Rumors and Misinformation:

Dispelling Myths and Creating Trust During Emergency Situations

everbridge

Introduction

In the past, organizations learned and shared information about an event through traditional methods – notifications from law enforcement, news media, and manual call trees to seek information from and to share information with contacts in an impacted area. But in a modern, digital world, how do we learn about a crisis? Interestingly, social media has become an efficient, real-time news source used by organizations around the globe; in many cases, even images on the evening news are being sourced from social media.

Proactive sharing of information has its benefits, but it isn't always a good thing. In fact, it can lead to rumors and misinformation that can potentially make a situation much worse. To prevent this from happening, it is important that you understand how to take ownership over the flow of information, and control speculation, gossip, and untruths before they damage your reputation, or worse, put people at risk.

How Do Rumors Get Started?

In general, the more serious an emergency or event, the more interest and demand for information. This desire to know what is happening, or has happened, often leads to rumors. As a rumor travels, and touches more and more people, it spirals out of control and gets further away from the facts. The Internet has contributed greatly to the number of rumors that are spread, because social platforms, especially blogs, have made it possible for anyone to look like a credible news source.

Rumors also get started due to the limited amount of time we generally have to react to a critical event. In such a situation, cognitive disruption is likely, which could lead people to believe information that they would not have otherwise believed under normal circumstances. With limited access to facts and a limited ability to verify information, rumors are likely to take hold.

Even the news can contribute to rumors and misinformation. For example, when Malaysia Airlines MH370 went missing, numerous channels had pilots and other aviation experts on to speculate about what may have happened—sources that appeared "official" but could only offer speculation about the current situation.

The narrative tendencies of people are another factor that leads to rumors and misinformation. As humans, our natural desire is to finish a story even when we don't have the facts. So, if we have partial information about an emergency or critical event, there is a tendency for us to fill in the blanks.

Why Does Controlling Misinformation Matter?

Perception is reality, and if people have incorrect information—even without malicious intentions—there can be very real consequences. Rumors can cost you time, resources, money, and in extreme circumstances, potentially lives.

"The bottom line is, even when they have wrong information or they've been told the wrong information, and whether a rumor is just simply a communication breakdown, or if it's a malicious rumor that's been started, that perception is the reality," explains communication expert Dr. Robert Chandler. "It can have very real consequences."

Effective communication planning needs to account for rumors, and the possibility that they could escalate the seriousness of a critical event.

Prevent Sequences from Causing Rumors and Misinformation

In an emergency situation, you need to take into account any sequences in your flow of information about an event. For example, if you have a telephone calling tree where five managers relay information to company executives, there is the chance the some information gets misconstrued in the communication path. People add and forget information in these sequences, and people who receive the information can forget certain details. Once the wrong information gets into the sequence it becomes misinformation, and can eventually start a rumor.

"People add things; people drop things; people forget things, and the more complex the network, the more likely it is that there is going to be these kind of communication problems," says Chandler.

Misinformation caused by sequences can occur with an email chain, telephone chain, calling tree, or any other type of communication path. Critical communication systems can help reduce the risk of rumors and misinformation starting this way, as these solutions can communicate targeted messages to large audiences, reducing the number of sequences required to notify people about an emergency event. If you can send your message directly without putting it through a sequence, you can help avoid the potential for misinformation and rumors.

Account for Formal and Informal Channels of Communication

When looking to prevent rumors, take into account your formal and informal channels of communication. Formal channels are those that you have great control over, and include your critical communication system, and your organizational chart. Meanwhile, informal channels of communication are more volatile, such as social media, and water cooler conversations.

You can control rumors through your formal channels of communication by proactively sending out information—this information needs to be trustworthy, transparent, and honest.

Controlling misinformation and rumors through your informal channels is much more time intensive. You need to be able to monitor internal rumors, while keeping an eye on the local news, social media, and forums for user-generated content, including blogs. Just one message that has misinformation can destroy trust in your organization, so you need to be sure that critical communication processes are in place to prevent bad information from getting to your contacts.

Be Honest and Transparent

If you're in a position to alert people about a critical event, appearing trustworthy, transparent, and honest is important. In the event that there is misinformation and rumors being spread, having a positive reputation often gives you the benefit of the doubt in the eyes of message recipients. Your official statements will often trump and eradicate those that are false. If, on the other hand, you withhold information from your contacts—and are found to have done so—you not only damage your reputation in the near-term, but it may be even more difficult for you to control rumors in the future.

Organizations often have reasons for wanting to withhold information from employees or the public. You may by afraid to share information because you fear it may cause a panic. But panic generally occurs when people are left unknown or information is hidden from them; the reaction to information that is shared will be much more positive than the discovery that you withheld information that could have helped people in an emergency. Keeping information from people actually contributes to greater hysteria, especially if it keeps people from feeling like they fully understand the risk of a given situation. In addition, a lack of information makes people much more likely to fill in the blanks with their own ideas.

Remember that information has a limited shelf life, which is why the timeliness of the information in your messages is critical.

Avoid Inconsistencies and Subjectivity in Your Messages

When sending messages through your formal channels about critical events, you need to be sure that the messages are coordinated, consistent, and mutually reinforcing. The exact words in a message may differ based on the role and responsibility of the recipient. However, even with distinct messages, you'll want to be sure the information is consistent, as any inconsistencies could be cause of rumors and confusion.

Ensure that your messages are consistent by providing proper training on message construction, supportive technology systems, and communication processes for the people who are sending them out. In addition to this training, the most important factor when trying to avoid inconsistencies is providing message senders with accurate information—even if that means letting them know what information is *not* currently known. Confirm that what you are conveying is factual, so that you don't risk sending out something that may not be true, and then a later correction, which can hurt your credibility. Finally, provide facts without subjective interpretation. Reading into the facts about an event can create incorrect conclusions, and could become rumors.

Keep Your Messages Simple

In an emergency or crisis event, your contacts will likely experience stress, that can impact or diminish their capacities; they won't respond as if they were under normal circumstances. This is extremely important to remember, and it should play a large role in how you construct your messages about an event. When constructing a message, you need to be sure it is appropriate for all audiences. It should be free of jargon and be clear. Dr. Chandler's 3-30-30 rule can be really helpful when constructing a message: include no more than three message points, deliver three short sentences, and keep the important content in the first 30 words. By following this simple guideline, you can make sure that your point is clear, which could help prevent rumors and misinformation.

> ### *Chandler's 3-3-30 Rule*
>
> - 3 message points
> - 3 short sentences
> - 30 words of key content

Don't Fret over Trivial Rumors

With a high impact emergency or event, it's unlikely that you'll be able to prevent every rumor. If rumors are serious enough, whether through their content, reach, or impact, you probably have to respond to them with factual information. Threats to lives or business operations, of course, need to be addressed. However, if there are small, trivial rumors, it may be a better decision to just ignore them, and put your focus on getting accurate, timely information about the situation to your contacts.

Differentiating between a serious rumor and a trivial rumor requires judgment. It may be helpful to have some preventive process in place so you know what rumors are necessary to address, and which can be overlooked. Being proactive is always important. When a potentially damaging rumor comes to light, you want to have processes already in place to handle them, as opposed to coming up with a plan on the spot. The longer you take to suppress a rumor, the more damage it can do.

Establish Credibility

For your messages to be effective, you need to establish credibility with your contacts. One way to accomplish this is to limit the number of sources you use for communications. For example, it may be best to have press releases, incident notification messages, statements on your websites, and other communications come from the same person. If people see that reliable information is coming from the same source during emergency events, they will begin to develop a level of trust with that source.

Two-way communication with message recipients and impacted parties can also help build your credibility, as you are making your contacts feel as though they are part of the process. If people can pen a line of communication with you, it will help establish you as a reliable source.

Finally, establish credibility by being accountable. When you make a mistake, admit it. Your contacts will be much more responsive if you take accountability for a mistake as opposed to brushing it off and pretending it didn't happen. Becoming a credible source to your audience is critical for preventing rumors, because your contacts will look to you for the truth before giving weight to information from other sources.

Know that Social Media is a Double-Edged Sword

The emergence of social media has greatly impacted how we consume information, and how rumors are spread. The speed by which rumors can spread and circulate has drastically increased; a single person can publish a social media posting that can be seen by thousands of people in a matter of seconds. While social media can exacerbate the spread of misinformation, it can also prove to be a beneficial tool. You can use social media to post an official view, as well as respond publically to and correct inaccuracies or questions. Monitoring social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, either manually or through a monitoring tool, gives you the chance to understand what is being posted and discussed before it gains traction. Knowing what's out there is part of controlling rumors and misinformation. Social media platforms can help you understand public sentiment, as well as address it directly.

Prevent Rumors with Critical Communication

If not handled properly, rumors can cause a significant amount of damage. Whether they put lives in danger, damage your reputation, or cause financial losses, the impact of rumors can be very real, and stopping them from spreading is essential. A critical communication system allows you to communicate with your contacts quickly, via multiple paths, including email, SMS, voice calls, push notification, and social media, getting in front of rumors and ensuring that your message is received. The faster you're able to get accurate, timely information to your contacts, the better chance you have of preventing the spread of misinformation. By supporting two-way communication with contacts, through polling and solicited and unsolicited message response, you develop rapport and establish trust.

A critical communication system also helps you manage the bandwidth needed for disseminating and controlling information, freeing up important personnel so that you can keep operations moving forward, instead of trying to combat misinformation.

Finally, a critical communication system helps prevent information from getting misconstrued along the way. By eliminating sequences and call trees, you reduce the chance that facts might be distorted or omitted as the message passes from person to person.

According to Dr. Chandler, it takes three positive messages to counteract one negative message; with a critical communication system in place, you can deliver positive messages about emergency situations, by providing contacts with accurate information as soon as it is available. When you're able to get the right message, to the right person, at the right time, you can provide your contacts with the information they need, and prevent the spread of rumors and misinformation.

About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

- **Assessment**: When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.

- **Response**: In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.

- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

Visit **www.everbridge.com** to learn more.