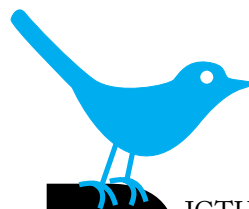
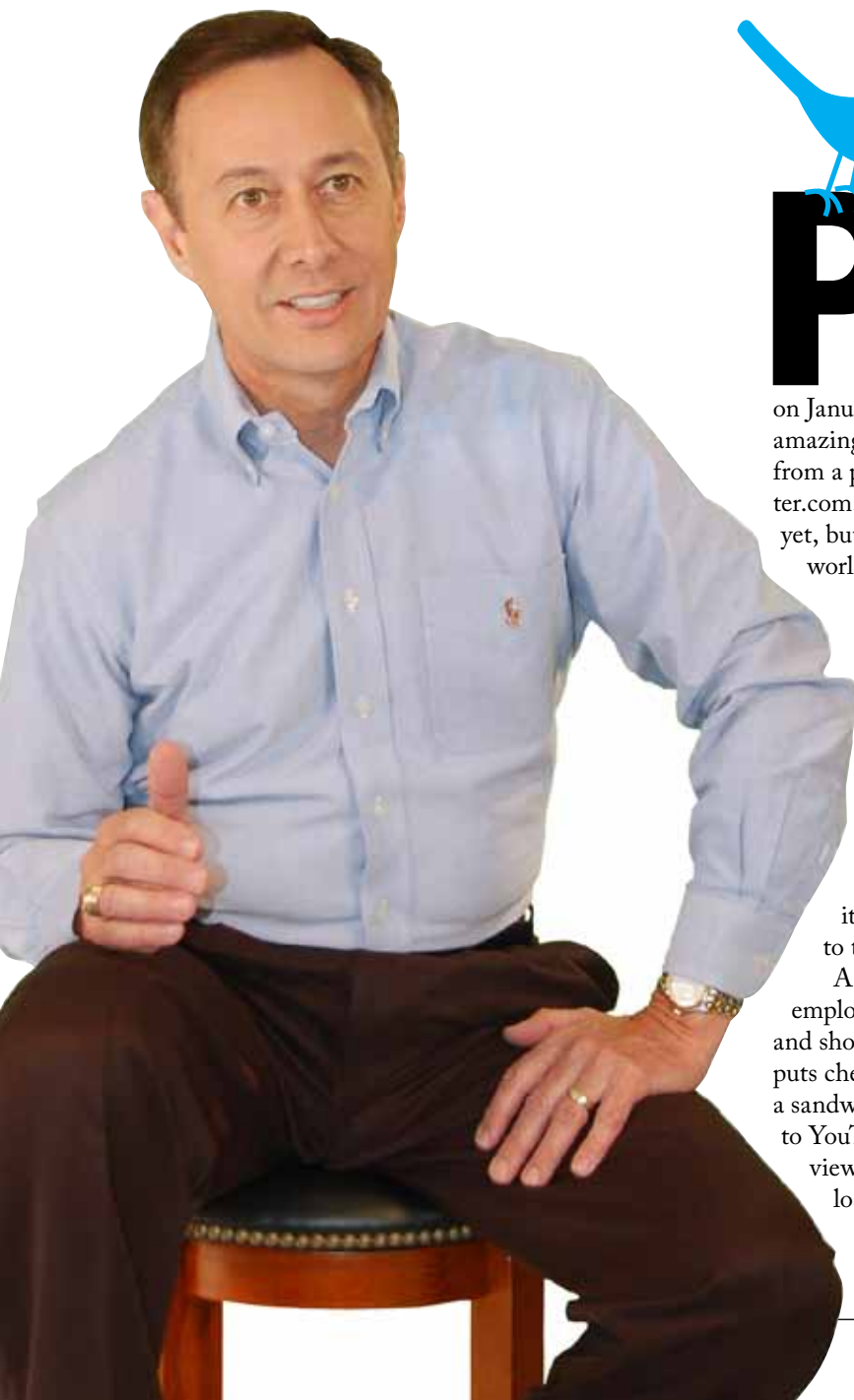


SOCIAL MEDIA WHEN "IT" HITS THE FAN

Effective Communications
in Critical Times

by Gerard Braud



PICTURE THIS: YOU are in the heart of the media capitol of the world, New York City. Every television network and major publication in the world has a reporter there. Yet when US Airways 1549 makes an emergency landing in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009, the first image used to report this amazing story comes not from the major media, but from a photo taken on a cell phone and posted to Twitter.com. The airline doesn't even know what happened yet, but the cell phone photographer is informing the world.

Now consider this: As a crazed gunman kills 30 people on the Virginia Tech campus on April 16, 2007, a student using his cell phone records video as 26 shots are fired. He instantaneously uploads the video as a CNN i-report, taking the world and the media into the heart of the tragedy, going where no reporter can go. Even though the crazed gunman has already murdered 2 students, 2 hours earlier, Virginia Tech has not yet issued its first statement, yet CNN has exclusive access to the new shooting as it happens.

And then there is Easter 2009, when bored employees at Domino's Pizza use a pocket size point and shoot camera to record a video, as one of them puts cheese in his nose, before putting the cheese on a sandwich he is making. They then post the video to YouTube.com, where more than a million people view it in 48 hours. Millions of sales are being lost as people view the video in disgust. At first, Domino's doesn't know the video exists. When they do find out, they wait 3 days before they

issue a statement and begin damage control.

These are all examples of social media when “it” hits the fan. What is frightening is that so many leaders in so many companies are oblivious to social media, its reach and its dangerous impact. As a result, leaders are making flawed decisions during crises, especially when it comes to effective communications at critical times.

What leaders don’t know about social media represents one of the greatest generation gaps in corporate history. While Gen X & Gen Y employees post comments, pictures and video to social media sites, often via their cell phones, older employees – especially leaders – seem oblivious to the far reaching impact of these tools and trends.

Over the past year I’ve tracked this disturbing trend during a series of keynote speeches to organizational leaders. Here are my questions and the responses received.

- When asked how many use LinkedIn.com, 10% - 20% usually say yes.
- When asked how many use Facebook.com, 10% usually say yes.
- When asked how many have watched a video on YouTube.com, 25% usually say yes.
- When asked how many have ever posted a video to YouTube.com, the response drops to about 2%.
- When asked how many use Twitter.com, the response is usually 0-1%.

I then ask, “how many of you have no idea what I just said and what I’m talking about?”, to which most hands go up and there is an uproarious laugh.

Each of the above mentioned websites allows anyone with a computer, camera or cell phone to post a variety of comments, pictures and videos to the internet at the speed of light. And during a crisis, the impact can be catastrophic.

As a crisis communications expert, I’m disturbed by what leaders don’t know and what they don’t know they don’t know. It is even more disturbing to hear leaders dismiss social media tools as trivial, narcissistic fluff. Warning: That trivial narcissistic fluff can take you down and cost you millions. Would anyone care to calculate how much money Domino’s lost in sales after the cheese in the nose video was posted to the web, then reported by media across the country?

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So what should leaders do? Here are 3 suggestions:

1 First, when “it” hits the fan, every organization should be ready to respond within one hour or less of the onset of the crisis. This should be non-negotiable, agreed upon by all leaders in all business sectors.

The reality I witness in most organizations is leadership debating whether to issue a statement with each new crisis, leadership listening to lawyers who make antiquated suggestions to say nothing, and leaders who then ask for a draft statement, to which they spend countless hours wordsmithing sentences and debating semantics before issuing.

2 Secondly, every company should have a crisis communications plan that contains more than 50 pre-written, pre-approved statements that can be given to the media, employees and posted to the web in the early hours of a crisis. The document should exceed being a list of standard operating procedures, but should be an action plan that dictates specific actions, in chronological order, designed to speed communications and decision making. A great plan can be written and implemented for under \$10,000 and can save you millions with a single use.

3 Thirdly, leaders need to become familiar with social media tools, learn to respect them and surround themselves with trusted advisors who know and use these tools.

Communications tools are taking exponential leaps every 18 months and leaders must know what the tools and dangers are, especially when “it” hits the fan. ■

Gerard Braud is known as the guy to call when “it” hits the fan. He is widely regarded as an expert in crisis communications and media relations. He has appeared on television more than 5,000 times and has been quoted in more than 500 publications around the world. Additional resources are available at www.braudcommunications.com.