

# 4-2 Reaching Your Audience Quickly

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**9/25/2014**

The most successful companies will or have already experienced some form of crisis throughout their existence. Having an effective communications and crisis response plan is essential before an incident happens because it could determine the future of the company while protecting its image. During a crisis however, there are many audiences that influence decisions ranging from customers, the news media and the management team of the company. Customers are audience members that are considered to be the life of any business. Therefore, if ever a problem arises there must be a continuity plan or to be redirected to a call center (if available) announcing the awareness of the temporary crisis (Ready, 2014). The News Media are brought in to create press releases and report highly escalated incidents. Also, with the advent of social media and Web 3.0, customers are using more than just word of mouth to provide feedback based on an experience dealing with a company. Studies show that the scale and reach of social media makes it easier to boast or complain about a company to their friends and family (Lewis, 2012). Due to the timeliness of the information spread on social media, it is pertinent that the main stakeholders (management team) respond rapidly to the customer. The management team is another audience member that responds to issues that are clearly understood and documented (Ready, 2013). They would also take advantage of social media to reach out to customers; however, some companies still haven't caught up with the more expedient nature of responding to an emergency situation.

I serve as a Guest Response Agent for a company called Donnelly Communications. We are a third-party call center for multimillion dollar businesses and corporations across the country. Out of these businesses include food establishments such as Sonic Drive-In, Steak and Shake, Checkers/Rally's, Quiznos and more. As agents, we also handle crisis response cases from car maintenance companies such as National Tire and Battery (NTB), Midas, and

Merchant's Tire. My job is to gather the details related to any incidents, pleasant or unsatisfactory (over the phone) and report them to the corporate headquarters of the company for resolution. The customers' feedback is important to ensure that their public relations doesn't deteriorate the company or appear as if they don't care about the needs of their customers. Some guests, for example, would call stating that there was a cockroach in their chili or the service at their participating location was poor while others would state that their car oil drained after getting service done at a car maintenance shop. Since we don't work for these companies directly, we are severely limited to the amount of information that we can provide to the guest including follow up time, conflict resolutions and direct numbers to corporate representatives. This is unfortunate and can serve as a challenge because people look for quick results to their problems and don't desire to wait for a call.

For quality and assurance, the crisis calls are recorded and the window of response time is usually one to two business days. If we follow the prompts of the call as documented and read the cue cards to the customers with emergencies, we could comfort them until they can get a response by a person of authority. The reports are usually forwarded to upper level management (usually the District Manager) of the surrounding area who would determine whether the case can be resolved at store level or not. In very specific cases where the customer threatens to file a class action lawsuit, we as agents could escalate the complaint, which shortens the response time for the customer to receive a follow up call. This is another challenge because it creates bias in whose call would be of higher priority than others. Furthermore, many customers could experience similar situations that require immediate assistance as well. However, since each report is filed and resolved on an individual basis, the company could receive multiple scenarios relating to the same incident. For example, Sonic drive-in and Chili's recently created a policy

restricting customers with visible firearms from receiving service at their establishments. This was a decision made in an effort to reduce or eliminate an uncomfortable atmosphere at its locations (Hallman, 2014). This incident also got media attention as explained earlier to inform more people about the policy. Customers were furious and felt that Sonic violated their second amendment privileges for their right the bare arms. Multiple calls and reports were made but Sonic was slow to respond or provide a follow up to these customers.

All of the clients we work for don't have an online platform where customer's can share their experiences directly and get a response without filing a formal report through our call center. A site such as Yelp.com or various forms of social media is where customers can share their experience with friends and influence future business for the company. However, by then it is usually too late to retain business from these furious customers. Therefore, during a crisis, these companies should have a more active social media presence. Having a good social media presence creates a unique and efficient way to defend their brand and reputation (Lewis, 2012). Corporations can also report their guidelines along with pricing and policy information for customers to be informed of ahead of time. Research has shown that keeping customers and stakeholders (especially internal ones) informed of the developments of the company could mean the difference between their success and failure (WebAfrica, 2014). I would also offer more direct lines to the corporate office representatives for those that are experiencing emergencies and need immediate assistance. In most cases, during holiday's and weekends, the consumer relations line is closed when guests are still in need of service. It would be beneficial to have a direct line to corporate representatives that can do more than file reports. Aside from responding in a timely matter, corporations must continuously update their customers ensuring them that they care and that they are listening (Canty, 2011).

Lastly, with a wide array of problems occurring on a daily basis, it can be difficult for companies to adequately address each issue. Social media makes information easier to obtain in effort to ensure customer satisfaction. It is also important that companies provide multiple ways of escalating an incident so that customers don't have to prolong their agony without response. Donnelly Communications' crisis response is a little more than outdated due to the window of time it takes to get a call back. It also increases the amount of dissatisfaction because we have such limited information to provide. I think that in order to reach customers quickly, we should implement crisis management resolutions at store level so the corporate office has little involvement.

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