

# Crisis Management's Real-Time Frontier

## Using New Technology to Secure Critical Data

BY MARY BETH WEST, APR

**Y**ou've probably been there: many tense, tedious months invested to create a crisis preparedness and communications plan that will meet your organization's goals when operational trouble strikes. No stone left unturned. No possibility left unchecked.

Yet when put to the reality test, you find that the absence of reliable, front-line information — what's happening when, where, how, why and to whom — can derail the most strategically crafted plan and render much of it moot. For PR professionals in crisis mode, a panic-filled environment, damaged infrastructure and lack of a decent phone line with an informed person are just some of the limitations to collecting time-critical data.

The only thing more debilitating in a crisis than collecting little or no information when you need it is receiving — and disseminating — inaccurate information. Tension with your media contacts can be the least of your worries if bad information hinders operational activities.

At a time when crisis preparedness stands front and center on the world stage for business and government, senior PR managers can now direct new Internet-based technologies to lead the crisis planning and management effort, arming their organizations with real-time data from the front lines of an emergency scenario.

### The Case for More Investment In Crisis Preparedness

Seasoned PR professionals typically need no further validation for better crisis-recovery resources than lessons learned from their own experience.

And research supports this: A study conducted in 1997 at the Oxford Executive Research Centre revealed that publicly traded companies able to execute disaster recovery plans reduced the initial negative capital impact by 60 percent.

Conversely, companies that could not execute their plans had initial losses equal to 11 percent of business capitalization, followed by an average stock price loss of almost 15 percent, which continued for more than a year following the crisis. In some cases, the fallout can be much worse.

Whether an organization's crisis management success can be correlated to stock performance or other measures — such as lives saved, infrastructure preserved or recovery cost reduced — the effectiveness of most crisis plans must pass much higher scrutiny than was required before Sept. 11, 2001.

From a practical standpoint, even having the proverbial crisis manual lacks real applicability for some professionals. The National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI) surveyed its members in January 2001, with one-third of respondents indicating that they regarded reference manuals as the least important source to turn to when faced with a crisis. Eighty-five percent said the top resource they draw upon in an emergency is communication with their executive team — with voluminous up-to-date contact numbers for all team members representing a key resource.

### New Technology for Business Continuity

For companies that are susceptible to crises with complex operational ramifications affecting numerous people, having the CEO's vacation home on speed-dial serves a limited purpose. And for the PR executive in a time crunch, so does a multivolume three-ring binder.

What may be needed most by the communications department — and across disciplines to other departmental executives as well as employees in the field — is a user-friendly computer interface with Windows-type functionality that uses the Internet to capture, store and disseminate critical details of the crisis, response and recovery. By virtue of its inherent sensitivity, such an information system must always be secure and operational,

even in the event of corporate intranet disruption.

Several technology companies have emerged in recent years that specialize in helping organizations with such complex emergency-management needs.

For example, E-Team, based in Canoga Park, Calif., helped build an Internet-based emergency response system for such clients as the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in preparation for a possible terrorist attack. They also helped the City of Los Angeles' Emergency Preparedness Department prepare for any number of crisis scenarios, including earthquakes.

South Carolina-based E811 is another privately held company that has developed a brand of emergency management technology called IRIS (Internet-Routed Information System), a Web-deployed system uniting field workers with central management in a crisis-information network.

IBM has also developed its own system for such clients as the transportation and safety agencies in the Washington, D.C., area. IBM partners with a number of smaller specialty companies for the D.C. contract to build its full information network. Dubbed Capital Wireless Integrated Network (CapWIN), IBM's system — like E-Team's and E811's — has an information infrastructure comparable to systems used by the military for the battlefield.

The strength of these systems rests in their ability to enable all authorized members of an organization to manage crises of a physical nature (natural disasters, explosions, mechanical accidents, terrorist attacks and the like) rather than letting the chaos of a crisis situation manage the organization, its response and — most relevant to PR professionals — its communications.

With point-and-click desktop applications, these Internet-driven systems enable both senior managers in their offices and field employees in remote locations via laptop or even cellphone to input emergency data immediately as it becomes available.

These systems prevent any authorized employee from being left at the bottom of the information food chain.

### IRIS in the Eye of the Storm

When Hurricane Floyd approached South Carolina in September 1999, the South Carolina Emergency Management Division was already prepared. They had been utilizing E811's IRIS for two years, which helped facilitate recovery from the deadliest U.S. hurricane since 1972, precipitating one of the largest peacetime evacuations in the nation's history.

Tim Murphy, manager of response operations, was part

of the original concept development team for IRIS when the division brought E811 on board in May 1996. Freshwater flood damage represented a large portion of Floyd's multibillion-dollar damage total.

With Floyd, Murphy says, being able to document incoming requests by the affected counties using the software, and being online with the agencies involved, allowed them to keep up with their demand and the workflow.

### Public Relations Takes the Lead

For PR professionals in organizations with large-scale potential for crisis involvement, technologies such as IRIS and CapWIN present a new opportunity for them to lead the preparedness effort in fresh, meaningful ways.

While Internet emergency-management technology has typically been introduced into organizations via information technology departments, PR managers can play a key role for management in identifying the need for such resources and customizing information capabilities for diverse communications needs.

In the process, the PR function can be elevated to a higher level of management involvement. On the PR agency side, directing clients with complex crisis preparedness needs toward such new technologies can bolster the agency-client partnership, especially at the hour when it's needed most.

Tailoring some of a system's capabilities for communication-specific purposes lets PR staff control their access to more information, such as disaster impact on a corporate facility's surrounding community and actions being taken by emergency crews to contain an accident site.

Clearly, such information has major implications for media relations efforts in a crisis. PR managers can gain far greater access to information immediately as actions are taken, without the frustrating limitations of depending solely on word-of-mouth from internal sources and external third parties.

When confusion and unanswered questions are alleviated from within, similar perceptions will be prevented among the media, investors and other critical stakeholders. ■



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