

Pandemic Flu Communications:

How to Prepare for a Crisis in a Web 2.0 World

BY STEPHEN L. DAVIDOW AND GERALD BARON



ap wide world photos

Concern about a potential widespread pandemic flu outbreak has been the subject of public health discussions as well as blockbuster movies in recent years. Experts agree that preparation is important, but the question is when and where this will occur and how severe the epidemic will be. The current H1N1 Influenza A (also known as swine flu) outbreak gives PR professionals an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate their unique value in the advent of a public health crisis.

We need to be prepared. In 1918, the Spanish flu killed anywhere from 70 to 100 million people worldwide. At that time, approximately a third of the world's population of 1.6 billion people became infected. Imagine the impact today if one-third of the world's 6.7 billion people became infected and there was a similar proportion of deaths.

- How would that change the way your organization does business?
- What would it mean to your organizational model?
- What would it mean to your employees?
- How would it affect your communications to stakeholders?

The emergence of the H1N1 virus this past April serves as a warning for professional communicators. Although many people felt that initial news coverage and government announcements from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were overly alarming, the agencies' actions were prudent and based on sound scientific and medical evidence. They followed their plans. While this year's H1N1 virus hasn't been nearly as lethal as the 1918 Spanish flu, it deserves our careful attention.

From outbreak to global pandemic

On May 12, we conducted a PRSA teleseminar on pandemic flu communications. According to the CDC, at that time there were only 3,009 confirmed cases of the virus and

three deaths in the United States, and according to the WHO, there was a total of 5,231 confirmed cases of the virus and 61 deaths worldwide.

Two months later, as of July 17, there were 40,617 confirmed cases and 263 deaths in the United States. And there were 94,512 confirmed cases and 429 deaths worldwide. On June 11, the WHO classified the H1N1 outbreak as a global pandemic. On July 8, the organization also reported that three patients with H1N1 were resistant to Tamiflu, the antiviral drug identified as the primary way to prevent the spread of the virus and treat those who have been infected. It's an important development because there is no other vaccine currently available.

This timeline shows that the spread of this disease is unpredictable. Communicators must do everything that they can to make sure that their organizations are prepared.



Members of the media congregate outside the Metropark Hotel in Hong Kong. Guests and staff were allowed to leave the building after spending a week in quarantine due to swine flu fears last May.

Preparation is the strategy

An editorial in the April 30 issue of *The Economist* concludes, "[E]ven if this flu turns out to be less frightening than feared, it is only a matter of time before a deadlier one comes along. A drill today will help spare millions of lives in the future."

If the flu becomes more virulent in the fall and winter, like the Spanish flu was in 1918, then will you and your company be ready to keep your stakeholders informed about the effects on your organization?

Get ready

Now is the time to get ready for a more serious outbreak. The following 10 tips can help you prepare — not only for a resurgence of H1N1, but also for other potential crises:

1. Update your plan — Use the current situation as a test. You should evaluate what works and what doesn't work. The outbreak this spring revealed that many people's IT systems and Web sites couldn't handle the increased traffic. Consider your contact lists, approval processes, internal and external communications and social media tools. Once you've completed your assessment, adjust your plan to ensure that you're prepared for the real thing.

2. Connect and coordinate with others — Depending on your industry, get to know your counterparts at area hospitals, local government offices, public health departments, evacuation centers, police and fire departments, Red Cross centers, suppliers and the media. Obtain a list of e-mail addresses, cell phone numbers and landline numbers. During a crisis is not the time to start trying to make connections and build relationships.

3. Create dark sites and social distancing, which public health officials encourage during disease outbreaks to slow the spread of the infection — Make sure that you already have dark Web sites prepared to go live in the event of a crisis, and that you have anticipated the necessary information that stakeholders will need. Use technology that allows you to keep the information on your site up to date — whether it's links from the CDC, the WHO or other sites that regularly provide updated reports.

Work with IT to ensure that your employees can work virtually and remotely — also enabling your communications team to collaborate. Most mass-casualty disaster plans include the establishment of joint information or operations centers (JIC/JOC). If a widespread lethal epidemic occurs, then public health officials may call for "social distancing," which would mean that IT infrastructure, or "virtual JIC" technology will be needed to ensure that people continue to work together from different sites.

4. Act quickly or be left behind — A regular news cycle no longer exists. The media reports information as it is

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released. And if it needs to be corrected or updated, then they do it at a later time. You must quickly operate at Twitter speed, manage the information flow and ensure accuracy. The CDC, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and local agencies are effectively using Twitter to provide updates.

5. Communicate constantly — You need to be ready to use both traditional and social channels to reach employees and as many stakeholders as possible. News releases are no longer the most effective means of communication during a crisis. Audiences expect frequent Twitter-length updates. If you don't have any updates to provide, then let your stakeholders know that. It's vital to keep your Web site current and functioning because when other communications technology fails, the Web is resilient and accessible — especially with the expansion of smart phones.

6. Monitor news and information — Given how quickly rumors and misinformation spread with traditional and social media, continuous monitoring is essential. Early on during the H1N1 outbreak, people stopped eating pork because they thought that eating "swine" might spread the virus. You need to be seen as a credible source of information. As rumors and misinformation continue to flourish, you need to track, evaluate and respond on an ongoing basis.

7. Be prepared to manage interactivity — In today's environment, audiences expect answers to questions, and they expect them quickly. Make these answers public to avoid having to respond to the same question multiple times. You should post a policy on the frequency and timing of updates and then stick to that. Use your Web site as the primary organizational response mechanism. Some agencies estimate that they receive two-thirds fewer phone calls because they provide continuous updates through their Web sites. This approach can help reduce the strain on communications staffs in times of crisis.

8. Communicate clearly and openly — Transparency and honesty are the best methods, even if the news is grim. Telling people what you do and do not know is reassuring. Use existing expert sources, such as the CDC, which provides links and content that you can customize for specific audiences.

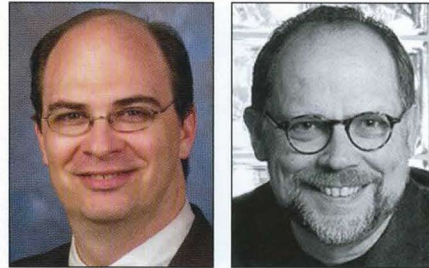
9. Provide and maintain perspective — You need to strike a balance between unwarranted panic and a lack of concern. If you don't communicate strongly enough, then people could lose their lives. But if you are excessive, then you'll lose credibility. It's in your best interest, your organization's best interest and the best interest of the public to provide perspective.

10. Support your team — In times of crisis, communicators are on the front lines. Make sure that you've trained your team and given them the skills that they need to cope with the stress. And, when it's time to take action, make sure that they have time for rest and breaks to reduce fatigue and burnout.

The H1N1 pandemic is a watershed moment in crisis communications. It is the first Web 2.0 global health issue. It also demonstrated a significant shift in where the public obtains its information. A study by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released May 6 showed that the public found the Internet to be the most useful source of

information on H1N1 above all other media, including TV and newspapers.

Although traditional coverage of the outbreak has waned, the public's interest has not. This means that you need to continually monitor the situation and communicate to your audiences, especially given that the number of infections and deaths continues to rise. ■



Stephen L. Davidow (*left*) is president of Davidow Communications, Inc., and works with clients to plan for mass-casualty disasters and other crises. Details: www.davidowcommunications.com.

Gerald Baron is founder of PIER Systems and author of crisisblogger.com. For more information about the PIER System or PIER Strategic Services, please visit www.piersystems.com.