



AUDIENCE**CENTRAL**

White Paper

**“Keep on Talking -- And Other Lessons
Learned from Crisis Web Sites”**

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www.audiencecentral.com

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What is the life of a crisis? Judging by current practice, most communicators today believe that a crisis comes and goes quickly and that once the news cameras have focused attention on the next big story, their job is done.

However, an analysis of web traffic following some of the past year’s most significant crises shows this thinking may need to be adjusted. A Delaware oil spill, the grounding of a ship and rescue accident in Alaska, a tragic refinery accident in Texas, and the near-sinking of the world’s newest and largest drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico all provide clear indication that interest in a major event lingers long after the cable channels have gone on to explore the latest celebrity criminal trial or White House controversy.

Each of these incidents used the PIER System as the web and communications platform for crisis communications so the analysis is based on an apples-to-apples comparison of site traffic. Because the PIER web system also enables and encourages interactive communication such as registering to receive updates, submitting questions, and completing audience survey forms, these sites may be more active than traditional sites not designed for crisis communications. Nevertheless, they provide perhaps the first snapshot available of audience activities during and after a major public crisis.

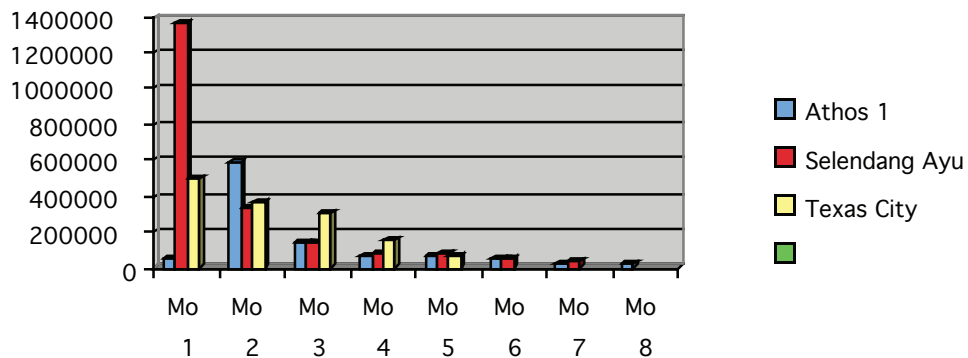


Chart 1: Initial incident website traffic and lingering traffic.
 Note: numbers reflect “hits” which should be divided by six to get an approximate number of site visits.

Eight months after the *Selendang Ayu*, a Malaysian freighter carrying soybeans, lost power and went aground in Alaska, monthly traffic on the US Coast Guard’s special incident site still registered 32,000 hits or approximately 5000 site visits. Three months after the incident, 140,000 hits were still being registered and 75,000 hits five months after the incident. The incident received extensive national exposure due to the loss of six lives during the rescue effort and the compelling video of the rescue that was served to the media and the public through the incident web system. The Coast Guard’s PIER System not only provided the media with the information and images they needed to tell the story, but also facilitated family members from nations around the world to inquire directly to the Coast Guard about the status of their loved ones.

This pattern of continuing web traffic is seen in other high profile incidents. In March 2005, the BP Texas City refinery experienced a devastating fire in which 15 contractor employees were killed and a total of 170 injured. Web traffic

on the PIER site was not as high for this incident as others such as BP's Thunder Horse platform incident following Hurricane Dennis. This was due in part to the use of the corporate site that received some of the traffic, but was then redirected to the incident site (a PIER site). However, web traffic stayed at a high level for an extended period of time after the accident only substantially dropping off in the fifth month.

On November 26, 2004 the oil tanker *Athos I* experienced a problem and 265,000 gallons of oil was released into the Delaware River. The crisis site launched by the US Coast Guard received 600,000 hits in late November and December while providing over thirty media releases and 33 digital images. In January, there were still 150,000 hits registered and in February there were about 75,000 hits. The Coast Guard, widely considered the federal agency with the best reputation for providing public information, continued to communicate with the website visitors providing updates of information into June of 2005.

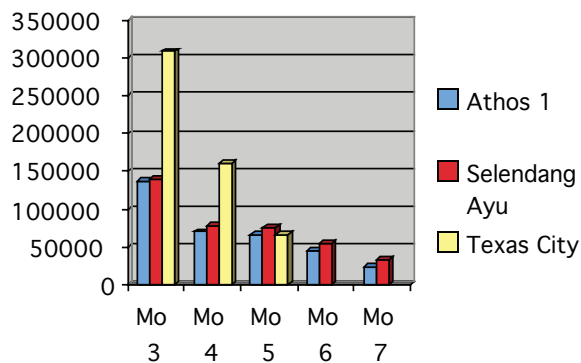


Chart 2: Site traffic in months following a high profile incident. Traffic in months three through seven.

In July 2005, Hurricane Dennis ripped through the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in the emergency evacuation and subsequent near-sinking of the world's largest production-drilling-quarters (PDQ) platform still under construction. BP, 75% owner of the Thunder Horse platform, launched a PIER crisis site immediately and provided dramatic visual images of the listing platform. When a Unified Command involving the US Coast Guard was established, rather than setting up a separate public information site for the incident, the Coast Guard public affairs personnel worked with BP to create a Joint Information Center site with their initial crisis site as the basis. Because the Coast Guard is a major user of PIER, the integration of their communication team with BP was seamless and the "virtual JIC" concept was proved with communicators from various offices and parts of the country participating in the communication response.

The Thunder Horse site received approximately six million hits in that first month—an exceptionally high volume considering that because it was not a producing platform there was no spill and no real threat of environmental damage. Hits were encountered on two different PIER sites used for the incident; one was a BP launched site specific to the event and the other a US Coast Guard District 8 site that was used until the Joint Information Center was established. Because BP was using PIER, the same system employed by the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Public Information Officer opted to participate on the company site which became the JIC site.

One likely reason for the heavy volume was the provisioning of high quality overflight videos provided by the US Coast Guard. Much of the traffic was tracked to visitor's server locations which were dominated by energy industry centers – Houston, Tulsa, Dallas and New York. The Thunder Horse PDQ platform is immense and the video dramatically presented its scale as well as the 20% list that was threatening to topple the gigantic facility. After the Joint Information Center was disbanded, the site was made private and unavailable to the public. At that time, the site was still experiencing approximately 2000 page loads per day with over 500 unique visitors coming to the site each day—with most of those being new visitors checking out the site for the first time.

While communicators dealing with a disaster or crisis may not be interested in driving traffic by placing compelling images or video on their crisis sites, a more important reason may be to counter misinformation. Shortly after the Thunder Horse situation was made public through the news media, a photo of a badly listing oil platform was distrib-

uted via Associated Press. Listing to at least 36 degrees it was apparent the platform was near sinking. The problem was that it wasn't Thunder Horse. The photo distributed and widely viewed in traditional media was likely the Petrobras P-36 platform that did sink in March 2001 following an explosion that killed ten workers. Thunder Horse maximum list was 20 degrees. The blogsite www.resourceinvestor.com pointed this problem out on July 14, 2005 noting how such misinformation would have an impact on share prices. The fact that investors as well as the interested public could visit the Thunder Horse site directly and see the platform including the video helped dispel some of the misinformation coming from both non-traditional media and traditional media.

Lessons for communicators

The opportunity to study web traffic during high visibility public incidents when using crisis site technology enables us to learn more about what drives audiences, what their expectations are and the best strategies to enhance or protect reputations. Here are a few key lessons from an analysis of these sites:

- 1) The web is gaining ground as a primary means of incident communication
- 2) Audiences diminish but highly interested audiences linger for months
- 3) Visuals and drama drive web traffic
- 4) Opportunities for continuing and transitional communication are frequently missed

Web is gaining ground

Most crisis communicators still consider their primary role to be to provide information to reporters. In a crisis response most effort is aimed at preparing information for the media for them to distribute via their channels such as newspapers, radio, television and internet news sites. What is frequently missed with this traditional mode of thinking is that the communicators themselves have a direct channel – their website – that audiences are using. Further, these audiences expect this channel will provide the best and most up-to-date information. In fact, when audiences become aware that these sites are available, they make it their first choice for information about the incident. Frequently, it is the traditional media's news sites that direct viewers to the incident site. This means that the communicators operating the incident site perform the function of reporters, editors and publishers/broadcasters. They, in effect, are the broadcasters. While they are not the only broadcaster of information about the event, the expectation is that their news should be the more current and accurate.

While some in crisis communications understand that the information world is undergoing this massive shift and are beginning to adopt the role of "broadcaster," many do not understand this. They continue to view their role as providing information to the media and they use their sites not as public information tools as much as media information tools. Recent site usage indicates that it will only be a matter of time before more communicators and the executives or incident commanders who direct them realize that they need to adopt the role, methods and thinking of the media when using crisis sites. They need to understand that whether they intend it or not, they are the source of news that more and more viewers go to for information first. How well they perform this new and unusual role of "broadcaster" will likely determine the public's confidence and trust in them and the organization they represent.

The audience diminishes but a highly interested audience lingers

Patterns of viewing are emerging as we learn more about the use of crisis websites. While audiences do diminish over time, they do not diminish nearly as quickly as expected and in fact, substantial audiences often remain for months after an incident has left the front pages. The fact that communicators too often ignore this is another indication that they are operating in the old paradigm of providing media information rather than responding to an audience seeking them out specifically and directly. They seem to think that a crisis is over when the reporters stop calling, yet viewers visiting the site for information may be as large as many small daily newspapers.

Opportunities to transition

With the new crisis website technology now available, contact lists are built and maintained very easily as part of the communication process. In most of the incidents listed above, visitors to the site added their names to the mailing list and received the updates of information in email form. Depending on the situation, these interested visitors as well as site visitors can be communicated with as the crisis is resolved. In some situations, communicators may want to invite

them to continue to receive information from the company or the organization. When a crisis site is removed, there should be an opportunity provided to transition to the main organizational website with final incident updates being offered on that site. There are opportunities to provide important messages to this interested audience that too often seem to be ignored in the understandable urgency to end the crisis and get back to normal life.

Video, compelling visuals and drama impact traffic

This is not news to professional news reporters, but it is something those in public affairs and crisis communications need to consider. Both the *Selendang Ayu* and the Thunder Horse platform site experienced very heavy traffic. Both offered compelling video. In the case of *Selendang Ayu*, the video provided was of the rescue helicopter picking up survivors shortly before the crash that killed six ship crew members. In the case of Thunder Horse, the video was of helicopter overflights that dramatically showed the listing platform and visually showed its massive scale as little else could do. The video provided via these sites was widely distributed through national and international media coverage with frequent links provided directly to the site as is now common in traditional media.

In September of 2005, despite all the media attention focused on Hurricane Katrina, the Coast Guard public affairs office in Alaska posted a video on their site of the rescue of football legend Larry Czonka. It effectively served the video to numerous news outlets who played it on air, but the traffic absolutely skyrocketed when Sports Illustrated ran a story on the rescue and published a link to the Coast Guard website. Within days thousands of viewers had downloaded the 67 megabyte video file.

Traditional thinking about crisis communications may lead to the conclusion that it would be wise to keep video or compelling still images off the site in order to minimize site traffic. There are two problems with this. The first is in a Joint Information Center scenario, where the agencies involved may push strongly for providing the best possible information including videos and images. And second, the images provided may help counter reporting errors and intentional misinformation that is becoming more common in the internet-driven news and information world.

The Coast Guard was the common denominator in both the *Selendang Ayu* communication and Thunder Horse. The Coast Guard has a well deserved and highly respected reputation for excellence in public communication in part because of their goal as public communicators to be the first and best source of information in incidents where they are involved. In short, unlike most other agencies and private organizations, the Coast Guard public affairs staff are trained to think like broadcasters. They invariably think first about what the interested public wants and how they can provide it for them.

While BP was the controlling owner of the Thunder Horse platform and very quickly launched a crisis site to communicate with the public about it, the Coast Guard participated in the site content through the formation of a Joint Information Center. This is standard procedure in multi-agency responses and is mandated by the Department of Homeland Security. BP was fortunate to have employed the same public information technology as the Coast Guard which enabled them to efficiently collaborate in providing the public information. But it was Coast Guard footage from a Coast Guard helicopter that was uploaded to the Thunder Horse site and the Coast Guard incident commander working the response would have ultimate authority as to what was posted on the site and what was not. That is a reality for companies involved in Incident Command System responses and when the Joint Information Center concept is employed.

The world of public information is changing rapidly. Websites specific to high profile incidents are demonstrating how audiences today are getting their information and how their expectations are changing. Communicators, particularly those involved in the challenging work of crisis communications, need to be continually aware of these changes, adopt new strategies and help prepare the executives they support with the technologies and updated strategies needed to support their organization's mission.