

Testing the team

Building upon the communication matrix highlighted in the previous issue, **Regina Phelps** describes the best way to organise an exercise to test how all the processes work

COMMUNICATION EXERCISES CAN BE organised just for the communication team, or as part of a larger incident management team exercise. Whoever the exercise is aimed at, however, it is best to begin by sitting down with the team to determine what team members want to get out of the experience. This conversation will help you to develop the specific exercise objectives, which you can then design the exercise around. For example, if the team is interested in validating its communication matrix and new templates (as was discussed in my article in *CRJ* 8:1), your objectives might look like this:

- Assess the ability of the communication team to develop timely communication;
- Validate the communication matrix: stakeholders, owners, and tools. Note areas for improvement;
- Utilise the new communication templates. Assess tools and process for timeliness. Note areas for improvement; and
- Assess the ability of the team to monitor and respond to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Digg. Note areas for improvement.

Once you have designed the communication objectives, the next step is to select an exercise narrative. This should involve creating a realistic scenario that will deliver the results you are looking for in the objectives. In order to provide the best exercise for the communication team, the event selected should be public enough to create issues that may affect the company's reputation and brand (both internally and externally), and one that will also create media interest in the story.

Social media

One important aspect of the exercise is the actual simulation. To achieve the objectives, the exercise will need to be fully-simulated in order to push the team to respond in real time. Two things will make it feel realistic to the participants, the first being that a simulation team should be used for interaction with the communication team. The simulation team can act as the media, the investor community and other key stakeholders, giving the communication team people that it has to consider and talk to. Live media injects should be planned, to force

the team to respond to these inputs. This can include radio broadcasts, television (ie, video) clips, newspaper or web articles, Facebook and Twitter feeds, blogs, or any other social media outlets that may be applicable to you.

In recent times, social media has exploded as a means of communication. Often a company's employees will be tweeting and posting on Facebook before members of the communication team know what has hit them, so the use of social media injects is a great opportunity to get the communication team really involved.

Furthermore, observing how the team responds to social media inputs is a very useful aspect of response to explore in an exercise.

If responding to social media is something you want to work on, develop a whole series of injects using Facebook postings or tweets on the topic at hand. If you do not follow these social media sites regularly, you should sign up and see what people say about other companies, especially when there is a big public issue. It is useful to note the tone, quality, and content of those messages and when creating these inputs for your exercise, feel free to span the gamut of comments from polite to snarky, and somewhere in between. Then, dummy-up Facebook posts or tweets on paper and give them to the team as exercise injects.

This is excellent practise for those participating in the exercise to decide what to respond to, what to not respond to, what



Picfive / Dreamstime

takes practise to provide enough information in 140 characters or less – the length of a standard SMS message. Although these should already be in the pre-approved templates, modification may be required. A goal in any exercise would be to have the communication team develop and send SMS messages to employees taking part in the exercise.

Next, is the company website message. How are updates posted on the company website? Which team makes the changes? If a dummy webpage can be set up, it is very useful to change the page to reflect the company's status during the exercise. If that isn't possible, ask the team to develop the message and then post it on a status board in the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC).

In addition, a formal press release should be developed for the exercise, either in response to media enquiries or just as a matter of course. This release should be developed, approved through the agreed-upon channels, and distributed to the team in the exercise. Having pre-approved press release templates speeds up the process.

Finally, a press conference is an excellent conclusion to any exercise. The pre-identified company spokesperson gets up before a group of 'reporters' to read the company statement and then takes questions. The simulation team – people who the players have been interacting

communication team for the inside scoop.

It is important to develop numerous social media postings during the exercise and post these messages on the communication status board in the exercise so everyone can see what you are developing in real time.

Another area not to be overlooked is that of the client message. What are the main messages to clients? What are the talking points for sales staff and client-facing call centres? Review your communication matrix, which should already have communication owners and tools spelled out. Develop several client messages during the exercise and deploy to the business units that would use them to ensure that they are getting what they need. If you don't provide the talking points, clients are likely to make up a story themselves – not an ideal solution for customer communication. Post all client messages on the communication status board in the EOC.

If you are a publically-traded company, sometimes you need to get a message out to investors rapidly. This is usually an integrated response between your investor relations, legal and senior management departments. Timeliness is important, so use pre-designed templates and modify them in the exercise. Assess their effectiveness and post in the EOC.

Throughout any exercise, or real emergency, it is important to remember the qualities of good communication during an emergency, which can be summed up in four key points:

- Show concern and demonstrate compassion;
- Be transparent and forthright in all your communication;
- Co-operate with all responders; and
- Show resolve to overcome the situation and get back to some semblance of normality.

However, even if these points are adhered to but are not carried out in timely manner, they will not achieve the type of results that the company is looking for after a major incident.

Work with your team in advance to develop plans and tools, then exercise the team regularly to produce the communication results that you desire.

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with all exercise – make great reporters. Ask each of them to have a few questions ready about different aspects of the exercise. After the spokesperson delivers the statement, the reporters can spring into action, asking all types of questions. This is good training for the spokesperson and, if possible, the proceedings should be recorded on video so the spokesperson can see his or her performance for their own personal development.

As noted earlier, social media skills are really important and getting on top of this social media information fountain is critical. Although many media outlets now scan employees' Facebook pages and tweets (and other similar sites) for information, ideally, you want those media sources to be looking to your

to say, and how to say it – and to practise doing so in 140 characters or less.

There are a variety of specific exercise deliverables you might want to have your team come up with. This list would, of course, be developed as part of creating the exercise objectives. At a minimum, I would suggest the activities listed below as part of your communication exercise.

The first is an employee hotline message, which is a very reliable form of personnel communication used by many companies to disseminate information. Staff call a number, which is usually free, to find out simple information (ie whether the office is closed or open, etc) and basic employee instructions.

A good way to exercise this is to set up a dummy voice mailbox to act as the hotline during the exercise. The message is developed and then recorded, so everyone taking part in the exercise can dial in and hear what has been recorded. Taking this further, it is useful for the team to actually record the message as well as to prepare it (it is a good idea to use a dummy voice mailbox so you aren't changing the information on the real hotline, thereby avoiding a potential *War of the Worlds* situation if someone not in the exercise were to hear the message).

The next activity is to harness employee text messages. If using a notification system, SMS might be the best and most reliable method of communication after a regional disaster. But it

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