

# Handling a Public Crisis

*What Role Does the Media and Social Media Play?*

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*“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”*

-Warren Buffet



# What Crisis Communications IS NOT:

- ▶ **Is not** all about “spin” control.
- ▶ **Is not** making a negative event appear positive.
- ▶ **Is not** one-way communication.
- ▶ **Is not** communicating solely with external audiences.

*Discussion: What is crisis communication?*

**In the Simplest Terms...**

**A crisis is when you simply  
can not do business as usual.**



# The Five Truths of Crisis Communication

- 1) Crisis communication training is **essential**.
- 2) Focus on **transparent** and **honest** communication.
- 3) Crises are **inevitable**; preparing for crises is **critical**.
- 4) The **culture** of a workplace matters.
- 5) Put yourself in the **stakeholders' positions**.

***Discussion:** Are there “truths” that are especially relevant to your office environment?*

# Types of Crises Municipalities May Face

- ▶ Natural disasters
- ▶ Management or employee misconduct
- ▶ Technical or service breakdowns
- ▶ Human error
- ▶ Workplace disruption
- ▶ Random violence

*Discussion: Have you ever had to face one or more of these head-on?*

*What did you do?*

# Case Study: Hurricane Sandy

- ▶ Hurricane Sandy swept through the East Coast of the U.S. in late October of 2012.
- ▶ Media reported on the storm several days before it struck the East Coast, giving elected officials and government leaders a platform to discuss what they were doing to prepare for the storm.
- ▶ **The real lesson:** Many crises occur *without* advance warning, making it essential to have strong crisis plans in place, and to practice your response.



<http://www.wjla.com/articles/2012/10/pepco-bge-prepare-for-hurricane-sandy-81450.html>

# Preparing for Crises

- ▶ Brainstorm potential **crises**; **rehearse responses**.
- ▶ Assemble a **crisis response team**.
- ▶ Identify a **spokesperson(s)**.
- ▶ Distinguish **clear roles** for crisis management team.
- ▶ Develop **key messages** for various audiences.
- ▶ **Consider** what folks need to know; residents, employees, etc.

*Discussion: Have you had to put together a crisis response team? How did you create the team?*

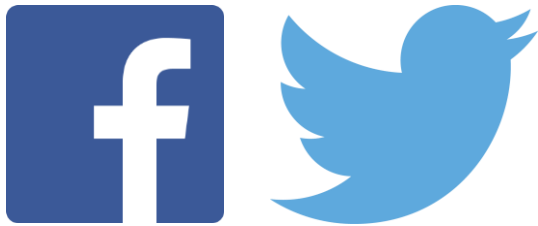


# The Media's Role in a Crisis

- ▶ There is always a chance that elected officials, and county or municipal managers will be **thrust into the media spotlight** during a crisis.
- ▶ **Media training for senior officials is essential** to successful messaging during a crisis.
- ▶ Be prepared by having a **crisis management plan** and make sure it includes a role for media and message management.

# Role of Social Media in Crisis Management

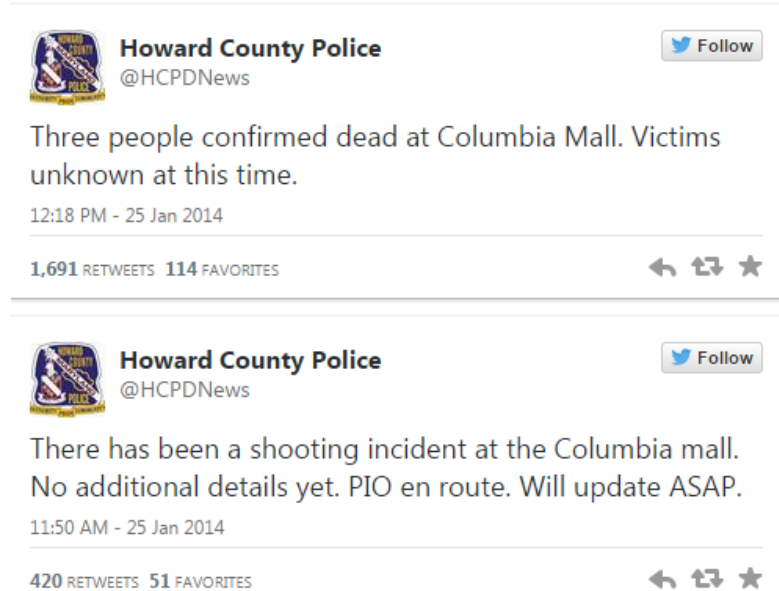
- ▶ Social media is **essential** for responding to publics in a crisis.
- ▶ Either be **proactive** and lead the way, or be reactive and chase the spread of misinformation.
- ▶ **Twitter** and **Facebook** are used most frequently.
- ▶ **Tweet** credible, accurate information during a crisis; use hashtags to monitor discussions and respond rapidly.



# Why Crisis Communication Efforts Fail

- ▶ Lack of planning.
- ▶ Denial or no comment.
- ▶ Not anticipating reactions from various publics.
- ▶ Attempting to shift blame or attention.
- ▶ Sending out mixed or inaccurate messages.
- ▶ Ineffective media relations.

# Case Study: Columbia Mall Shooting



- ▶ On a Saturday in January of 2014, a gunman entered Columbia Mall and fatally shot two store employees.
- ▶ Howard County Police Department used Twitter to keep the media and public updated with information.
- ▶ Department's Twitter following **grew** from 5,000 to 20,000 in 24 hours. *(Today, 31,000-plus!)*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_fyeQ1lgp0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_fyeQ1lgp0)

# Case Study: Felon Escapes from Hospital

- ▶ In March of 2015, Wossen Assaye, a violent felon, escaped from a **northern Virginia** hospital.
- ▶ Assaye was apprehended when a woman saw a picture of him on **social media**.
- ▶ Crossed state line; **every locality in his path was potential “ground zero”** for next phase of crisis; covered 100% by media.
- ▶ <http://www.nbcwashington.com/video/#!/news/local/Wossen-Assaye--Alleged-Bicycle-Bandit--Back-in-Custody-After-8-Hour-Manhunt/298223261>



# Case Study: Swine Flu School Closings



- ▶ In the spring of 2009, schools in Montgomery County – and across the U.S. – began closing in response to confirmed cases of the swine flu among students.
- ▶ After nearly two weeks of school closings, the Superintendent capitalized on the media’s attention to pressure federal health officials to reopen the schools.

# Leadership Scandals: Reputations at Risk

## ▶ **Toronto Mayor Rob Ford:**

- ▶ Admitted to smoking crack cocaine after months of media attention.
- ▶ Eventually, Toronto Council voted to transfer Ford's powers and budget to Deputy Mayor.

## ▶ **Prince George's County Executive Jack Johnson:**

- ▶ Former PG County Executive charged in connection to a corruption case.
- ▶ The arrest drew national attention and left constituents shaken, and the next county executive had to work hard to restore the damage to the County's reputation.

## ▶ **Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell:**

- ▶ Former Virginia Governor faced corruption charges in connection with lavish gifts and large loans from a wealthy Richmond area businessman.
- ▶ Convicted and jailed; ethics laws under scrutiny.

# Cities and Towns Under Fire: *From Smoldering Crisis... to Lingering Crisis*

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rzC2koKnmg>





# Questions? Follow-ups After Today?

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