

Crisis Communication Videos – What Works, What Doesn't, and Why

By Steve Mack

In the YouTube age video has become an increasingly common medium for corporate communication. Since video conveys much more emotion and personality than other media, companies are using video to strengthen the bonds they have with employees, investors, customers, the news media, and the public. In addition, an increasing number of organizations are now using video to communicate in crisis situations, including:

- ◆ Communicating economic and business issues that impact employees, investors, and customers.
- ◆ Damage control communication to customers in response to internal problems and errors.
- ◆ Disaster communication to the public and news media.

In a crisis, how well issues are addressed is very important to the long term success of both the executive delivering the message and the organization.

There are several elements that make video different from written communication. Video is powerful because it emphasizes many of the same qualities of an in-person interaction. Here are three guidelines for using video effectively.

- ◆ First, use personal words and phrases. Unlike memos that use stiff and impersonal phrases, video requires more amiable messaging. Avoid corporate speak.
- ◆ Second, use voice inflection to convey passion and sincerity. You don't need to cry or break down to show that you have emotion, but you do need to show human qualities to connect with the viewer.
- ◆ Third, address the audience directly, showing them respect. Just as you don't talk about someone in the third person in front of them, you also don't do this in an online video message.

Let's take a look at four examples of how companies used video to communicate with the public over course of the past few months. In some cases, these organizations used video to enhance their image. In others, video may have only made things worse.

A TALE OF TWO AIRLINES

Two recent examples from airlines show good and bad video usage by CEOs to address crisis situations. The irony is that in a positive situation, the CEO came across poorly at the press conference, while a negative event was followed by a very effective CEO video message.

Last year jetBlue Airways had an awful day. A huge scheduling glitch grounded most of their planes and left many passengers stranded in airports. jetBlue CEO David Neeleman reached out to his customers and the public with a YouTube video message that conveyed his sincere desire to fix the issues that caused the problem. A lot of viewer comments on YouTube mentioned the respect his message conveyed for jetBlue customers. As well, several comments noted that the tone of his message was consistent with jetBlue messaging over the past several years.

The next example is from the recent US Airways “Miracle on the Hudson”, in which a crash landing resulted in no fatalities. Immediately following the incident the company CEO, Doug Parker, addressed the press. Unfortunately, Parker came across with no emotion as he literally read a dry memo. It’s no wonder that Parker was criticized for coming across “wooden”. He could have brought in some energy to the press conference to play off of the emotion of the heroic landing. He and US Airways lost an opportunity to build good will with the public and they lost an opportunity to further inspire their employees.



Two different airlines,
two different executives,
and two very different outcomes
using video.

David Neeleman from jetBlue (left) and
Doug Parker from US Airways (right)



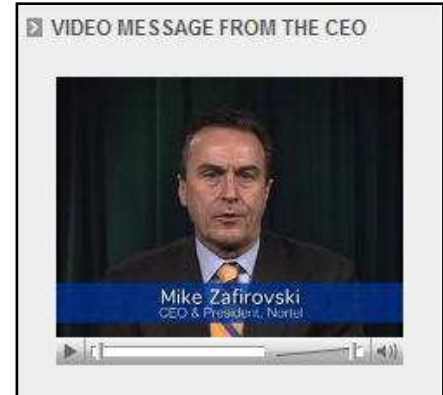
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r_Plg7EAUw

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Db-sR2Boqq>

An airplane crash is certainly an unpredictable event. While a company's leaders can't control where or when disaster will occur, they do need to be able to quickly and effectively address the situation. Just as meticulous training and preparation for air emergencies enabled the US Airways pilot and crew to save every passenger on that airplane, all executives should plan for worst case scenarios and be just as prepared to communicate with their employees and with the public.

NORTEL BANKRUPT BOTH ON THE BALANCE SHEET AND IN CEO MESSAGING

Our next example may be an illustration of how not to use video. In mid-January Nortel announced that it does not have the financial means to stay solvent. In a video posted on Nortel's website, CEO Mike Zafirovski addresses the company's Chapter 11 financial restructuring. Zafirovski reads from a teleprompter (just as JetBlue CEO Neeleman did) but Zafirovski conveys no emotion and comes across unsympathetic.



<http://www.nortel.com/corporate/restructuring.html>

In my view, the video communicates that this CEO lacks the leadership skills needed to guide his organization to better days. Not only could Nortel have saved some money by not doing the video message—it may prove to worsen their image.

THE BEST HOLIDAY VIDEO EVER

I'd like to leave you with a final example of a very effective corporate video. In December 2008, First Round Capital posted a holiday message on YouTube. The five-minute piece is a string of clips showing dancing employees from First Round Capital's network of partner companies. It proves simple in its message that happiness can still exist in tough economic times.



Employees Dancing in the First Round Capital Holiday Video

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU_5P3GLWv4

This video message got over 50,000 views on YouTube, a 5-star rating, and a lot of positive viewer comments. Not too shabby for a low-end production—proving that you don't have to break the bank to use video effectively.

About the author:

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