

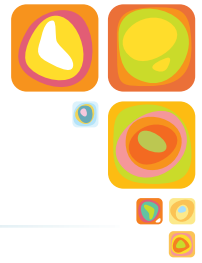
Principles of Crisis Management in a Viral Age


Integrating the Tools and Lessons of Search 2.0 into
a Comprehensive Crisis Response



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A White Paper with Pizzazz by  oneupweb

“Be honest. Be thorough. Be first.” These are the consistent pearls quoted by every PR professional paid to manage a potential crisis. But those prescriptions were written long before there were camera phones, YouTube and Digg. Today, being thorough is relative at best and being first is virtually impossible. In a viral age, it’s “be honest, be thorough and be everywhere.” And, don’t forget the Boy Scout motto – “Be Prepared” . . . for anything.

In the pages that follow, we’ll look at what it takes to manage a crisis in the age of social media. Specifically, we’ll examine the changing environment and technology that has revolutionized the collection and distribution of information. We’ll see how a fully integrated online search engine optimization and paid search marketing program can help stem the tide of negative publicity, and view some recent examples of managing and mismanaging a crisis. The resulting best practices can be used to create or revamp your crisis management plans.

Be honest, be thorough and be everywhere.



IT’S A FAST, NEW WORLD OUT THERE

Many of today’s crisis situations could not have been envisioned 50, 20, even 10 years ago. Terms like “going postal”, “pandemic”, “terrorist attack” and “personal data theft” that fill the headlines, were barely on the corporate radar. Today, they represent their own category of crisis planning as organizations scramble to prepare for the next potential disaster.

The same can be said for the environment in which a crisis occurs. Where and how people collect and distribute information is exploding. Traditional media outlets have undergone a major evolution. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television have expanded into downloadable talking newspapers and personalized magazines, satellite radio, and 24-hour cable news networks. But it’s online media that has had the greatest impact. The internet offers near instantaneous access to news, images and commentary through search engines, email, blogs, podcasts, and a growing array of content-sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr.

Managing the flow of information in a crisis has never been more difficult. Electronic witnesses such as camera and video phones can capture a crisis as it unfolds. Distribution of the sounds, descriptions and images travels at the speed of light. Traditional opinion leaders with established credentials and accountability are competing with anyone with an opinion and a blog. It’s never been more difficult to speak with one, clear voice. Incomplete, inaccurate or uninformed crisis analysis and public commentary can be passed blogger to blogger in seconds through links, where they can be captured and sent to desktops, phones and mobile devices around the world. In less time than it takes to gather your own crisis assessment team, an international audience in the millions may be making their own assessment.





JET BLUE AND TACO BELL – TWO TEXTBOOK RESPONSES

Consider JetBlue and its 2007 Valentines Day disaster. On February 14, 2007 a rapidly moving storm tore through the east coast, affecting thousands of travelers. JetBlue customers were stranded on the tarmac, some up to 11 hours, while JetBlue contemplated its next move.

Forget about being first with the news, JetBlue passengers were immediately on their cell phones. Stories with accompanying pictures of overflowing toilets were instantaneously on their way to news outlets around the globe.

In traditional crisis management mode, JetBlue issued same day press releases including an apology and offers for compensation. The next day, JetBlue CEO David Neeleman was seemingly everywhere – all major network morning shows and cable news networks – with an accounting of what went wrong and how he would fix the problem. In the next 10 days JetBlue issued no less than 8 press releases about the situation.

Large, apologetic ads were placed in newspapers in JetBlue's major east coast markets. It was textbook. THE OLD TEXTBOOK.

Online, Mr. Neeleman and JetBlue were losing the war. While CEO Neeleman was cranking out his own very personable blog, emailing current customers and replaying his video apology, angry passengers were feeding sites such as JetBlueHostages.com with its own posting on MySpace. The news was so filled with passenger-generated horror stories that the poorly optimized JetBlue press releases were nearly invisible. YouTube was running regular JetBlue segments from the late night comedians and Comedy Central.

Days later when JetBlue had to cancel more flights, the buzz started building again. Although the company survived, it appears much of their hip, customer-friendly brand cache did not. The blogosphere doesn't forget easily. Neither does the mainstream media; as the JetBlue crisis played out, *BusinessWeek* Magazine dropped the company from its list of "25 Client Pleasing Brands." JetBlue had been #4 on the list.

TACO BELL EMBRACES CRISIS MANAGEMENT 2.0

In December of 2006, fast food giant Taco Bell faced an equally daunting PR challenge. As many as 71 customers at multiple locations were stricken by an E.coli outbreak. Immediately, Taco Bell's crisis team went to work.

While generating press releases and securing live media interviews, Taco Bell simultaneously initiated a paid search informational marketing campaign. Using crucial keyword phrases such as "Taco Bell E.coli", the company created bilingual informational mini-sites where the public could see a video message from CEO Greg Creed and check informational updates on the outbreak.





A similar video message was delivered as paid television advertising and posted on YouTube. The immediate hysteria was turned into cautious confidence, as Taco Bell and regulatory investigators were able to isolate the source of the outbreak. The general feeling of “we’re on top of it” was achieved and overall damage minimized.

A little over a month later, Taco Bell suffered another serious PR setback, as a security video surfaced showing a rat infestation in a New York City franchise. Ironically, although less threatening to human life, the rapidly distributed video has proven a much harder image to shake. Once again, Taco Bell initiated an aggressive crisis management response through a paid search program on all major search engines.

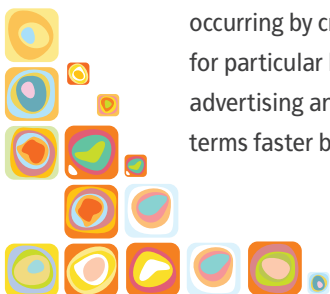
The online staying power of this latest Taco Bell PR crisis says volumes about the viral impact of social media. A rat is a much more compelling visual than a virus. Taco Bell will have to continue paid and natural search campaigns to buy the issue off the first search pages, as they hope the late night comics find a new target.

CRISIS PLANNING IN A VIRAL WORLD

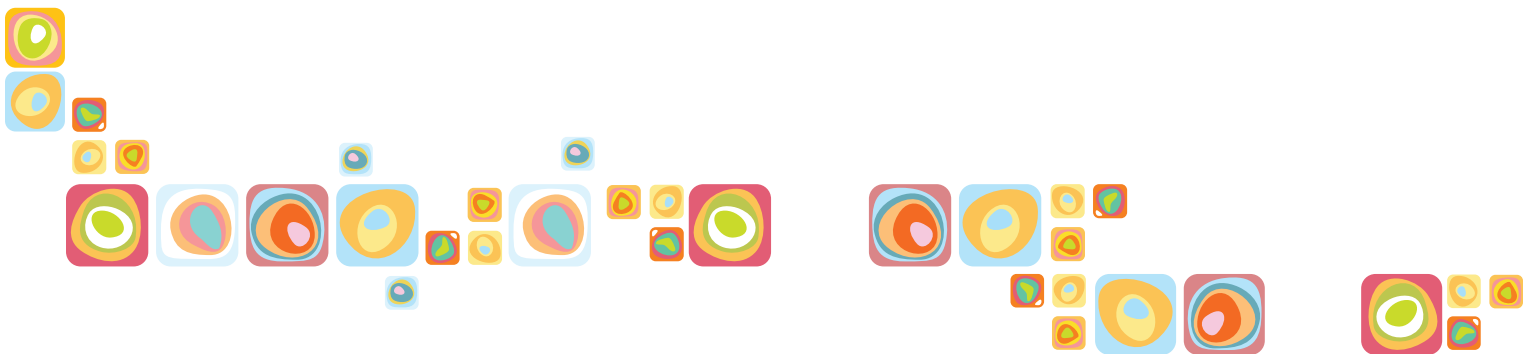
The above examples show the importance that online search marketing strategies can and must play in any crisis response plan. Here are the steps that should be part of any crisis planning process:

- **Scenario scripting** – What are the worst things that could happen to your organization? What could focus critical public attention and scrutiny, fair or otherwise, that could affect your long and/or short term viability? The list is usually larger than any one individual could imagine. We recommended a formal brainstorming process here where small groups devise and script 10 potential disasters, and then the lists are rotated between groups spurring new ideas. When the lists are completed and tabulated, you’ll find that they fall into a few definite categories, such as environmental disaster, labor/personnel troubles or violence; sudden financial downturns or difficulties; terrorist attack; computer leaks, attacks, or errors; natural disasters; product or service problems, recalls, delays or tampering, etc.
- **Response Teams** – Once you’ve established crisis categories, you can assign a team and brief them on their potential responsibilities. Each team must include a designated spokesperson for both internal and external communications, a person with special category expertise (i.e. a production specialist for product-related disasters), a PR coordinator and someone with an understanding of the company’s online presence. From here internal and external specialists can be added on the run. A list of such potential resources including home and cell phone numbers should be established and kept current.
- **Keyword Generation** – You can prepare for your online response prior to a disaster occurring by creating lists of potential keywords that might appear during a search for particular kinds of disasters. Your press releases, online video statements, paid advertising and blogs during the crisis can then be optimized for these and more specific terms faster by having keywords identified in advance.

Know the social media sites, chat rooms and directories where potentially damaging material may appear.



- **Optimizing for Benign Keywords** – In some cases you can begin optimizing your current sites, pr, blogs etc., revolving around certain benign keywords that may prove helpful in a future crisis. This will prevent delays in achieving a position on those terms. A packaged cereal company might optimize for “cereal safety” prior to the outbreak. Although there are over a million listings under this search term, when you add a brand name, such as Kellogg in front of it, as someone would when checking during a Kellogg contamination crisis, “Kellogg cereal safety” would already appear in the top ten search results.
- **Pre-plan PPC Campaign Creative** – If your company has the best safety record in your industry, it would be nice to have a PPC campaign on the shelf that says so when a product safety crisis breaks. Added to this would be directions to the official company response, an information hotline and mini-site, blog and/or podcast. If you can, make up likely scenarios in your major categories, develop creative campaigns for an on- and offline response, and test them with a focus group audience. Keep your best campaigns in each category in reserve so you can roll them out at a moment’s notice. There’s little time to do much creative thinking, much less testing, when a crisis breaks.
- **Identify the Social Media Landscape** – Any organization with an active PR program will have a handle on the industry analysts, key reporters, publications and industry bloggers to be reached in a crisis. But it is equally important to know the social media sites, chat rooms and directories where potentially damaging material may appear. A video or videos will undoubtedly show up on YouTube, photos on Flickr and podcasts on iTunes. Take time to see what others facing a crisis have been able to do to blunt negative attacks in these and other social media and prepare a strategy that anticipates rather than simply reacts to negative social buzz. Familiarize staff with social media, establish and circulate written procedures for dealing with unwanted social media attention. And identify outside specialists who can help you in this process.
- **Video B-Roll** – Background video (B-roll) of a company shown during any news commentary can leave a lasting impression about that company. Clean, busy manufacturing facilities; busy, productive employees; R&D with award-winning products; substantial corporate headquarters; an impressive truck fleet – these all make positive statements that can serve as a counterweight to any negative fallout during a crisis. News media stuck with deadlines, decreasing production budgets and an insatiable audience will welcome the footage you provide them. The B-roll will also be helpful in your own online video and video news release responses to a crisis. With good B-roll and little more than some “talking head” spokesperson commentary, a thorough, professional-looking response can be produced in hours rather than days.



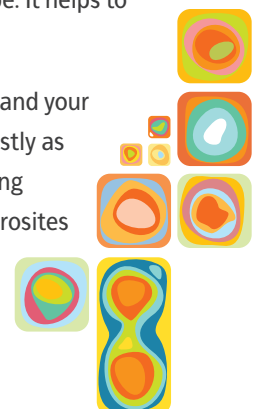


ONLINE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The onset of an actual crisis should trigger the actions of the appropriate crisis team as you make an assessment and develop your response. The team needs to be expanded internally with identified specialists, and where necessary outside vendors immediately brought into the loop. Since it's the quickest to spread and most difficult to control, your online response should be an immediate focus. Specifically, consider the following:

- **Use PPC Ad Campaigns** – These can get you out in front of a crisis. Using appropriate keywords, your PPC listing can appear where most of those searching for details of your crisis are looking. Natural search results cannot. This gives you the opportunity to direct them to sites where you can provide updates on the crisis and what your company is doing about it. You can also perform an appreciated public service by getting those impacted by the crisis to the information and assistance they'll need in the days ahead. This not only goes a long way to counteract more inflammatory stories and images, it allows you a way to track those who accessed your information through the PPC crisis response campaign.
- **Use Online PR** – During a crisis the media is hungry for more. You have the opportunity to stay on top of the news sections by generating content for stories in the form of optimized press releases. Report the company's assessment of the crisis, give a story with links about management's official response, list new mini-sites and resources being set up for those affected, hotline numbers, etc. Include photos and video clips wherever possible. As always, appear to be everywhere. Make key company spokespeople available to traditional media and talk venues, since these appearances will provide online content for social networking sites. Wherever there is a serious critic, provide a contrasting voice. Survey blog content and post responses to inaccurate or unfair commentary.
- **Set Up Microsites and Landing Pages** – Microsites dedicated to information relevant to the crisis provide a way to focus a visitor on the information they have requested. It also allows you to maintain a "business as usual" posture on your main website. Landing pages are another way to provide a gateway to specific information relative to the crisis while presenting only that information vital to their inquiry.
- **Send Video, Early and Often** – Your corporate response to a crisis should start from the top, with a leading management figure issuing a video assessment, including the actions the company is taking, where more information can be found, and where needed, a heartfelt apology. (Yes, run the apology past the legal department, but don't let them water it down to the point that it causes a second crisis.) Use video news releases (VNR's) to supplement your other PR efforts. News outlets that cannot generate their own video may be willing to use these. Also, make sure your videos appear on YouTube and other video networking sites. It's possible that others, perhaps even late night talk shows like Leno and Letterman, have their own, unflattering takes on your crisis appearing on YouTube. It helps to have your own content there for balance.
- **Use Your Other Online Resources** – Email your current mailing list with regular updates on the crisis and your steps to bring it under control. Offer to answer their specific questions, and do so as quickly and honestly as possible. If you have a company or personal blog, get your story out there. If you don't, consider creating one. Add an accompanying video podcast. Optimize your blog and podcast to include links to your microsites and other information sources that you manage or trust. Make your blogs and podcasts personal and to the point. Invite and respond to postings as they too have an online life of their own.

Wherever there is a serious critic, provide a contrasting voice.





TEN CRISIS MANAGEMENT 2.0 BEST PRACTICES


Given the new challenges confronted by social media, here are some essential 2.0 crisis management best practices:

- 1. Scenario planning** – Long before something goes wrong, companies need to assess what all that could go wrong and how they would respond in the new viral environment. The long list of potential crises will soon fall into categories, which will prove useful in responding to actual events.
- 2. Identify and acknowledge the problem** – How big is it, how bad is it, what is being done about it NOW? The faster a company can sum up the problem with accuracy, in one clear voice, the easier it will be to limit the damages. No time for circling the wagons here.
- 3. Recognize and implement actions to remedy the problem** – Look to the past scenario planning, identify appropriate protocols and resources and set a plan into action.
- 4. Communicate meaningful remedies in creative ways** – In a viral world, to have a solution you also need the perception of a solution. This means reaching seekers where and how they look for credible information, with a solution that this audience deems to be acceptable.
- 5. Develop integrated on- and offline strategies** – Consistency is essential during a crisis, particularly as media compete to develop exclusive treatments of a well-publicized disaster. On- and offline media need to complement each other.
- 6. Keep generating online communications to meet ongoing buzz** – Keep the press releases, blog entries, podcast interviews and investor communications going. Communicate that you're on top of the situation.
- 7. Use paid and natural search to keep your message on the first page** – If you need help here, find it. You cannot keep negative stories off the first search pages, but through diligent search marketing you can position a response to these stories nearby.
- 8. Seek prolific allies and links** – The blogosphere can be as much a friend as a foe. Through open access and by providing regular credible content, a company can create valuable allies and links to help them tell their story. But avoid the paid PR blog factories that set up favorable blog posts for a price. In the long run, these can generate more bad publicity than good.
- 9. Monitor buzz constantly and adjust tactics as necessary** – Long after a "solution" has been effected, negative stories will continue circulating. Such is the archiving nature of the web. And unfortunately, "new" content frequently consists of regurgitating the old. Monitoring and where necessary answering the ongoing buzz is essential.
- 10. Learn from the experience** – After a crisis subsides, companies need to revisit their scenario planning with an eye toward what was learned. What worked, what needs fixing and how can the process be improved in the future? Learn from the examples of others.







IMPLEMENTING BEST PRACTICES



Inventory your assets

You have a general idea of what you need to do. Who and what do you have to involve to get that job done? As discussed earlier, this will vary by the crisis and the task. One need will remain constant, however. You will have to have immediate access to a fast-moving online marketing expert with experience in natural, paid and social media. It's never too early to start this research.

Get management approval



Even the preliminary stage of developing a crisis management team requires resources. Since you will be asking considerable time from top management should a crisis occur, they should be part of the initial process of creating a plan. Planning will take time and resources that should be budgeted and approved as well.

Put the right team together

You can start with job titles and resumes, but bottom-line, you need to have a knowledgeable team that will work well together under pressure. This includes on and off-staff resources. A crisis is no time for egos and posturing. Nor is there time to beg supervisors for access to their people. Use your pre-approved management support and when someone has been added to added to your standing team, make sure supervisors know what to expect regarding use of their people during a future crisis.

POST CRISIS FOLLOW-UP

As the dust settles and the first deep breaths are taken, there is still much to do. The long term reputation of your organization and its brand stands in the balance. Consider the following:

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 • **Ongoing Online Press Communication** – The two most lasting impressions of a crisis are the first and the last. You may not be able to control the first time someone experiences your crisis and you cannot define when the crisis is over, but through ongoing updates to the press, you may have major impact on the last impression someone gets. Send updates through press releases, with video where possible, of your organization's progress in addressing the situation. Include stories about people who were affected positively by the solution, the permanent steps taken to prevent a recurrence and an overall assessment of the causes and long term effects of the problem. Post these on your site. Continue to offer access to the media. Offer insights as to what it was like inside the crisis, humanizing your company and your desire to expedite a solution.
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 • **Revisit Your Brand Personality** – Like it or not, this crisis may have changed your marketplace. Maybe your brand's persona needs to change as well. If you've been known as "the bare bones, no-frills airline" and you've had your entire fleet grounded because none of your planes could pass a safety inspection, maybe you should revisit that "bare bones" image. Perhaps, after you've revamped your entire maintenance program, you should revamp the brand as well;

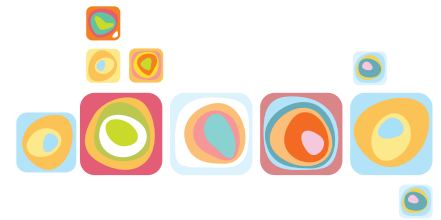


perhaps, “the safe alternative in air travel.” Brands are expensive to build, so major changes should not be made lightly. But the possibility should not be rejected out of hand.

- **Expect Greater Scrutiny, Less Forgiveness** – Taco Bell is an excellent example. They earned a great deal of respect, and scrutiny, for their response to the E.coli contamination. But their equally adept handling of the rat infestation problem has been less well received. The two situations were quite different, but not in the minds of the media, who may now view the problems as symptomatic of the company, and the entire fast food industry for that matter. Be prepared to work harder and faster on your next crisis. Learn from your last disaster – both what you did right and wrong. Don’t be so predictable that your efforts are ignored.
- **Optimize Your Content to Stay Atop the Fallout** – Unlike the traditional press, an online news story has a nearly endless life. By continuing to generate and optimize content regarding your crisis, you can begin to bury the older stories deeper in the search pages. Optimize your website, microsites, press releases, blogs, podcasts, etc. to improve your natural positions on keywords relevant to the crisis. If you need outside help here, find an outside partner with a proven record of integrating SEO, PR and the various social media.

LEVERAGING THE EXPERIENCE

There’s a silver lining in every well-handled disaster. For example:



- By using carefully placed search marketing, you can position your organization as stronger, more attuned with its employees and customers, more prepared for whatever is on the horizon. You are the people who were tested and responded to the challenge.
- Through podcasting, company executives can speak personally and authoritatively about the proactive measures that can be taken to manage a crisis. They position themselves and your company as leaders who future clients will respect and seek out.
- Handled and positioned correctly, you may enjoy classic Tylenol “halo effect.” This refers to the comprehensive product tampering response Tylenol initiated, pulling all their products from the shelves and issuing tamperproof packaging in a sweeping public information campaign that has paid for itself many times over. It identified Tylenol as a company with exceptional concern for the welfare of the public.
- At minimum, a post-crisis analysis should lead to a process that learns from and corrects your mistakes. For example: you now know which employees are the best spokespeople for your company and who should remain silent. No time for egos, here. The goal is a better response in the future.
- Finally, if you’ve responded to the challenge integrating the best viral, Search 2.0 avenues available to you, your organization will be perceived as a leader, attuned to the new realities and opportunities in a changing marketplace. Forward thinking is a valued and saleable commodity.



Common Implementation Mistakes & Their Solutions

Mistakes

Late To Respond

Assess damage
Catch up with paid search campaign
Hold a thorough press briefing
Start speaking engagements
Create hot line and minisite
Return to the initial management plan

Responded Too Soon

Assess damage
Admit errors, correct inaccuracies
Use PR, blogs, minisites, appearances
Launch paid search campaign to give accurate picture
Return to your original plan

Wrong Spokesperson

Assess damage
Identify, brief new spokesperson
Replace old spokesperson's statements with new
Return to original plan

Media Driven Response

Assess damage
Identify/address press inaccuracies
Develop thorough press briefing
Correct record through integrated ad campaign
Create hot line and minisite
Return to the initial management plan

Ending Response Too Soon

Assess damage
Pitch "lessons learned" stories
Create paid search loyalty campaigns
Increase natural search campaigns
Revisit current branding

Solutions

DEVELOP STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS NOW

As we've seen by the above, a crisis is no time to develop a plan. Nor is it an occasion to do a resource assessment.

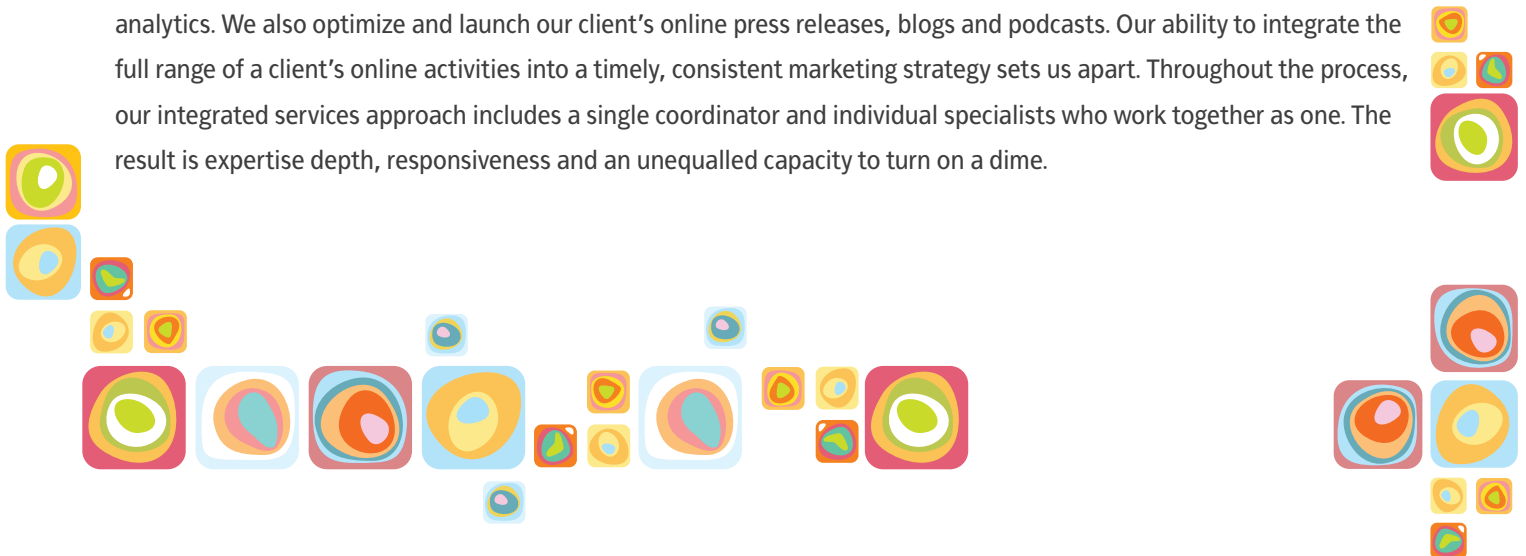
You probably have existing PR assets, either on staff, on retainer or both. The difficulty is matching these to an online response which is effectively integrated into a comprehensive solution. Run a crisis scenario past your PR team and ask for a response plan from them. Keep in mind, theirs is just part of the solution.

Since your greatest communications challenges will occur online, start looking for an online marketing partner today. If you already employ an online marketing firm or have an in-house team, look at their capabilities and turnaround commitment in a time of crisis. Do they have a track record in paid and natural search, social media and optimizing PR? Send them one of your sample scenarios and ask them how they might respond if they got the call on a Sunday evening.

Listen to their answers carefully. Ask how they would integrate their response with your internal and outside PR and crisis management team. For an outside supplier, review their website and printed materials. Does their response jive with the way their products and services are positioned? Would you be dealing with two or more separate entities within their company, and if so, who would be coordinating things on their end? Is it someone who is already familiar with your business, or will it be one or more specialists who'll require a crash course on you and your industry? Generally, you can't afford the latter.

These are not easy questions, particularly when you're considering a change in an otherwise satisfactory supplier. As we see in the headlines almost daily, however, the price of failure in a crisis far outdistances the value of a nicely performing website, brand or ad campaign. Like it or not, it's a new day requiring a new, strategically integrated approach. And in a viral world, the best time to address a crisis is now, before not after it occurs.

At Oneupweb our online marketing services include paid and natural search, social media marketing and conversion analytics. We also optimize and launch our client's online press releases, blogs and podcasts. Our ability to integrate the full range of a client's online activities into a timely, consistent marketing strategy sets us apart. Throughout the process, our integrated services approach includes a single coordinator and individual specialists who work together as one. The result is expertise depth, responsiveness and an unequalled capacity to turn on a dime.



ABOUT ONEUPWEB

Oneupweb is an integrated search marketing firm and has been a trusted leader in online marketing for more than ten years. Named one of the Michigan 50 Companies to Watch in 2006, Oneupweb is the only three-time winner of the prestigious ClickZ Best Search Engine Marketing Vendor Award. Oneupweb shares insight through its research studies, white papers, newsletter articles and StraightUpSearch blog posts in order to help business develop sophisticated online marketing plans, and specifically, natural and paid search campaigns. Our team has been helping marketers gain visibility in search engines since 1996, expanding our capabilities into mobile search marketing, usability, online research, media buying and online creative services.

We encourage you to contact us for information about your organization's specific online opportunities:

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