Facilitator’s Guide

Case Study - Dominos

On Easter Sunday in April 2009, two Domino’s employees who were bored “working in a North Carolina store figured it would be just hilarious to post a video of themselves, defiling sandwich ingredients”. The duo created five videos in total, one of which showed an individual sticking mozzarella cheese up his nose and then blowing the cheese on a sandwich, among other unsanitary and stomach-turning activities. An estimated 1 million people viewed these videos before they were pulled two days later.

During the first 24 hours, Tim McIntyre, Vice President of Corporate Communications, surveyed the situation and determined that the videos were not a hoax. He then began to communicate internally and externally with “relevant audiences at that time including social media people.

McIntyre collaborated with the consumer watchdog organization GoodAsYou.org, which first alerted Domino’s of the employee video, to identify the rogue employees as Kristy Hammond and Michael Setzer. By Tuesday, according to McIntyre, the company was responding to customers’ queries on Twitter about whether the company knew about the situation, what the company was doing, and why the company had not issued an official statement. By Wednesday, Patrick Doyle, President of Domino’s Pizza, recorded an apology that was then uploaded onto YouTube.

Initially, Domino’s relied on its traditional technology (the Internet) to upload a video response on its corporate website to tell the public the truth about the situation. However, the number of people who viewed this video paled in comparison to the number of YouTube viewers who watched the employee prank videos—over one million within 24 hours. This realization accelerated and expedited the implementation of Domino’s social media plan that was still in development.

The 10 best crisis communication practices recommended by expert practitioners are:

1. Process approaches and policy development;
2. Pre-event planning;
3. Partnership with the public;
4. Listen to the public’s concerns and understand the audience;
5. Honesty, candor, and openness;
6. Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources;
7. Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible;
8. Communicate with compassion, concern and empathy;
9. Accept uncertainty and ambiguity; and

Discussion Questions

1. What impact does social media have on public relations practices, particularly crisis communications and reputation management? How significant is it for organizations today to monitor content on social media sites, including hash tags and other signs of internal and external dialogue?
2. How should crisis communications preparedness plans address the proliferation of social media outlets?
3. From the perspective of crisis communicators concerned with social media, what else could Domino’s have done or said to prove with action that its key messages are sincere? What other messages could Domino’s have delivered?
4. What other types of traditional media and social media could Domino’s have used to reach its stakeholders?
5. What other challenges do you think that PR practitioners, marketers, or corporate communicators could have in telling the truth in the digital age?
6. How important is speed of response rate in a digital world, particularly when an organization is facing a crisis situation?
7. Are there any other conclusions that you can draw from this incident?

**FACILITATOR’S DISCUSSION INSIGHTS**

- The only way to combat and lessen the impact of a social media generated crises like what Domino’s experienced is to integrate social media into crisis communication strategies and to create strategies for monitoring social media dialogue.

- Because social media users can instantaneously create visual and textual dialogue with an organization, there is a corresponding expectation that organizations should respond just as quickly throughout all phases of a crisis incident. But taking the time to verify information and craft appropriate and effective responses is necessary to avoid legal issues and other complications.

**The Learning points on Communication**

1. **How often organizations need to communicate with stakeholders:** Regular updates across multiple social media should occur.
2. **How far and wide organizations need to span the boundaries of cyberspace and social media for potential crises and for potential stakeholder groups that can be impacted and affected:** Johnson, Baza, and Chen (2011) conducted a study on boundary spanning, concluding that “organizations should focus on recruiting, attracting, and nurturing those online users with high levels of enduring involvement and social identity,” i.e., highly engaged social media users.
3. **How organizations can manage their online reputations through search engine optimization.**
4. **How new principles and best practices need to be developed to determine what messages or images from which stakeholder groups will tip towards a crisis.**

**Conclusion**

Dominos strategy and decision to fight the crisis’ viral nature using YouTube was the tipping point that allowed the company to use the platform for distributing information back to users” in order to prove itself with action and to communicate with passion, concern and empathy.

“This crisis happened online. It had to be dealt with online.”