

## **A Study of PR Practitioners' Use of Social Media in Crisis Planning**

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*Social media are increasingly changing the way public relations practitioners communicate and do their jobs. Scholars have begun to explore public relations practitioners' general social media usage. This study is one of the few attempts to investigate how public relations practitioners use social media in crisis planning and crisis communication as well as in ordinary situations.*

*A survey exploring social media and crisis planning was conducted with 251 members of the Public Relations Society of America. Nearly half of respondents (48%) said they have incorporated social media into their crisis plans. Of these respondents, most indicated they have incorporated Twitter as a tool in their crisis planning, primarily for distribution purposes. Additionally, the study found that public relations professionals whose organizations rely more heavily on social media tools in their crisis planning correlated positively with practitioners' greater confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis. As for practitioners' use of social media in their every day practice, results revealed that a large percentage use social media on a personal level; however, results also indicated that a large percentage of respondents' organizations (82%) use social media. Survey respondents indicated that the stakeholders they communicate with most via social media are potential customers and clients (71%), followed by news media (61%).*

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social media are changing the way everyone, including journalists and public relations practitioners, communicates. Despite the prevalence of social media and those who use these channels, the definition of what constitutes social media is still developing. Dykeman (2008) describes social media as a place for humans to use Internet and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information. Marchese (2007) believes social media differs from traditional media because of the way information is discovered, distributed and consumed. Others emphasize that social media differs from traditional media because it is cheaper and more accessible (Wright & Hinson, 2009). In mainstream media and pop culture, social media are often used to describe Web sites like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, all places where humans can go to interact and engage with others by simply logging on through a computer or mobile device. Palen (2008) defines social media as "blogs, social networking environments, person-to-person broadcasting messaging and other Web 2.0 applications" (p. 76).

Several scholars have explored the use of social media in public relations. Eyrich et al. (2008) surveyed 283 public relations practitioners and discovered that e-mail was the most heavily relied on form of social media. The authors found that while public relations professionals have adopted more established tools such as e-mail and Intranet, they have yet to fully embrace more advanced tools such as social networking and virtual worlds. In a study of public relations practitioners across the globe, Wright and Hinson (2009) found a significant difference between what practitioners say is happening in their organizations with social media and what should be happening. Furthermore, respondents indicated they do not spend much time working with social media. Forty-eight percent of respondents said they spend between one and ten percent of their working time with social media. Seven percent indicated they do not spend any of their time working with social media. When asked about the importance of various social media tools in their organizations, respondents indicated search engine marketing as most important. This was followed by blogs and social networks.

The goals of this paper are to examine the 1) how organizations are using social media for general public relations purposes and more importantly, 2) how organizations rely on social media for crisis planning and crisis information dissemination.

### *Social Media and Crises*

Crises dominate today's news coverage, from Tiger Wood's sexual escapades to E. coli outbreaks to bankrupt financial institutions. Media coverage, whether in print, online or on the airwaves, is dominated by stories about earthquakes, sex scandals, and acts of violence. Naturally, a key to successfully handling crises is controlling the flow of information to the media and one's publics. Fearn-Banks (2001) describes a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p.2). Barton (1993) states that a crisis is "a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results" (p.2). Fink (1986) describes a crisis as an event that increases in intensity and is given much scrutiny by the media.

Crisis management most often falls under the responsibility of an organization's public relations practitioner. One of the key components to handling a crisis successfully is controlling the flow of information by developing and disseminating key messages to the media and an organization's publics. "Staying on message" is a common term among public relations practitioners when engaging with the public or members of the media during a crisis (Howard & Mathews, 2000; Shin & Cameron, 2005). Furthermore, a survey of crisis management practitioners and scholars reveals the importance of communicating during a crisis. For example, Fearn-Banks (2001) refers to crisis communication as the interaction (verbal, visual, or written) between an organization and its publics. Kaufman (1988) argues for the release of accurate

and timely information to the media and its publics and says that when an organization fails to release information it “relinquishes the substantial amount of control it could have exercised over the flow of information to the media” (p. 15).

One thing crisis managers must contend with is information flow. Controlling the flow of information in the event of a crisis is paramount to successfully managing a crisis. But because of the current media landscape in which anyone can instantly have a megaphone and access to millions of people, the goal of controlling information has become more challenging than ever. Despite public relations practitioners' best attempts to control the message using official spokespersons and other means, it appears that technology, along with the media's rush to be first with information, are challenging crisis managers' efforts to control the message (Hannah, 2009; Kurtz, 2009). Because of social media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, citizens have become more important players in the coverage of crises. Additionally, many mainstream news outlets also have embraced social media. CNN's I-Report, Fox News Channel's U-Report, ABC's i-Caught, and MSNBC's FirstPerson encourage ordinary citizens to upload pictures, stories and videos to be aired on television and cable and broadcast news Web sites (Potter, 2007). Meanwhile, the gatekeeping function of media has all but disappeared.

Examples of social media's impact on crisis reporting abound. When singer Jennifer Hudson's family was murdered the media turned to the alleged perpetrator's MySpace page to learn more about him. When US Airways Flight 1549 landed safely in the Hudson River, the first pictures of the crash were posted on Twitter. When terrorists took over parts of Mumbai, victims tweeted to update their friends, families and the world about what was happening to them.

Public relations strategist Mark Hannah noted that public relations professionals have been trained to provide information and context in crisis situations. Now, thanks to social media, bystanders and others are able to provide that initial information and context. He also pointed out that user-generated media is just as likely to inform traditional media as vice versa, especially during a crisis. Hannah (2009) also emphasized that public relations professionals no longer have time to strategize before bad news reaches the media and public. Therefore, crisis managers are put in a reactive mode and forced to repair the news once the public has already revealed it.

Hannah (2009) also cited the famous photograph of US Airways Flight 1549 that came not from a photojournalist but from a bystander who snapped a picture with his phone and uploaded it to his twitter account. Long before US Airways issued an official statement, the photograph had been picked up by major news organizations, and at least one cable news station, MSNBC, had interviewed the man who took it (Hannah, 2009; Kurtz, 2009). Additionally, Twitter users provided updates from the crash landing site even before the *New York Times* published an online story (Kurtz, 2009). As Kurtz stated, “Twitter is gradually becoming a

factor in news events” (p. C01). Gonzales-Herrero and Smith (2008) agree, stating “crisis communication has never been as important as it is today because there has never been so much information available to so many people at the touch of a button” (p. 152). In fact, social media can provide major problems for an organization in the throes of a crisis. Victims of the Virginia Tech University shooting were correctly identified on social media sites long before authorities released their names (Palen, 2008).

Social media are changing the way public relations practitioners function, especially in the realm of crisis communication, and scholars have taken notice. In their study on crisis and technology, Gonzales-Herrero and Smith (2008) emphasize how the Internet and social media can aid in a crisis but can also trigger one. They also note how organizations must now include issues of hacking, negative blogging movements and other Internet-based problems in their crisis plans. In several studies exploring the Web sites of organizations in crisis, researchers discovered organizations using two-way dialogic communication tools such as links, audio and video (Perry et al., 2003; Taylor & Perry, 2005). However, a survey of the Web sites of organizations involved in product recalls reveals that a number of organizations have failed to fully integrate social media into their crisis management efforts (Taylor, 2010).

While previous studies have surveyed public relations professionals about social media’s overall impact on their jobs (Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2009), few, if any, have explored social media’s impact on public relations professional’s crisis planning efforts. This is perplexing, especially when anecdotal evidence suggests that social media are becoming a factor in the way stories are covered and the way in which the public learns about crises. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

*RQ1a:* How often are public relations professionals using social media?

*RQ1b:* What percent of public relations professionals indicate their organizations are using social media?

*RQ2a:* How do public relations professionals’ organizations use social media?

*RQ2b:* What percent of public relations professionals indicate they have incorporated the use of social media into their crisis communication plans?

*RQ3a:* How much do public relations practitioners’ organizations rely on different types of social media tools for crisis planning?

*RQ3b: How have public relations professionals incorporated the use of social media into their crisis communication plans?*

Communication scholars and practitioners often emphasize that openness, transparency, and two-way communication are key element of successful crisis management (Coombs, 2007, Ulmer et al., 2007). Because social media offer channels for transparency and open, two-way communication, then it would stand to reason that public relations practitioners whose organizations have embraced social media would have more confidence in their organization's ability to successfully handle a crisis. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Public relations professionals whose organizations rely heavily on social media for crisis communication will indicate greater confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis than public relations professionals whose organizations do not rely heavily on social media.*

## **METHOD**

### *Data Collection*

An online survey investigating PR practitioners' and organizations' use of social media tools in crisis management was conducted from January through March 2010. Potential respondents were identified from a comprehensive member list of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). An e-mail invitation and the survey link were sent to a sample of members encouraging them to participate in the survey. The sample yielded 251 responses.

## **RESULTS**

Of those participants responding to demographic questions, there were far more female practitioners ( $n = 150$ , 69.8%) than male professionals ( $n = 65$ , 30.2%); on average, professionals were 40-49 years old ( $SD = 1.08$ ); Typical practitioners reported holding four-year college degree and having some graduate school ( $n = 217$ ,  $SD = .96$ ); of those who reported their ethnicity, Caucasian professionals were the dominant with 89.2% ( $n = 189$ ), followed by Hispanics 4.7% ( $n = 10$ ), African Americans 4.2% ( $n = 9$ ), and Asians 1.9% ( $n = 4$ ), there was no Native American practitioner. Respondents reported an average of 11-15 years of public relations practice ( $SD = 1.47$ ,  $n = 215$ ); of those who reported their public relations role within their organization ( $n = 215$ ), 20% were executives ( $n = 43$ ), more than half (56.7%,  $n = 122$ ) were directors or managers, 16.8% were technicians ( $n = 36$ ), and 6.5% ( $n = 14$ ) indicated other categories.

*RQ1a: How often are public relations professionals using social media?*

PR practitioners were asked about their frequency of using the social media ranging from 1 “never,” 2 “rarely,” 3 “sometimes,” 4 “often,” and 5 “always.” As reported in [Table 1](#), more than three quarters (76.1%) of working PR professionals often and always used social media in practice. In total, 97.2% (N=243) of them used social media in their practices.

*RQ1b: What percent of public relations professionals indicate their organizations are using social media?*

In general, social media usage is very popular in respondents’ organizations. More than 82% of respondents (203) indicated that their organizations are using social media to achieve organizational purposes.

*RQ2a: How do public relations professionals’ organizations use social media?*

In general, nearly a quarter (24.2%) of respondents reported that their organizations have one or more people whose only responsibility and job function is social media.

According to [Table 2](#), organizations appear to have professional staff to deal with the ever expanding social media technology. 43.5% of respondents indicated that their organizations have at least one person who is responsible for maintaining social media tools and an almost equal percent (43%) of them mentioned that their organizations have several people in charge of social media tools.

The most frequently mentioned stakeholder communicated via social media by respondents organizations are current customers and clients (70.9%), followed by news media (60.6%), potential customers and clients (59.8%) and employees (53%). Other stakeholders contacted by organizations are volunteers (28.7%), donors (26.7%), and former employees (23.1%). Stakeholders least communicated by organizations via social media are retirees (15.1%) and investors (13.1%) (See [Table 3](#)).

Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with several statements concerning various purposes their organizations or largest clients used social media on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.” As seen from [Table 4](#), mean scores ranging from 1 to 5 show organizations most likely use social media to listen to what people are saying about the organization (3.99), followed by “listening to what people are saying about the industry in general (3.89),” “listening to what people are saying about the competition (3.65),” and “communicating with members of traditional media” (3.36).

*RQ2b: What percent of public relations professionals indicate they have incorporated the use of social media into their crisis communication plans?*

Less than half (48.2%, N = 95) of PR practitioners indicated that their organizations have incorporated the use of social media tools into their crisis communication plans.

*RQ3a: How much do public relations practitioners' organizations (or largest client) rely on different types of social media tools for crisis planning?*

Respondents were asked specifically the extent to which their organizations or largest clients relied on various types of social media on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 "don't rely on at all" to 5 "heavily rely on." As seen from [Table 5](#), mean scores ranging from 1 to 5 show Twitter (2.51) is the social media tool that organizations rely on the most, followed by Facebook (2.42), blogs (1.98), YouTube (1.96), Flickr (1.32), and MySpace (1.20).

*RQ3b: How have public relations professionals incorporated the use of social media into their crisis communication plans?*

The current study included a couple of open-ended questions which asked how public relations practitioners have incorporated social media tools into their crisis communication plans. Most of the professionals mentioned using social media as another communication tool to disseminate and monitor information in times of crisis. Respondents told us:

- "Added social media sites as points of distribution and monitoring."
- "Crisis Web page to replace our standard home page with blog ability to post messages; Facebook and Twitter accounts for emergency use only."
- "In the event of a crisis, a coordinated statement and/or instructions will be disseminated via traditional media, social media and on the organization's internal media (ie: internet, intranet, signage and phone hold messaging). In the event that servers are down and/or the building is not accessible, social media will be the primary mode of communication in lieu of organization internet. "
- "Messages released to media, public, etc. are duplicated on Facebook page. If reinforcing tactics include videos, they are placed on the organization's YouTube channel. Facebook is also used to monitor the informal communication networks to detect misperceptions that need to be corrected and to discover additional concerns among all stakeholder groups. "
- "When the appropriate channels are approved, we will reach out to Facebook Fans and Twitter Followers with relevant information. We also have message boards on our Web site that stakeholders can use to communicate about their experiences in real time. We have staff

- dedicated to monitoring the message boards so that if a user is in a moment of crisis, we can work with experts to reach out to offer support. ”
- Only one respondent mentioned that the company “utilized social media as outreach and engagement tool.”
  - Still some professionals mentioned that their organizations are beginning to implement some policies and guidelines concerning social media. For example, one respondent said, “We are finalizing a social media policy guideline for all staff and a response guideline for communications staff tasked with responding to online comments/crises.

*Hypothesis 1: Public relations professionals whose organizations rely heavily on social media for crisis communication will indicate greater confidence in their organization’s ability to handle a crisis than public relations professionals whose organizations do not rely heavily on social media.*

First, correlations were done on reliance on individual social media and confidence in the organization’s ability to handle a crisis. There were significant correlations between half of the reliance on social media measures and confidence in the organization’s ability to manage a crisis situation: reliance on Facebook ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), reliance on Twitter ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ), and reliance on YouTube ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ). However, there were no significant correlations between reliance on MySpace, Flickr, and blogs and perceived confidence in the organization’s ability to handle a crisis. Then a correlation analysis was conducted on the reliance on social media index (Cronbach’s alpha = .78) and confidence in the organization’s ability to handle a crisis. The reliance on social media index is positively correlated with confidence in the organization’s ability to manage a crisis. Therefore, H1 is supported (See [Table 6](#)).

## **DISCUSSION**

Results of this study which surveyed members of the Public Relations Society of America revealed that a large percentage of public relations practitioners use social media on a personal level; however, results also indicated that a large percentage of respondents’ organizations (82%) use social media. This seems to contradict findings from Wright and Hinson (2009) who found that 48% of respondents spend only one to ten percent of their time working with social media. The findings also differ from Eyrych et al. (2008) who found public relations professionals to be slow to adopt social networking and that e-mail was the most heavily used form of social media. Also, while the present study indicated a high percentage of practitioners personally use social media, Wright and Hinson (2009) discovered that most respondents get their news and information from newspapers and other traditional media. One caveat that should be noted is that the present study did not ask where respondents get their news it simply asked if practitioners personally used social media. Still, the discrepancy is interesting.

Differences in the emphasis placed on social media by respondents' organizations could be explained two ways. First, the present study involved domestic practitioners, while Wright and Hinson (2009) surveyed public relations practitioners internationally. Perhaps international practitioners and organizations are slow to adopt social media into their public relations practices. In addition, the present study was conducted within the last two months; therefore, the results could indicate that public relations practitioners have simply progressed in their use of social media.

Results also revealed that less than 25% of respondents work for organizations that have at least one person whose sole responsibility is social media. In most instances social media is considered a part of other job functions. The findings indicate that although organizations are dedicating resources to social media, it does not warrant a full-time job function in most organizations. Rather, social media appears to be an additional job function for most practitioners.

Survey respondents indicated that the stakeholders they communicated with most via social media are potential customers and clients (71%), followed by news media (61%). It is interesting that so many organizations are using social media to conduct media relations efforts. This begs the question: are the media going to where organizations are or are organizations going to where the media are? This is a question that should be explored further in future research studies. Respondents also indicated they use social media to communicate with employees (53%). Again, this was an unexpected finding, especially in light of some of the instances in which employees have created crises for their organizations by engaging in social media. Furthermore, some companies have wrestled with the idea of limiting employees' use of social media while at work and on behalf of the organization. Therefore, the fact that more than half of respondents' organizations are using social media to communicate with employees is surprising.

As for crisis planning, nearly half of respondents (48%) said they have incorporated social media into their crisis plans. Of these respondents, most indicated they have incorporated Twitter as a tool in their crisis planning. This was followed by Facebook, blogs and Youtube, respectively. Distribution of crisis information was a main theme for the open-ended question which asked how organizations have incorporated social media into their crisis planning efforts. Issues management, or monitoring and scanning for potential crises, also was mentioned by several respondents. Others mentioned that social media was used to monitor for potential crisis, detect misperceptions that need to be corrected, and discover additional concerns among stakeholder groups. Issues management was not specifically addressed in this study; therefore, future studies should focus on this specific element of crisis management.

Interestingly, only one respondent mentioned the organization using social media as an outreach and engagement tool in order to prepare for a crisis. Scholars

(Coombs, 2007; Ulmer et al., 2007) emphasize the importance of relationships and reputation with stakeholders before a crisis begins and social media sites are a way to do this. From the responses in our study it appears that more crisis managers should think about social media as a way to develop relationships with stakeholders, by using dialogue, etc. and think of this as a way to prepare for a crisis.

Finally, the study found that public relations professionals whose organizations rely more heavily on social media tools in their crisis planning correlated positively with practitioners' greater confidence in their organization's ability to handle a crisis. This indicates that public relations practitioners, whether their organizations have incorporated social media into crisis planning or not, know that it should be included. The savvy practitioner knows that social media can help ensure the organization is prepared from all angles. Furthermore, public relations practitioners understand that social media has become an important factor in how crises are reported on by the media and therefore managed by public relations practitioners.

As with any research study, a few limitations must be addressed. First, a high percentage of females responded to the survey and this could have impacted the results. Additionally, the survey did not specifically address issues management, something that several respondents mentioned in the open-ended questions. Therefore, future studies on the topic should delineate between issues management, such as scanning and monitoring of potential crises, and crisis preparedness in the form of developing crisis plans.

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Table 1: Frequency of Using Social Media by PR Practitioners

	<b>Always</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>	
<b>Frequency of using social media</b>	39.1% (95)	37% (90)	13.6% (33)	10.3% (25)	2.8% (7)	M = 2.04 SD = 1.08 N = 250

Table 2: Number of People In an Organization Dedicated to Maintaining Social Media Tools Such as Facebook and/or Twitter

	<b>Percentage (N)</b>
<b>None</b>	13.6% (29)
<b>One person</b>	43.5% (93)
<b>Several persons</b>	43% (92)

Table 3: The Stakeholders Respondents' Organizations Communicate with/via Social Media

	<b>Percentage (N)</b>
<b>Employees</b>	53% (133)
<b>Former employees</b>	23.1% (58)
<b>Donors</b>	26.7% (67)
<b>Investors</b>	13.1% (33)
<b>Retirees</b>	15.1% (38)
<b>Volunteers</b>	28.7% (72)
<b>Current customers and clients</b>	70.9% (178)
<b>Potential customers and clients</b>	59.8% (150)
<b>News Media</b>	60.6% (152)

*Table 4: Purposes Respondents' Organizations Use Social Media*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
<b>to communicate with members of traditional media such as newspapers or TV</b>	7.5% (16)	16.8% (36)	22.9% (49)	37.9% (81)	15% (32)	M = 3.36 SD = 1.15 N = 214
<b>to listen to what people are saying about the organization</b>	4.2% (9)	7.5% (16)	7.5% (16)	46.5% (99)	34.3% (73)	M = 3.99 SD = 1.05 N = 213
<b>to listen to what people are saying about the competition</b>	3.7% (8)	9.3% (20)	24.2% (52)	43.7% (94)	19.1% (41)	M = 3.65 SD = 1.01 N = 215
<b>to listen to what people are saying about the industry in general</b>	2.8% (6)	5.6% (12)	14% (30)	54.9% (118)	22.8% (49)	M = 3.89 SD = .91 N = 215
<b>to identify potential problems/issues before they become a crisis</b>	3.8% (8)	11.3% (24)	24.9% (53)	40.4% (86)	19.7% (42)	M = 3.61 SD = 1.04 N = 213

Table 5: The Extent to Which Respondents' Organizations Use Social Media for Crisis Planning

	<b>Don't rely on at all</b>	<b>Rarely rely on</b>	<b>Sometimes rely on</b>	<b>Regularly rely on</b>	<b>Heavily rely on</b>	<b>Mean &amp; SD</b>
<b>Facebook</b>	38% (94)	13.4% (33)	24.3% (60)	17% (42)	7.3% (18)	M = 2.42 SD = 1.34 N = 247
<b>Twitter</b>	36.8% (91)	14.6% (36)	20.2% (50)	17.8% (44)	10.5% (26)	M = 2.51 SD = 1.41 N = 247
<b>MySpace</b>	86.8% (204)	7.2% (17)	4.7% (11)	1.3% (3)	0% (0)	M = 1.20 SD = .58 N = 235
<b>Flickr</b>	79.6% (191)	10.8% (26)	7.9% (19)	1.7% (4)	0% (0)	M = 1.32 SD = .69 N = 240
<b>YouTube</b>	52.1% (124)	16.8% (40)	17.2% (41)	10.9% (26)	2.9% (7)	M = 1.96 SD = 1.18 N = 238
<b>Blogs</b>	57.6% (140)	10.7% (26)	13.6% (33)	11.9% (29)	6.2% (15)	M = 1.98 SD = 1.32 N = 243

*Table 6: Correlation Between Reliance on Social Media for Crisis Planning and Respondents' Confidence In Their Organizations' Ability to Handle a Crisis*

<b>Reliance on social media</b>	<b>Confidence in R's organization's ability to handle a crisis</b>
<b>Face book</b>	.18**
<b>Twitter</b>	.28**
<b>MySpace</b>	.06
<b>Flickr</b>	.11
<b>YouTube</b>	.23**
<b>Blogs</b>	.07
<b>Reliance on Social Media index</b>	.24**

*NOTE:* Reliance is measured on a 5-point scale where 1 meant “don’t rely on at all” and 5 meant “heavily rely on.” Reliance on social media is an additive measure of reliance on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, and Blogs.

\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p < .001