How social media can aid during a crisis

These tips can help school leaders use technology to react to emergencies effectively

All it takes is a quick read of the headlines to recognize the added stress on educators and students as they deal with the potential for violence. Today's news contains a rising number of stories about disruption at our schools—from altercations between staff or students to disastrous events like shootings.

It's important for school leaders to understand basic crisis management principles—and how social media might play a role in the event of a crisis, for better or worse. Here are some tips to keep in mind.

Identify the risks

Technology isn't very useful in mitigating a crisis unless it is part of a larger integrated plan, and the backbone of a good crisis plan is the ability to define potential threats. Administrators should conduct a baseline exercise that takes into account multiple types of crises, including crime, natural disasters, illness, infrastructure failure, and mass events such as terrorism. Review the school's physical location and its inherent risks—a school in California, for example, is more prone to earthquakes than one in the Midwest.

Group the risks into four categories:
• Highly damaging and likely to happen (address these first)
• Minimally damaging, but likely to happen
• Highly damaging, but unlikely to happen
• Minimally damaging and unlikely to happen (address these last)

Categorize employee roles and responsibilities with regard to risks they face—teachers and students will face different risks than cafeteria or office employees. Consider a human asset management program that helps track staff and student locations to identify any missing in the event of an emergency, which can help to direct first responders.

Create a plan and decide the role of technology

Your final, agreed-upon crisis plan should detail step-by-step response protocols, as well as appropriate technologies, resources, and roles for each staff position. This becomes a blueprint for action during a crisis and, as simple as it sounds, it's always comforting to have a written plan amid chaos.

From a technology perspective, the crisis plan should help identify:
• What systems are in place and ready to be called upon in a time of need
• Who can be reached using each type of technology (students, staff, and families)
• Who among the staff knows how to activate the technology

Schools and campuses often work closely with a public safety department or with local police. However, during a crisis, those law enforcement professionals will likely be more focused on defusing the direct threat than alerting students and staff about the proper next steps. This is often where technology can help.

At a school with thousands of students and staff across multiple buildings, the right technology can significantly shorten the time needed to reach everyone with vital emergency information. Many schools have invested in campus-wide text alerts, cell phone messaging systems, and eMail notification programs. Some have even implemented computer override programs that place emergency pop-up alerts on any classroom computer linked to the school's network.

These types of alerts should be used only in crisis situations, with short direct instructions on whether to evacuate or stay put.

Put the plan into action through practice

Schools can't just graft on a security approach and expect it to work. All staff and students must be familiar with the plan. This does not mean simply reviewing a piece of paper, but instead means practicing through testing, drills, and technological troubleshooting.

Faculty need to be made aware of what they are expected to do when an individual becomes dangerous or when weapons are involved, for example, and these procedures should be simple and specific:
• Disengage from the violent individual.
• Keep yourself safe; leave the area if necessary.
• Call police and seek help immediately.

We've found that most violent incidents follow typical patterns of escalation. Being aware of these patterns can help reduce natural panic when a facing a real-life situation. We often compare this to fire drills—people become familiar with what to do when there is no fire, so they can respond via muscle memory if a fire occurs. The goal is to build that same type of innate response for other crisis situations.

Use social media to track a developing crisis

Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are quickly becoming the sources for information on just about anything, especially during a rapidly evolving crisis situation. This sudden and widespread emergence of social media has led to several new challenges. Yet, with the right attitude and management approach, we believe social media offer new and unique opportunities to gain insights into and better manage crisis situations.

Challenges

Increased speed and volume
Social media outlets have created an information flow of much greater velocity and volatility that previously imagined. Twitter and Facebook are more likely to divulge the first inkling of a crisis event than a story on a cable news network. It is important to establish proven, well-organized strategies and tactics that allow for quick, concise responses when needed.

Pervasive inaccuracies
There is no way to monitor the accuracy of information conveyed by social media, and this challenge creates a whole new class of information. In addition to managing the actual crisis, schools must now address fears caused by rumors or false facts due to the common inaccuracies of social media.

Demand for hyper-transparency
A big challenge with social media audiences is that they seem to feel they have a right to know anything and everything about a crisis and the people and organizations behind it. Withholding information or hesitating to update the public risks being seen as a cover-up.

Action steps

Create a "listening post"
A "listening post" is simply a term for the electronic platform used to synthesize news across all types of media, including traditional print, blogs, and Twitter. It is a way to learn what people are saying about a situation in real time. Administrators and faculty can use the following tools to help feed a listening post:
• Google Alerts – eMail reports that track news stories, blogs, and more, based on search keywords.
• Twitter Search and TweetBeep – websites that act like a Google Alert equivalent for Twitter. They monitor discussions occurring in the Twitter realm.
• TweetDeck and Seesmic – desktop applications that allow you to monitor Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, as well as Twitter.
• Social Mention – a search tool that also tracks content from YouTube and Flickr, in addition to Facebook and Twitter.

Social media's speed can help—or hinder—efforts.

Monitor emerging threats
Social media often are used as a place to share thoughts or vent, and diligent monitoring might allow schools to identify emerging problems, spot disgruntled students, or address risks before they become a crisis.

Incorporate social media in crisis planning
Be sure to include a tactic for addressing social media in the school's crisis plan—and stick to it. Through the combined efforts of faculty, the communications team, and outside crisis counselors, schools should be able to address trouble areas, share accurate information, and calm those involved.

Provide the most appropriate solutions
One benefit of monitoring social media is that people tend to convey their true emotions on a subject. This can give school leaders insight on the human aspect of a crisis situation. Administrators get a real-time snapshot about the emotions people are experiencing right now, and they can craft the best support solutions to address those specific concerns.

Evaluate the impact of your response
Establish baselines regarding the number of conversations that typically occur about the school or a situation. Note how many people talk about it, how often, and for how long. This will help leaders quickly gauge the impact of a crisis—through a swift uptick in chatter—as well as the impact of their response. Schools also can track how the tone of conversation changes, be it positively or negatively, throughout a crisis situation, which might influence response tactics.

What if a crisis does occur?

After enacting your school's crisis plan, it's important to implement post-incident assistance programs that provide support and counseling for those affected. Remember, crisis events occur within communities—and the long-term effects, like ripples in a pond, might continue to emerge for weeks or months. Ongoing stress counseling for students and staff can be one of most essential aspects of a comprehensive crisis management plan.

School leaders have a duty to craft the best possible solutions to protect students' safety. Luckily, you have a number of options at your fingertips. Through a thoughtful, integrated approach, schools can foster a safer, healthier learning environment in light of potential crises. **eCN**

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