can accomplish many communication objectives through their sites.

The use of the Internet in crisis situations is a logical use of the World Wide Web. Perry et al. (2003), and Taylor and Perry (2005) developed a methodology to track the diffusion of the Internet in crisis communication. Perry et al. (2003) examined crises appearing on CNN.com and MSNBC.com during the months of October and April. Taylor and Perry (2005) discovered that approximately 54% of organizations that met the parameters of their crisis study, integrated the Internet into their crisis response. Their research specifically studied the presence of traditional and new communication tactics. Using diffusion theory (Rogers, 1995), they argued that over time, newer, innovative tactics would increase because organizations would see the economic, time, and rhetorical value of the Internet to reach the public and the media. Instead, the studies show that traditional public relations tactics such as the news release are still the most prevalent tactics used in crisis. New communication tactics such as informational links, two-way communication, real time monitoring and reporting, and audio and video feeds/files are less frequently used.

We have continued to collect data about crisis responses through October 2005. Our findings suggest that the Internet is being used in approximately half of the crises studied. In total, over the 7-year period, over 175 crises emerged and over 100 organizations have integrated the Internet in their responses. The next section of the paper discusses the features of best practices of these crisis responses.

## 2. Best practices of mediated crisis communication

In our analysis of crisis responses, some organizations have used the Internet and WWW in ways that have allowed them to communicate relevant, useful information in a timely manner to the media and public. Many responses exemplify the type of response suggested by public relations and communication theorists. From the sample of over 100 crisis responses, we have identified six best practices that illustrate the potential of the Internet in crisis communication.

### 2.1. Best practice #1: upload traditional tactics to the Web site

Research suggests that media relations during a crisis often follow a predictable pattern. The organization acknowledges a crisis either before the media coverage of its crisis or immediately after it. The public relations department (often in conjunction with the legal department) drafts statements to inform the media and the public about the crisis. Crisis statements often take the form of news releases, fact sheets, memos, Q&A sheets, and news conferences. Key figures in the organization are often available for interviews.

Traditional media relations tactics can be adapted for use on the organization's Web site during and after a crisis. Perry et al. (2003) and Taylor and Perry (2005) identified traditional media tactics that now are used in mediated crisis response. They found that transcripts of news conferences, news releases, fact sheets, question and answer formats, memos/letters to relevant publics, and transcripts of interviews with organizational leaders appear with varying frequency in crisis communication. These traditional tactics are tried and true crisis communication tactics and adopting them for crisis response is quite reasonable. The strength of integrating traditional crisis tactics into the Internet response is that such tactics have already been approved and are ready for rapid dissemination. Uploading PDFs of printed material to the organization's Web site requires little extra time and effort.

### 2.2. Best practice #2: integrating innovative tactics

The interactive potential of the Internet provides new tactics for crisis response. Perry et al. (2003) and Taylor and Perry (2005) identified four new media tactics that offer the organization in crisis more interactive ways to communicate with the media and public. The first crisis tactic made possible by the Internet is the *two-way, interactive communication feature*. It allows an organization to solicit feedback from public to respond to an issue via the Internet. Feedback encourages dialogue and interaction between the organization and its stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Two-way communication also allows an organization to more effectively manage conflict, improve understanding, and

address stakeholder concerns. Taylor and Perry (2005) noted that Microsoft integrated two-way interaction into its response to the Department of Justice Antitrust case against them.

A second new communication tactic, *connecting links*, allows an organization to directly connect visitors to other relevant sites, additional information, or resources to improve understanding and demonstrate a good-faith effort to fully inform the stakeholders. In October 2004, Merck & Co., Inc. announced a voluntary recall of its VIOXX arthritis medicine. It provided links to other Web sites that contained additional information for “patients and health care professionals.” This additional Web site hosted by Merck Co., Inc., also provided links to background information about NSAIDs and COX-2s from the Federal Drug Administration and posted a link to a Resource Center.

A third new media tactic, *real-time monitoring*, provides timely monitoring that may be necessary or helpful for the media or public to follow a crisis hour-by-hour or minute-by-minute. Real-time monitoring has also created the ability to reduce delays in reporting and response time. The National Hurricane Center provides an excellent example of how an organization can use its Web site to bring visitors and the media the most up to date information available.

A fourth tactic now possible because of the Internet is *videolaudio effects*. The ability to post video or audio feeds affords organizations the ability to use satellite images, taped or live video, high-resolution photography, and audio effects to Internet visitors. It is now a common practice for organizations to feature Web casts of their news conferences on the Website. Broadcast feeds are a valuable resource for television and Web news organizations because these journalists can get the actual visual and audio files from the news conference rather than relying on a textual transcript.

Today, with the mix of traditional and new communication tactics, organizations can provide much more comprehensive crisis communication. Organizations can include video/graphics, audio, downloadable forms, and real time monitoring of the crisis. They can create opportunities for dialogue by asking people to call in, e-mail, or write to them.

### 2.3. Best practice #3: reducing uncertainty during product recalls

During a product recall, consumers have increased uncertainty and the need for answers. One product recall, the Batmobile, provides an exemplar of how innovative features of Web site design can help an organization communicate with its customers. In April 2004, the Consumer Product Safety Commission issued a joint news release with Mattel, Inc. The news release announced the voluntary recall of Mattel’s Batmobile toy vehicle. The Batmobile had been produced with two very sharp rigid plastic rear tails that could puncture or lacerate children. By April 14, 2004, 14 children had reported injuries from the plastic tails. Of the 14 injured children, 4 required medical treatment. The recall announcement was made on the Consumer Product Safety Commission’s stationary and provided contact information for the CPSC and for Mattel. The CPSC news release included many innovative tactics including a detailed graphic of the Batmobile, the 800 numbers for both CPSC and Mattel, and a link that could be sent to friends informing them of the Batmobile recall. Web site visitors were also provided with a series of questions and pictures to look at to ascertain whether or not their toy was part of the recall. The link “click here to determine if your product is affected” brought the visitor back to Mattel’s Web site. Visitors could download an instruction manual, order replacement parts, call a Mattel customer service representative, browse through frequently asked questions, and use their postal code to locate a dealer in their area with replacement information.

Another product recall, involving the Hewlett Packard battery pack, also helped consumers to reduce their uncertainty about the safety of their laptop computers. The voluntary recall included FAQs, enlarged pictures of the numbers and identification codes on the battery, a letter explaining what to do if you owned a computer with a recalled battery pack, a link to find out the status of your battery replacement order, contact telephone numbers for over 50 countries, and a high quality poster that could be downloaded by retail stores and posted to educate employees on the recall. HP integrated many of the innovative tactics into its product recall.

### 2.4. Best practice #4: using your Web site to tell your side of the crisis

Organizational Web sites are controlled communication channels. When an organization posts information to its own Web site, it bypasses the news filters of the media and can communicate directly to the visitors of the site without the limitations inherent in the information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). Direct, unfiltered, controlled information provided via Web sites to interested parties is especially important in crisis situations. Organizational Web sites offer unlimited access to a “soapbox” and provide the organization the forum to tell its perspective on the crisis. Organizations can write as

much as they want with no editing by the media, and they can provide supporting materials such as pictures, documents, speeches, interviews, white papers, fact sheets, and news releases to support their arguments and explanations.

Practitioners might ask, “is it really worth the effort to use the Web in my organization’s crisis response?” The answer is yes. [Caldiero and Taylor \(2005\)](#) measured how much of the content from 10 fraud-related news releases actually ended up in newspaper coverage of the crisis. They found that the full quotes attributed to CEOs and organizational leaders featured in the news release appeared in 12% of the news stories about the crisis. Partial quotes provided in the organization’s news releases appeared in 28% of the news stories. [Caldiero and Taylor \(2005\)](#) concluded:

If an organization includes no direct quotes from a spokesperson in its crisis communication, no direct quotes will be used in news media coverage. It is like the lottery; in order to win, you have to buy a ticket. Organizations that do not buy a ticket – that is, do not respond to a crisis through their Web site – could lose all possibility of framing the crisis. (pp. 20–21)

Organizations involved in long, chronic crises such as legal problems or management problems can use their sites to tell their side of the story. Consider for example Microsoft, which experienced a crisis during three of the time periods examined in this study. Microsoft’s legal trouble with the Department of Justice (DOJ) began on October 13, 1999. [Taylor and Perry \(2005\)](#) found that Microsoft employed five of the traditional tactics and all four new media tactics, including press releases, fact sheets, Q&A’s, letters and memos, two-way communication, multimedia effects, real-time monitoring (updated hourly and daily throughout the trial), and connecting links to third party supporters. Microsoft’s Web site presented its side of the story in the form of press releases, fact sheets, and legal documents. The Web site contained an archive, a virtual library, and a chronology of events. Microsoft also attempted to establish a dialogue with its visitors, encouraging them to share their views with the organization. Using an icon labeled “What’s your opinion?” and linking to a text box, visitors could talk with spokespeople who responded to visitor concerns with letters and articles. Visitors were also encouraged to send e-mail and letters to their Congressional representatives in response to the lawsuit by clicking on the “How can I help” link.

One benefit of the WWW is that it can link organizations together in a way that was not possible before. The inclusion of connecting links on Web sites suggests further informational opportunities to visitors. Third party endorsement links have also been widely used. Creating links to news Web sites that have favorably covered an organization are also valuable. Indeed, during the DOJ trial, Microsoft Corporation offered links to over 30 respected newspapers around the world that had published articles opposing breaking up the company. Additionally, because the articles were written by independent media sources and posted on “news” Web sites, the articles appeared credible. Microsoft incorporated many of the new communication tactics that provided the organization the opportunity to tell its side of the story to the media and to interested visitors.

### *2.5. Best practice #5: create different Web pages for different stakeholders*

During times of crisis, there are many key stakeholders that require information. Each stakeholder group may require different information. In 2005, Mesaba Airlines, a large midwestern regional airline, voluntarily filed for Chapter 11 protection. Mesaba is a subsidiary of MAIR Holdings and it flies planes for Northwest Airlines, the dominant carrier in the Midwest. Mesaba Airlines announced its bankruptcy status on an audio Web cast and disseminated a news release announcing the filing.

Mesaba created a variety of Web pages for different stakeholders and tailored the information of each page for that particular stakeholder’s interests. For passengers, Mesaba uploaded a letter from the president explaining how the bankruptcy decision would affect the flight schedules. Mesaba Airlines’ letter contained links to their restructuring Web site and also linked visitors to Northwest Airlines.

For investors, the letter came from the parent company’s president and explained how the Mesaba filing did not include any of MAIR’s other financial holdings. Mesaba Airlines also provided a link so that investors could replay the Web cast where the company announced its decision. A frequently asked questions page explained some of the major questions that investors might ask. FAQ answers also included links to the restructuring Web page. Mesaba also provided a backgrounder that included information about the company.

A third unique Web page was created to communicate with employees. This Web site explained how the decision and the restructuring would affect them. A final Web page was directed to suppliers and business partners who would be affected by the terms of the bankruptcy filing. The letter from the Mesaba president reassured business partners

that “we can – and will – pay” suppliers in the post petition period and that “Mesaba Airlines is not going out of business and will continue to operate its schedule.” The letter provided contact information for the Accounts Payable Department so that its partners could inquire about the status of previous invoices.

The Mesaba media link contained all of these links, the Web cast and provided additional legal information. The actual filing for bankruptcy, from the EDGAR database, was included for financial reporters. Links to case information, court documents, service documents, and procedures were also included for journalists who follow legal stories. Overall, Mesaba used its site and its parent company’s MAIR Web site to tailor information to specific stakeholders. The letters from the presidents provided reassurance that the organization was moving in the right direction. The restructuring site reduced uncertainty for employees and business partners. The use of FAQs and the backgrounder provided the stakeholders with additional information. And, the link to Northwest Airlines gave worried passengers immediate information about how the bankruptcy filing would affect ticket holders and frequent flyers.

### *2.6. Best practice #6: work with government agencies during the crisis*

One way that organizations can manage their crisis is to work directly with a U.S. government agency. Government organizations have a mandate to serve the public interest. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Federal Drug Administration (FDA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) regularly post information about public health and potentially harmful products. For instance, in many product recalls, the organization in crisis jointly announces the recall with the CPSC. The Consumer Product Safety Commission maintains a Web site that includes all of the information about the recalled products. Additionally, the CPSC also archives Freedom of Information Act documents that follow up on the product recall and any litigation.

The auto industry regularly works with the National Highway Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to provide information for automobile owners. General Motors, Ford, and Toyota announced recalls of their vehicles during the study period. When auto recalls happen, original owners and people who regularly service their car at dealerships receive letters by mail informing them that their car should be brought into an authorized dealer. But some owners may not get this letter and when they hear about the recall, they will most likely go to the automaker’s Web site for more information. When customers look for this information, they are directed to the NTSB’s Web site. This may save the automakers from having the bad news of the recall on their Web site.

The Security and Exchanges Commission (SEC) regulates financial information and reporting processes. Its Web site provides organizations an opportunity to fulfill their SEC mandated obligations while at the same time keeping negative information off of their own Web sites. Many financial reporters read the EDGAR database for new SEC filings and use this government Web site as the starting place for reporting financial news stories. The value of working with a government agency is that the organization can immediately show that it is addressing the crisis and safeguarding its consumers.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also works with organizations during product recalls. When Merck & Co., Inc., announced its voluntary recall of its VIOXX arthritis medicine, the Federal Drug Administration created a page dedicated to explaining the drug approval process. The FDA created a link to its Public Health Advisory site. The FDA also provided a Q&A format for visitors and linked to Merck’s news release announcing their voluntary recall. Government agencies, however, must walk a fine line when participating in the crisis response of the organizations it regulates.

One year after the VIOXX recall, the FDA was accused of not using solid scientific judgment in reviewing the risks associated with the drug in the pre-approval stages. Additionally, critics charged that the FDA did not adequately monitor the heart attack data gathered once the drug was regularly available to the American population. How did the FDA respond to these allegations? It posted a response on its Web site to manage the crisis and explain its rigorous review process for all drugs.

The previous sections have identified some of the research-based findings about crisis response and the Internet. The next section extends these examples into specific suggestions for public relations practitioners.

## **3. Lessons learned about mediated crisis response**

This longitudinal study design allows us to draw conclusions based on a large but evolving data set. We believe that our review of the current research in mediated communication and our analysis of over 100 crisis responses provides

a solid foundation to make these recommendations to practitioners of crisis communication. There are many things that an organization can do to prepare for a potential crisis, communicate during a crisis, and rebuild relationships with publics after a crisis.

### 3.1. *Before any crisis*

- (1) Create links to a “Press Center” or “News Room” that are clearly marked on the home page. Journalists and visitors should be able to immediately find your Press Center from the homepage. Do not hide the Press Center or News Room inside another link.
- (2) Archive previous news releases and provide a key word search engine that sorts the search term results by relevance. For instance, if a reporter inputs the term “CEO resignation,” all news releases that address the CEO resignation should come up in reverse chronological order.
- (3) Upload general fact sheets, backgrounders, high-resolution photos of the organization’s leaders, PDFs of annual reports, and update contact information to include addresses and phone numbers of organizational spokespersons. The best way to think about this information is: what would a reporter need to write a story about our organization. Make it easy for the reporter or visitor to learn more about the positive things about your organization.
- (4) Assess your organization’s risks and identify worst-case scenarios. What could go wrong – product recall, layoffs, terrorism, etc. – and brainstorm what can you prepare today to shorten your response time tomorrow.
- (5) Create draft communication tactics that can be used in the event of a crisis. Write templates of organizational materials that can be quickly edited to meet the requirements of the crisis.
- (6) Consider how the innovative crisis tactics might be integrated into the crisis response. Which links to pages within your Web site might prove useful during a crisis? What graphics might be uploaded to help the media better understand your organization? Do you have the technology/bandwidth to provide streaming video if needed? Can 1 million people in 1 day successfully navigate your Web site?
- (7) Speak with the legal department to gain agreement about the role of public relations function during a crisis. Advocate for a significant role for the public relations function and be able to explain that what the organization does during and after a crisis is crucial to its recovery. Gain agreement from the legal department that public relations will use the organization’s Web site for communication during the crisis.
- (8) View your Web site through the lens of a media representative who needs information quickly. Ask an intern or friend to visit the site and find the answers to simple questions. Make any necessary changes so that all visitors can easily find the information they seek.

### 3.2. *During a crisis*

- (1) Upload traditional communication tactics to the Web site as soon as they are approved.
- (2) Clearly mark any tactics specifically dedicated to the crisis. Keep the crisis information separate from other organizational materials.
- (3) Specify the exact times and dates of next update so that reporters know when to expect new information.

### 3.3. *After a crisis*

- (1) Return to the pre-crisis configuration of your Web site.
- (2) Create a two-way communication option that solicits visitor opinions and provides answers to questions. Feedback loops such as 1–800 numbers and e-mail addresses provide valuable information about how the public responded to your crisis.
- (3) Create an archive of your mediated crisis response for evaluation (and possible future use). Create a list of what your department did well and what you can do to improve future crisis response.

## 4. Conclusion

The Internet is revolutionizing many aspects of public relations research and practice. The progression of Webbed public relations will not change just because the field ignores it. And ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

Almost every organization will experience some type of crisis. Some organizations will become the focus of media and public attention during this crisis. Web sites are one controlled channel through which organizations can communicate directly with the media and the public. The level of preparation that goes into developing strategic information subsidies may be the difference between weathering a crisis or succumbing to it.

Effective crisis responses do not happen miraculously. They require forethought and cooperation among many different organizational units. More importantly, effective responses require that the public relations practitioner understand that the organization's mediated response to crisis has the potential to tell the organization's side of the story, reduce the uncertainty of consumers, address multiple stakeholder needs, and work with government agencies that specialize in public safety.

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