



Under Attack: Using Social Media to Respond to a Public Relations Crisis

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A guest post by SMB member Doug Tangwall

What if you came into the office and found your organization in the middle of a PR crisis—a controversy with serious repercussions for your customers and your business?

This was the situation described by the communications team of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) at our latest Social Media Breakfast.

Implications for Every Business

“It’s not a matter of *if*, but rather *when* your company will face a crisis,” said Wendy Soucie, co-organizer of the meeting, during her introduction. “So pay close attention to the heated environment in which WEAC was operating. There are lessons here for each and every business.”



The crisis created an emotional and escalating public response, ©2011 WEAC, Used with permission, Photo credit: Bill Hurley

Timeline of a Crisis

Bill Hurley, editor and social media strategist for WEAC, began the presentation by showcasing the events that triggered the crisis, actions taken by his organization, an escalating public response and the mindboggling explosion of social media usage that occurred over the next few days:

Thursday, Feb. 10, 2011 (WEAC Facebook post views: **38,000**)

It was just another day at the office.

Friday, Feb. 11, 2011 (Facebook views: **66,000**)

A bombshell is dropped: Governor Scott Walker shocks WEAC leaders and members with statements made at a press conference on his proposed “Budget Repair Bill.”

Within hours a headline by the Reuters news agency proclaimed, “Wisconsin governor aims to curb state worker unions.”*

A flurry of activity and the mobilization of staff: The communications team goes to work to get out their message, using Facebook, Twitter and the association website, WEAC.org. Hurley explains, “WEAC is the union for state teachers and education support staff, and you can imagine this announcement generated a lot of activity in our offices.”

A heartfelt response sets the stage: Wrapped up in the day’s events, Hurley suddenly realizes there is a news conference with WEAC President Mary Bell at 4:00. He leaves his office to run down the hall. Then he stops, thinking to grab his Flip Camera. The speech that Hurley captured on video was emotional and sincere. It garnered more than 11,000 views and set the tone for an intense battle that would thrust WEAC into the spotlight and redefine its image.

Note: View YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTfy8ZTEjzQ>

“Today the governor took aim at my values and the values of many of our members across the state...He attacked the profession and the professionals we represent by taking away hard-earned benefits and...limiting their rights to a voice...”

Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 12-13, 2011 (Facebook views: **115,000/259,000**)

WEAC develops emergency TV and radio ads: WEAC develops television commercials in conjunction with the national AFL-CIO union and radio advertisements in conjunction with its Greater Wisconsin Committee. WEAC also develops its own radio ads, featuring teacher Kim Hoffman, which begin running across the state the following week.

WEAC launches a cyber-lobbying campaign: 16,000 messages are sent by WEAC members to state legislators over the weekend.

Monday, Feb. 14, 2011 (Facebook views: **423,000**)

“I ♥ UW” march on the Capitol: University of Wisconsin faculty carry signs of protest; 1,000 protestors crowd around the Capitol building.

Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011 (Facebook views: **642,000**)

WEAC, AFL-CIO, AFSCME, SEIU and others continue to inform and to mobilize: 10,000 people encircle the Capitol

Three thousand protestors occupy the inside of the Capitol building around the clock.

Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2011 (Facebook views: **827,000**)

Madison schools close: 20,000 people march on the Capitol square. WEAC is organizing requests for signs and sets up an online events page listing locations, dates and times for other protests being organized across the state.

Overwhelmed with emails: Hurley says, "Social media became the only feasible way in which we could communicate. It was impossible to keep up with the amount of emails coming in. At one point I had to delete a block of about 800 emails. Teachers from other states were asking how they could help. We told people to 'like' our Facebook page, follow the news there and provide words of support to our members who felt they were under attack from the governor and Republican legislators."

Thursday, Feb. 17, 2011

Schools across the state close: 25,000 people march on the Capitol square.

Twitter provides inside information: "Because of the noise level in the Capitol, it was often impossible to talk on cell phones. With its broad reach and immediacy, social media became the best source of news from 'inside the dome,'" says Hurley.



Social media became the primary source of news from within the Capitol, ©2011 WEAC, used with permission, Photo credit: Bill Hurley

Friday, Feb. 18, 2011

Democratic senators flee the state to prevent a quick vote on the controversial bill: 40,000 people march on the Capitol square. (Author's note: On this day, I attended the protest with my children, where another social media success story was emerging. Learn how [local restaurant Ian's Pizza took orders from more than 60 countries during this turbulent time.](#))

Saturday, Feb. 19, 2011

More than 70,000 protest.

Sunday-Friday, Feb. 20-25, 2011

The protests continue.

Other twists and turns occurred during this week, such as the release of a recorded phone conversation between Governor Walker and someone pretending to be billionaire David Koch.

Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 26-27, 2011

More than 100,000 protestors march outside the state Capitol on Saturday.

WEAC creates or retweets 141 Twitter posts on Sunday.

Reliance on Social Media Leads to Ongoing Engagement

“A transformation was occurring over those two weeks,” says Marlena Deutch, WEAC communications specialist. “Most of our audience is middle aged or older. They were casually interested and used social media to look at pictures of their grandkids. But when they needed information quickly, they learned how to use these tools overnight. Teachers began sharing WEAC messages and created their own social spirals with family, friends and colleagues, using tools such as Facebook and text messaging.”

And WEAC members were not only viewing posts, they were getting involved with the content. Facebook interactions—a measure which counts likes and comments climbed from 62 in January to 26,000 in February, 34,000 in March and the organization has collected a cumulative 9-month total of 108,000 since the start of the crisis.

Hurley says, “Our members became engaged during the crisis, and they have remained engaged. Our Twitter stream averaged over 1,000 clicks per day during February and we’ve had more than 20 million Facebook post views since Governor Walker’s press conference. Our website page views climbed from just over 100,000 in January to more than 1 million in February. On February 14, we had 143,000 page views in one day!”

WEAC staff created an activities page to help members locate events in their local communities. This became used and referenced as a reliable resource for media as well, garnering 60,000 views on its own. WEAC communications staff used Flip Cams and iMovie to create 47 videos for a [YouTube channel](#) and added another 34 from local videographers and other sources.

Lessons Learned

Hurley offers the following advice: 1) Be ready. 2) Set up your Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts, and know how to use them. 3) Be familiar with your camera and know how to upload images. 4) Cross-train everyone.

Deutch says their social media policies made it easier to react and to decide whether to delete posts from “trolls.” She says, “As a mother with children in school, I found it unbelievable to see some of the things people posted on our Facebook wall. Sometimes, I had to take a moment because it was so emotional, and we were operating in shifts and conversing on social media 18 hours per day.”

Deutch promotes Twitter as a great tool during a crisis of this nature. “Tweet, tweet and retweet,” she advises, but cautions. “Inevitably, you will post something that’s not accurate. I strive for complete transparency, so I corrected and explained any misinformation as soon as I learned about it. Over time, local news sites started listing the WEAC Twitter and Facebook pages as a reputable source of information and WEAC itself became viewed as a kind of source for news.”

Media Relations Officer Christina Brey says she used social media to develop relationships with reporters for traditional media sources. “I could target media in the Capitol and tell them a teacher from Waukesha was available for interview. Over time, they would contact me via social media for help with news stories.”

Brey recommends using smart-phone-based audio recording applications, and editing tools like Audacity. “In the right context, audio can be as powerful as video and deliver immediate, credible information” she advises.

Finally, Brey says she discovered that social media can be used to pinpoint relevant and highly targeted information, for example, to reach nontraditional media, such as community-based bloggers, or for news specific to a region or locale.

Conclusion OR What Does A Public Relations Crisis Have in Common with a Computer Meltdown?

I ran across this seemingly unrelated Slideshare presentation by John Allspaw, [Outages, Post-Mortem and Human Error 101](#), describing strategies for preventing, managing and learning from computer crashes. Although written in “techy” language, I found striking similarities between our situation and the patterns that emerge for a team struggling to get a critical computer system back online. Consider these patterns:

Crisis...

...forces us beyond learned roles,

...requires actions with consequences that are both important and difficult to see,

...is cognitively and perceptively noisy, and

...has a coordinative load that increases exponentially.

I think a number of parallels can be drawn for responding to a PR crisis...

1. **It is necessary to have strong teamwork and dedication** to prevent outages as your staff adapt to roles that extend beyond their typical job descriptions.
2. **Define policies, plans, roles and escalation procedures** to remove a layer of questions and to increase focus and the ability to adapt to the murky, time-sensitive nature of a PR crisis, as well as to react to the important and sometimes unexpected consequences of actions taken in response to the situation.
3. **Social media are excellent tools to use in noisy and time-sensitive situations** where reach and access to information are critical.
4. **Coordinate immediately, respond quickly, tell your side of the story and manage negative emotions** as these activities will all become more difficult as computer circuits overload (literally and figuratively).
5. **Be transparent, correct errors and apologize, if necessary**, to provide a human face and to position your organization as a credible source of information.
6. **Use a “post-mortem” analysis to learn and improve.**

The crisis has already facilitated layoffs at WEAC. And this month marks the launch of efforts to recall Governor Walker, with a rally drawing 40,000 already held at the state Capitol, so it may not be long before this social media team once again finds itself in crisis mode—but this time they'll have a little more experience under their belts.

About the author: Doug Tangwall is president of [End Result Marketing](#), a nurture marketing and social media company based in Madison, Wisconsin, that enables businesses to gain a competitive advantage by educating and engaging customers.

**The author and Social Media Breakfast-Madison take no formal stance on political issues. Our goal is to describe and learn from the events in a business and social media perspective.*