Communications

In times of crisis or controversy
Crisis Communications

Gail Plewacki
Executive Communications Director
Minneapolis Public Schools
gplewacki@gmail.com
What is crisis communications?

• Crisis communication is an effort designed to inform the public, while protecting the reputation of the organization and maintaining its public image
Top five things to do to make matters worse

• Lie
• Get the facts wrong
• Minimize the seriousness
• Blame others
• Say nothing (they will fill the void...)

Cheap lessons: learn from others’ mistakes
Sandy Hook shooting

- Lone gunman identified as Adam Lanza
- 20 children killed
- 6 adults killed
- Suspect’s mother among dead
- Gunman took his own life
“Ryan Lanza’s mother Nancy Lanza was shot to death by Ryan at her kindergarten classroom at Sandy Hook Elementary.”
How does this happen?

Do you have information on this developing story? Let us know:
openreporting@huffingtonpost.com
How does this happen?

A law enforcement official speaking on condition of anonymity said investigators believe Lanza attended the school several years ago but **appeared to have no recent connection to the place**. At least one parent said Lanza’s mother was a substitute teacher there. But **her name did not appear on a staff list**. And the law enforcement official said investigators were **unable to establish any connection so far** between her and the school.
This is how it happens

Headline: Shooter Adam Lanza's mother Nancy battled with the Newtown school district

“...She mentioned she wound up home-schooling him because she battled with the school district," explained Marsha Lanza (ex-sister-in-law living in Chicago).
In the end, only the faces mattered...
Top four things to do to make matters worse

• Lie
• Get the facts wrong
• Minimize the seriousness
• Blame others
• Say nothing (they will fill the void...)
Police shoot mentally ill, unarmed man - Sept 2006

• Shooting puts Minneapolis police on defensive – MPR

• Minneapolis police shooting outrages relatives – Star Tribune

• Outside inquiry demanded in shooting by police – Spokesman

• Minneapolis sued over police shooting – Star Tribune
I have an idea; let’s make 2 mistakes in one interview

• "One of the officer’s guns allegedly became part of the struggle and seven rounds were fired (Police Chief Tim Dolan to Star Tribune reporter).” (mistake #1)

• Dolan said there would be a news conference at City Hall tomorrow to discuss the incident. (mistake #2)
Guess who all showed up?
Making matters worse

• Lie

• Get the facts wrong, or something in between

• Minimize the seriousness

• Blame others

• Say nothing
Costly and long-lived

- Dominic Felder's family awarded $2.1M by Minneapolis in wake of police shooting –

*City Pages June 18, 2012*
Sago Mine disaster-2006
Sago Mine disaster-2006
Sago Mine disaster - 2006
Good news

12 miners found alive
Survivors beat odds in W.Va. after 41 hours; one body found
Good news
Governor Joe Manchin

- Was at Sago Baptist Church with family members.
- Heard there is news about the miners.
- Left for the command center to be updated.
- Was approached by reporters and asked if the miners were alive.
Governor Joe Manchin

• Answered, “Miracles do happen.”
  (Later, the governor’s communications director said that what the governor told the reporters was: “I don’t know. I’m heading up there right now to find out what’s going on, but believe in miracles.”)
Unbearable
Unbearable
Making matters worse

- Lie
- Get the facts wrong, horribly wrong
- Minimize the seriousness
- Blame others
- Say nothing
CNN headline

- Blind man and guide dog kicked off plane; 35 passengers follow in support
US Airways

• You can never win a battle against a blind man with a cute dog
Making matters worse

- Lie
- Just plain get it wrong
- Minimize the seriousness
- Blame others
- Say nothing
Big bad county

MN Homelessness: 'Worse than it's ever been'

Homeless family with infant sent packing by Ramsey & Dakota Counties  KARE TV
“Late Wednesday afternoon, Dakota County officials offered temporary housing to the man, his fiancé and their son-- while officials investigate the specifics of their case.”

KARE anchor tag

The cost of a motel room for 3 nights: $150

Being the good guys: priceless
We *didn’t* make matters worse

- Lie
- Get the facts wrong
- Minimize the seriousness
- Blame others
- Say nothing (they *will* fill the void...)
Paving over paradise....

- "Of the 690 people who commented on the plan, only 3 percent supported it. Most of the negative comments centered on the 10-foot-wide paved trail through the park." (Star Tribune, 3/11/15)

- **MINNEAPOLIS (WCCO) —** Controversy has crested over a park in the south metro.

- **Lebanon Hills can do without paving-** By Daily Editorial Board
Paving over paradise....
Bob Matheson Really? this is your plan for this oasis in the city? The park is not a jobs program or a construction project. It is a wild park and should remain that way for future visitors. It would be nice to preserve this for the kids so they do not have to drive way north to see what nature looks like unpaved and raw. Love your slogan, "Forever Wild" why not live up to it!
The seven Dakota County Commissioners are elected officials, and four Commissioners are up for re-election in 2016. Met Council representatives are appointed by the Governor, but elected State Legislators are the body that authorizes funding to Met Council for regional parks.
Paving over paradise....

I'm disgusted by the process and by the ignorant tools that ignored the majority of our wishes. BOO to the Met Council, Dakota County Parks and County Parks Director Steve Sullivan. All involved obviously have too much funding and don't care about a democratic process, let's make sure they don't get reelected.
Paving over paradise....

• More than 500 people signed a petition to stop the paving
• Hundreds showed up at every public information meeting
• Controversy divided the board-plan approved 5-2
Making matters worse

• Lie
• Just plain get it wrong
• Minimize the seriousness
• Blame others
• Say nothing
Importance of public engagement

• History of not clearly defining role of the public
• Too little too late
• Didn’t have representative input
Importance of public engagement

• Careful planning and preparation
• Inclusion and demographic diversity
• Collaboration and shared purpose
• Openness and learning
• Transparency and trust
• Impact and action
• Sustained engagement and participatory culture
Not our fault…

• The less blame you assume, the more they’ll give you
When it’s your fault

• Name it

• Claim it

• Explain it

• ...and tell them what you’re doing to make sure it never happens again
Social media

• Social media is about conversations, creating community, connecting with the audience and building relationships.

• It is not just a broadcast channel or a sales and marketing tool.

• Authenticity, honesty and open dialogue are key.
Social media

• Social media allows you to hear what people say about you and enables you to respond, which you should.

• Social media content should be compelling, useful, relevant and engaging.

So, when does social media really work?
Coke on Facebook
Coke on Facebook

• 94 million likes
• High share rate
• Multiple new posts per day
• Fan driven
• Indirect promotion
• Brand focused
Coke on Facebook—daylight savings time

Don’t think of it as an hour lost. Think of it as an hour we’ve bottled and saved for the fall.

- 85,267 views
- 5,115 likes
- 1,250 shares
Minneapolis Public Schools-Facebook

- 6,622 likes
- 86 people talking about
- Unknown percentage of page fans are district employees or education peers
- Only comments or sharing on this post—13 complaints about middle schools athletics changes
Social media-time commitment

• Should provide multiple postings per day

• Respond to questions within 1 hour
  - users expect round-the-clock support

• Remove inappropriate material immediately

• Facebook analytics are sketchy

• There are risks
Exec to unemployed via Twitter

Justine Sacco
@JustineSacco
CorpComms at IAC. Troublemaker on the side. Also known for my loud laugh.
NYC
Exec to unemployed via Twitter

• Her tweet? On the way to Africa for business:

“...hope I don’t get aids.
Just kidding, I’m white.”
Exec to unemployed via Twitter

• Company response-...the employee in question is unreachable on an international flight, but this is a very serious matter...

• #HasJustineLandedYet

• By the time she landed, her name had been removed from the company website

• She was fired
Exec to unemployed via Twitter

✔️ @lizzwinstead
Hey Justine, Maybe Paula Deen is looking for a communications director.
#HasJustineLandedYet
11:53 PM - 20 Dec 2013

Co-creator of The Daily Show
5 things to make it better

• Be genuine-express sympathy, fear, concern
• Own the message early
• Be transparent and say so
• Put the right face out front
• Plan and train
Question: At the end of this, how many people will have died?
Answer

“More than we can bear………….”
And finally...you just can’t pretend this kind of grace....
Fifth girl to be buried

October 2, 2006: 5 Amish schoolgirls killed
Gunman takes his own life
Gail.plewacki@mpls.k12.mn.us

QUESTIONS?