



## Journal of Communication Management

Best practices as an assessment for crisis communication

Shari R. Veil Rebekah A. Husted

### Article information:

To cite this document:

Shari R. Veil Rebekah A. Husted, (2012), "Best practices as an assessment for crisis communication", Journal of Communication Management, Vol. 16 Iss 2 pp. 131 - 145

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13632541211217560>

Downloaded on: 29 March 2016, At: 03:26 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 47 other documents.

To copy this document: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 3896 times since 2012\*

### Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2014), "Developing internal crisis communication: New roles and practices of communication professionals", Corporate Communications: An International Journal, Vol. 19 Iss 2 pp. 128-146 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-09-2012-0063>

(2011), "The study of internal crisis communication: towards an integrative framework", Corporate Communications: An International Journal, Vol. 16 Iss 4 pp. 347-361 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13563281111186977>

(2014), "How publics react to crisis communication efforts: Comparing crisis response reactions across sub-arenas", Journal of Communication Management, Vol. 18 Iss 1 pp. 40-57 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-03-2013-0015>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:540409 []

### For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit [www.emeraldinsight.com/authors](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/authors) for more information.

### About Emerald [www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com)

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

\*Related content and download information correct at time of download.



# Best practices as an assessment for crisis communication

Best practices as  
an assessment

Shari R. Veil

*College of Communications and Information Studies, University of Kentucky,  
Lexington, Kentucky, USA, and*

Rebekah A. Husted

*Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication,  
University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, USA*

131

Received 5 September 2010  
Accepted 20 November 2010

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to use the now-classic case study of American Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate the utility of the best practices in risk and crisis communication as an assessment tool.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative case study methodology is used to provide a thick description of the case based on media analysis and internal and external evaluations. The best practices in risk and crisis communication are then used to assess Red Cross's response efforts.

**Findings** – This study provides contextual support for the best practices in risk and crisis communication and demonstrates their usefulness in post-crisis assessment. Lessons learned specific to the case outline the importance of: maintaining flexibility in the crisis plan; developing a crisis communication protocol with partners; considering the affects of response procedures on the emotional and psychological health of crisis victims; and establishing connections with diverse populations and the communities in which the organization works.

**Practical implications** – As an assessment tool in the post-crisis stage, the best practices provide an outline for organizations to question whether their planning was sufficient and their strategies and responses met the needs of their stakeholders.

**Originality/value** – This study provides reason for continuing to develop, study, and apply best practices in risk and crisis communication across organizations and industries. By using the best practices as an assessment tool post-crisis, organizations can look at each specific practice through the lens of the crisis to stimulate organizational learning.

**Keywords** Disasters, Best practice, Crisis communication, Natural disasters, Communication

**Paper type** Research paper

## Best practices as an assessment for crisis communication

During crises, information is both essential and limited. Missing information can be vital, but because of the very nature of crises, it is often difficult to obtain and relay. Communication within and between organizations and between organizations and the public can break down or become scrambled. To assist organizations in communicating effectively under the stress and time constraints of a crisis, researchers have outlined best practices specific to risk and crisis communication. The best practices in risk and crisis communication were drawn through an exhaustive review of the literature related to crisis and risk communication and examination of a multitude of case studies (Sellnow and Littlefield, 2005). The works of numerous communication scholars as well as practitioners went into the compilation of the practices, which were featured in a special issue on risk and crisis communication in



Journal of Communication  
Management  
Vol. 16 No. 2, 2012  
pp. 131-145

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
1363-254X  
DOI 10.1108/13632541211217560

the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (2006). This study uses a now-classic case study to demonstrate the utility of the best practices in risk and crisis communication, not just as guidelines in the crux of a crisis, but also as an assessment tool to stimulate learning post-crisis.

### Significance of the study

The overall goal of best practice research and development is to learn from the experiences of the past, detect errors, correct them, then determine ways to apply learning and practical knowledge to foster continued improvements (Veil and Sellnow, 2008). By using best practices as an assessment tool post-crisis, organizations can look at each specific practice through the lens of the crisis to enact organizational learning and thereby prepare the organization to better apply the practices next time. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of the best practices as an assessment tool through an analysis of American Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina. Because Hurricane Katrina received so much attention and was analyzed from so many directions the case is rich with detail, allowing for assessment of multiple communication facets. An overview of the best practices approach to crisis communication is provided, the response of Red Cross during Hurricane Katrina is assessed using the best practices, and the key lessons learned from this assessment are outlined. Finally, the implications of using best practices as a crisis communication assessment are discussed.

### Best practices in crisis communication

Best practices are created to improve and streamline the processes of an organization or industry. A broad overview, analysis and assessment of the current processes used by experts and leaders in the field allows for the identification of such best practices. On exhaustive research, a model set of standards and guidelines can be drawn to improve quality and efficiency. A set of best practices in risk and crisis communication have been outlined by researchers with the National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD), a US Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. Though the best practices were developed by a research center focused on protecting the food-chain, the individuals on the research team came from a variety of backgrounds and have consulted and conducted research within a variety of industries. Indeed, it is by applying the practices to organizations in multiple industries and sectors of society that their validity is confirmed and reinforced.

Seeger's (2006) original description of the NCFPD best practices in risk and crisis communication is the most often cited source, but additional scholars have since explained, expanded and tested the best practices (e.g. Sellnow *et al.*, 2009; Sellnow and Vidoloff, 2009; Veil and Ojeda, 2010; Veil and Sellnow, 2008). The following breakdown will explain what is included in each practice and how it helps mitigate the effects of crises. The guidelines include:

- *Plan for a prompt response:* organizations can and should plan for the chaos inherent in crises. This practice at minimum requires identification of needed resources, recognition of potential hazards, and designation of responsibilities for team members. A crisis plan should include the who, what, where, and when of the response to provide the organization with easy-to-follow guidelines during the initial confusion of the crisis.

- 
- *Establish a crisis communication network*: this network should include internal information sources and actors at all levels of the organization, outside agencies, and the media. Establishing a network of who you can and should call on before the crisis is essential to administering an efficient and effective response during a crisis event.
  - *Accept uncertainty*: by their very nature, crises create uncertainty (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007). Organizations need to be ready to respond even before they know all the details of the crisis event. Sellnow and Vidoloff (2009) suggest “that organizations tell the public what the organizations know, admit what they do not know, and explain what they are doing to gather additional information” (p. 41).
  - *Form partnerships*: in the midst of a crisis, key organizations and sometimes even the public emerge as influential players. Partnering with these organizations/ individuals in the crisis response can limit duplication of efforts while improving the clarity and reach of the organizational message. Forming a joint command or sharing information with key partners can often expedite the recovery.
  - *Listen to public concerns*: what the public may be concerned about may not be the same things that the organization or experts are worried about. Sandman (1993) reconciles these two concerns by proposing that risk is a combination of hazard (what is the true danger, what the experts are concerned about) and outrage (what the public is concerned about). If hazard is high but outrage low, the public should be warned of danger; if hazard is low but outrage high, the organization should acknowledge and address the outrage, not ignore it as unfounded (Sandman, 1993).
  - *Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness*: Sellnow and Vidoloff (2009) bluntly assert that “there is no substitute for the truth in risk and crisis communication” (p. 41). The adage that “truth will out” applies in crisis situations, and being less than honest with publics and the media will inevitably backfire on the organization. Furthermore, not sharing information with the public, “responding with such answers as ‘no comment’ or avoiding any interaction with the public or press reveals a cavalier attitude and implies guilt” (Sellnow and Vidoloff, 2009, p. 41).
  - *Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible*: the public typically learns about a crisis or risk from the media, and thus, remaining accessible to these outlets is crucial. Especially in cases where access to the disaster area or crisis site is restricted, members of the media may be unable to effectively gather information first-hand. Providing the media with information and assisting them in gaining access to the scene will prevent the media from going to other, potentially less credible, individuals for information (Veil and Ojeda, 2010).
  - *Communicate with compassion*: organizations must consider the emotions of their message recipients, both to avoid seeming callous and to “maintain the public’s trust and attention, both of which are essential for minimizing harm and beginning the recovery process” (Sellnow and Vidoloff, 2009, p. 42). Sandman (2006) stresses the importance of acknowledging fear, “If the crisis itself arouses fear – as it often does – the job of the crisis communicator is to help us bear our

Best practices as  
an assessment

fear, and to guide the choice of precautionary actions our fear motivates” (p. 258). Other emotions, such as anger, sadness, confusion, and disbelief can affect the response capability of the organization and its publics. Recognizing emotions and communicating compassionately will minimize emotional harm to victims and reputational harm to the organization.

- *Provide suggestions for self-efficacy*: messages of self-efficacy give individuals ways to “protect themselves from the effects of the crisis” (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007, p. 44). These suggestions may include messages on how protect oneself physically (evacuate the city) or psychologically (where to seek counseling). In either case, these suggestions “alleviate the potential for members of the public to harbor feelings of utter helplessness as a crisis runs its course” (Sellnow and Vidoloff, 2009, p. 42).
- *Continually evaluate and update crisis plans*: the basic crisis management plan should be created before crisis, but it should also be reviewed periodically and used during crisis simulations. An outdated or unfamiliar crisis plan is little help during a crisis and may hinder communication and further confuse the situation.
- *Acknowledge and account for cultural differences*: Spence *et al.* (2007) point out that minority stakeholders will seek out information in different ways. The same can be said of more technologically connected publics. In many cases, different stakeholders will need different messages; the same message will not resonate with donors, clients, NGOs, and government agencies. Recognizing and understanding various groups before crisis hits will enable an organization to reach those groups more effectively during and after the crisis.

The best practices give crisis communicators a framework not only to plan for and respond to crises but also to evaluate their response post-crisis. Analyzing crisis cases allows researchers to assess the communication strategies of organizations (Brinson and Benoit, 1996; Sellnow *et al.*, 1998) and test the validity of theories and concepts in a real crisis setting (Fishman, 1999). The Hurricane Katrina case has been rich for crisis communication research and has already been analyzed through the lenses of issues management (Waymer and Heath, 2007), risk perception (Cole and Fellows, 2008; Venette, 2008), race relations (Spence *et al.*, 2007), renewal discourse (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007), and mediated communication (Macias *et al.*, 2009). The response of Red Cross during this crisis has been evaluated by the organization itself and by outside entities. Since best practices provide an outline for organizations to question whether their planning was sufficient and their strategies and responses met the needs of their stakeholders (Veil and Sellnow, 2008), this case analysis will use the response of American Red Cross to Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate the utility of the best practices in assessing crisis response.

### Method

As “an explication of the problem, a thorough description of the context or setting and the processes observed, a discussion of important elements, and finally, ‘lessons to be learned’” (Creswell, 1998, p. 221), case studies try to explain a decision or set of decisions as to why actions were taken, how strategies were implemented, and with what result (Schramm, 1971). Yin (2003) contends that while case studies are not statistically generalizable to populations or universes, they are analytically

generalizable to theoretical propositions. Because case studies examine phenomena within a bound system, the contextual influence on theoretical propositions is also considered (Fishman, 1999).

Case studies in crisis communication are, as a general rule, different from those in other fields. As Jaques (2008) notes, while most fields consider and learn from successes, most crisis communication case studies analyze partial or complete failures, for several reasons. Failures last longer in the public memory, their impact is heightened by news coverage, “villains” to blame increase drama, numerous victims prolong public memory, political or legal fallout extends media attention, and any negative environmental impact extends the effects to multiple groups of victims (Jaques, 2008). Furthermore, failures often offer vivid examples of how not to respond to crises; as many lessons can be learned from the crisis response failures of Exxon as can be gleaned from successes such as Tylenol’s response to product tampering.

In this study, the use of a case with mixed results will aid in demonstrating the utility of the best practices in evaluating crisis response. To develop the context of this study, news articles were retrieved from the Access World News database using the search terms “Hurricane Katrina” and “Red Cross” from Hurricane Katrina’s landfall to nine months later. The media dataset was supplemented by reports from a roundtable discussion hosted by a charity watch organization in which Red Cross officials and other non-profit leaders self-evaluated their responses and a Congressional review of Red Cross’s response to the crisis, as well as information from the official American Red Cross Web site. These documents were used to develop a thick description of the case as it pertained to Red Cross and Hurricane Katrina. The purpose of this study was not to count the number of articles on the case but to use the content of the articles and other case evidence to determine the communication strategies used by Red Cross when responding to Hurricane Katrina.

### Case study: Hurricane Katrina and American Red Cross

In late August 2005, the southern coasts of the USA prepared for yet another hurricane. Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the southern tip of Florida on August 25, with sustained winds of 75 miles an hour. After passing over Florida, the hurricane moved back out over the Gulf of Mexico. Over warm waters, the hurricane picked up again and headed for New Orleans. An evacuation order was issued for the city and surrounding areas. Over a million people evacuated before the storm, leaving another 20,000 to 25,000 to take refuge where they could, many at the Louisiana Superdome, which was transformed into a shelter (CNN, 2009). By the time the eye of the hurricane hit the Louisiana coast early on August 29, the winds were blowing 150 miles per hour (Katrina graphics archive, 2009). The damage spread all along the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts. In New Orleans, conditions were greatly worsened when the levees built to keep the city from flooding were breached. In approximately six hours, breached levees led to flooding over major areas of the city. By September 1, 80 percent of the city was flooded, with some areas covered by more than 10ft of water (Murphy, 2005; Depths, 2009). There were 1,464 storm-related deaths in Louisiana and 346 in other states (Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, 2006), making Katrina “the costliest and one of the five deadliest hurricanes to ever strike the United States” (Knabb *et al.*, 2006, p. 1).



Aid to victims came from many directions. More than 66,000 troops were in the city, working to distribute water, ice, and rations and helping evacuees leave the city (American Forces Press Services, 2005). NGOs from around the country and the world, along with governments from around the world, sent funds and aid workers. In all, Americans donated \$4.2 billion dollars, and at least half of that went to American Red Cross (Diamant, 2006).

The New Orleans Red Cross chapter was already providing services to many of the victims in New Orleans (Roundtable discussion, 2009) and prepared to serve even more during the crisis. The night before Katrina made landfall, the chapter sent thousands of meals to Baton Rouge to keep them from being destroyed. Unfortunately, these meals became useless after the levees broke and all roads in and out of New Orleans closed (Stamp, 2006). When the city flooded, the local chapter had to evacuate its office and leave the city. "Frankly, everyone was forced to evacuate. [. . .] It makes no sense to set up a shelter in the flood plain. Though Red Cross was prepared to reenter New Orleans with relief assistance, state emergency officials directed otherwise" (Denton, Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 13). The evacuation order kept Red Cross from responding immediately to needs in the area.

After they were able to reenter the city, Red Cross workers and volunteers provided hot meals to those who could come to them and prepackaged meals to those who could not. They opened hundreds of evacuation shelters to house evacuees and provided mental health services in 30 area shelters through a partnership with the American Psychological Association (*American Psychologist*, 2006). In addition, Red Cross worked with Microsoft Corporation and the San Diego Super Computer Center to create KatrinaSafe.org. This Web site contained hundreds of thousands of names of victims whose families or friends were looking for them. Evacuees at Red Cross shelters were automatically registered unless they requested not to be (Goehner, 2007). Throughout the response, Red Cross "served tens of millions of meals and snacks, shelters [sic] thousands of people, provided emergency assistance to more than four million people and mobilized nearly a quarter of a million Red Cross volunteers" (Pikes Peak American Red Cross, 2006, para. 2). In the midst of crisis, then, American Red Cross provided needed services. And yet, the organization was both praised and criticized for its relief efforts during Hurricane Katrina. Critiques led, in the end, to the resignation of the organization's president (David, n.d.). The organization's self-evaluation and a government review also prompted several changes in Red Cross's operations and crisis plans (Brown, 2007).

### Case analysis

Using the best practices model to assess the organization's response provides a framework for highlighting successes and pinpointing failures. By breaking the response down, a best practices analysis helps practitioners and crisis communicators learn the right lessons from past crisis responses. Red Cross's crisis response is outlined here according to the best practices framework.

#### *Planning for a prompt response*

Red Cross's vice president of government relations and public policy, Denton, admitted that during Katrina, "[Red Cross's] biggest failure was a failure of imagination" (Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 9). Though the organization had coordinated

hurricane relief efforts before, “the 2005 season was some 20 times larger than anything [Red Cross] had dealt with previously” (Denton, Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 9). The plan also did not consider the effects of the failure of the communication system. “Both FEMA and the American Red Cross have built a system that relies on the Internet and telephones to communicate and process applications for aid, as if the victims of a disaster can sit in the comfort of their destroyed homes to telephone for help or sign in” (Hicks and Burton, 2005, para. 13). In short, the organization’s prepared plans could not deal with a crisis the size of Katrina that could knock out the communication infrastructure. This failure truly is, as Denton claims, a failure of imagination. Red Cross was prepared to deal with the expected – a large hurricane like they had dealt with in the past. It was not, however, prepared to deal with the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina. Red Cross’s crisis plan did not prepare it for the surprise inherent in crisis.

Best practices as  
an assessment

137

#### *Establish a crisis communication network*

American Red Cross had established a crisis communication network prior to the Katrina crisis. The organization had, after all, responded to numerous hurricane situations and dealt with crises every day. Internal communication channels were in place and, because of its past work, Red Cross had a very close relationship with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, this relationship, though close and longstanding, had recently changed. The 2005 hurricane season was the first time that Red Cross and FEMA worked as co-primacy agencies (Government Accountability Office, 2005). The organizations “disagreed about their roles and responsibilities,” and “FEMA officials told [the Government Accountability Office] that Red Cross should direct all requests for FEMA assistance through the ESF-6 coordinator, while Red Cross officials stated that the organization should be able to take requests directly to the FEMA Operations Section Chief” (GAO, 2005, p. 2). In 2007, the organizations agreed to change the relationship (Peters, 2008). This new arrangement, however, also has its problems and detractors (Peters, 2008).

Even if the two organizations had agreed on the chain of communication, however, Red Cross workers rotated every two to three weeks, making it virtually impossible for the employees to gain institutional knowledge of the communication process (GAO, 2005). Any strides towards reconciliation were also hampered by the frequent changes in Red Cross personnel.

In addition, Red Cross did not communicate effectively with local governments before the crisis. During Katrina, the *Gulf Coast News* complained that “local officials don’t even know what to ask for, or who, as there is very little instruction prior to an event that local officials can even implement in their own disaster planning. Just how hard would it be for FEMA and the Red Cross to provide necessary instructions prior to a disaster?” (Hicks and Burton, 2005). This oversight is serious, as it not only hindered the Red Cross response but handicapped local officials and the overall response efforts.

#### *Accept uncertainty*

American Red Cross did acknowledge the uncertainty of the crisis and focused much of its attention on mitigating one facet of that uncertainty. By setting up KatrinaSafe.org, the organization clearly communicated what it did know – which evacuees were safe



in one of its shelters – and what it did not – those still missing. Because this site was continuously updated, it kept victims apprised in real-time of what Red Cross was doing and what information it had.

#### *Form partnerships*

American Red Cross did work with partners during Katrina. In addition to its partnership with FEMA, the APA, and Microsoft, the organization worked with the Southern Baptist Convention, which cooked meals for shelters (Walden, Roundtable discussion, 2009). Red Cross also worked with communications companies to reestablish its communication network during the crisis. However, Red Cross's partnerships were nowhere near as extensive as they could – and perhaps should – have been. Following Katrina, the organization was severely criticized for not having established enough partnerships. In a striking self-criticism, Denton said that, through Katrina,

We learned that we needed to build stronger partnerships with other nonprofits if we are to increase our capacity to deliver services to a wide and varied disaster site. [...] The long-standing culture of the Red Cross was built on being self-sufficient. We learned that, in the event of large catastrophic disasters, we are most effective when working with others (Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 43-44).

After evaluating the organization's performance, American Red Cross "is seeking to form new partnerships with local, regional, and national organizations and companies to improve its response capabilities before the next big disaster" (Young, 2006, p. 407).

#### *Listen to public concerns*

American Red Cross was also criticized for not acknowledging the outrage of the publics they were serving. The organization only supplied 300 vouchers per relief station per day, "even though thousands may be standing in line" (Hicks and Burton, 2005, para. 6). Those standing in lines were also kept out in the heat and sun of the Southern summer, only to reach the front and find they were not receiving help but only registering for it (Hicks and Burton, 2005). The reasons the organization offered to explain the lines and lack of real help were, from Red Cross's standpoint, valid: safety concerns and worries about "double-dipping" kept the number of vouchers distributed low and limited resources kept the lines long. However, the organization came off as callous and uncaring because these reasons did not address the public's concerns or acknowledge the outrage of the hurricane victims.

#### *Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness*

Even though American Red Cross did not acknowledge the public's concern effectively, it was open and honest about its actions for the most part. It did offer explanations for its controversial actions such as limiting vouchers and separating aid registration from aid distribution. Despite the fact that these explanations were not satisfactory, they were given openly and honestly.

There were, however, multiple allegations of dishonesty within the organization both during and after the crisis. These criticisms included "improper diversion of relief supplies, failure to follow required Red Cross procedures in tracking and distributing supplies, and use of felons as volunteers in the disaster area" (Strom, 2006, para. 3). In essence, volunteers were accused of using the crisis for their own benefit. Though this

dishonesty was on the part of individual volunteers, it reflected poorly on the organization and on its ability to control volunteer actions.

Best practices as  
an assessment

#### *Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible*

If there is one best practice where Red Cross excelled during Katrina, it is in being available to the media. In fact, the organization was so present in the media that an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that “what we’ve now come to expect from a major disaster is a Red Cross media blitz” (Walden, 2005, para. 3). The organization’s media relations site is well-developed, it issued multiple press releases during the crisis, and, as the premier aid organization in the US, it was referenced in many news stories covering the crisis. Indeed, it is difficult to find a news article printed during the Katrina crisis that did not mention the organization or quote a Red Cross official or volunteer.

#### *Communicate compassion*

Red Cross’s success in communicating compassion is tied to its acceptance of the public’s concerns. Since, as noted, the organization did not effectively acknowledge the public’s concerns, it had difficulty communicating compassion. Rather than acknowledging concerns and kindly offering explanations or changing behavior Red Cross bluntly informed the public and the media of the reasons behind its actions. In this manner, the organization missed an opportunity to reassure victims of the crisis and to reinforce that its workers were there to help.

#### *Provide suggestions for self-efficacy*

In a way, Red Cross was better at offering suggestions for self-efficacy to observers of the Katrina crisis than to its victims. Red Cross and other aid organizations gave observers opportunities to help victims of Katrina through donations of money and volunteer aid. Though they are not directly affected by the crisis in the way the immediate victims are, those on the periphery can nevertheless feel the psychological effects of seeing suffering and being unable to help. By giving the observers a way to help and to become involved in the process of relief, Red Cross helped alleviate this psychological stress and translated it into aid for the victims.

KatrinaSafe.org also provided victims with self-efficacy options. There, those searching for missing loved ones could actively try to contact them. Though the physical conditions of the city did not allow for individuals to search for friends or family, the digital space provided by American Red Cross gave them a way to virtually search, rather than just to sit and worry.

#### *Continuously update and evaluate crisis plans*

Clearly, Red Cross’s crisis plan was not adequate during Hurricane Katrina. After the crisis stage was over, the organization responded to criticism and made several changes to its crisis plan. However, as Denton acknowledges, the organization has tried to prepare “‘if THIS’ were to happen again” (Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 49). Preparing for the last disaster, while useful, is also dangerous. Like lightening, the same crises rarely strike twice. The organization needs to focus not only on preparing for the last crisis but also on anticipating what might happen next and adding flexibility to the crisis plan. Red Cross states that it has “done extensive modeling and

incorporated ‘flexibility’ into [its] strategies for the future,” which is encouraging (Denton, Roundtable discussion, 2009, para. 49).

#### *Acknowledge and account for cultural differences*

Part of the criticism leveled at Red Cross after Katrina focused on the organization’s perceived lack of cultural awareness. In his testimony before a subcommittee of the United States House of Representatives, Kevin Brown, the chief operating officer of Red Cross, summed up these criticisms:

During the relief effort, some advocacy groups observed that the Red Cross had not consistently met the needs of a diverse segment of their communities [...] that the Red Cross workforce lacked diversity from top to bottom, and, as a result, was not sufficiently sensitive to racial and cultural issues [...] that the Red Cross lacked “cultural competence” in its response to Katrina. Other groups reported Red Cross communication failures with minority populations, particularly in remote areas along the Gulf Coast. Another recurring complaint was that the Red Cross had not done enough before Katrina struck to foster the necessary relationships and develop agreements with local and national organizations that serve diverse populations (Brown, 2007, para. 14).

In short, Red Cross failed to account for cultural differences in its crisis response. That said, however, the organization has since taken steps to improve its cultural competence, at least by forming partnerships with other organizations that work with diverse publics (Brown, 2007). Whether these partnerships will be enough to improve the organization’s service to diverse publics in crisis remains to be seen.

#### **Findings and lessons learned**

American Red Cross made positive contributions to the Katrina relief efforts. The organization helped thousands of victims and evacuees. However, the flaws in its crisis plan and communication hindered its response and relief efforts. Red Cross accepted the uncertainty of the situation, was accessible to the media and provided suggestions for self-efficacy for individuals beyond the disaster area. It had established a communication network; however, that network was ineffective and flawed. The organization did have some established partnerships, but not as many as it should have or on the levels that it should have. Though the organization as a whole was open and honest, internal dishonesty tarnished the organization’s response legitimacy. Red Cross had not effectively planned for a crisis response of the magnitude needed and neither acknowledged public concern nor communicated compassion. American Red Cross had not updated or evaluated its previous crisis plan and was not aware of or prepared for cultural differences.

For the most part, Red Cross has acknowledged the biggest flaws in its response to Katrina. Simultaneously addressing its lack of partnerships and its cultural deafness, American Red Cross partnered with several ethnic and cultural advocacy and aid groups along the Gulf of Mexico during the 2007 hurricane season (Brown, 2007). Though Denton did not offer explanations of how the organization is correcting its failure of imagination, he acknowledged that Red Cross’s crisis plan was inadequately planned and not well evaluated. However, Red Cross has not addressed its problems of acknowledging public concern or communicating compassion. These two key elements of a crisis response, not handled well during Katrina, are still not being addressed in the organization according to the case review.

As Jaques (2008) notes, the value of case studies is in the lessons they teach. By evaluating Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina, four essential lessons can be gleaned:

Best practices as  
an assessment

- (1) *Craft a well-designed crisis plan but maintain flexibility.* Flexible crisis plans provide needed structure and order during the chaos of crises but also adapt to changes and flaws in the original plan. If unique aspects of the crisis situation make portions of the plan unusable, organizations need to be able to move quickly away from the plan. Using the crisis plan in simulations that specifically go beyond the plan can assist organizations in learning to adapt.
- (2) *Develop a crisis communication protocol with partners.* The best practices suggest that organizations should form partnerships with key organizations/individuals. However, a protocol for communicating with partners also needs to be in place. As part of the crisis communication plan there should be clear guidelines on who to contact when through what channels. Whether the crisis involves Red Cross volunteers working with FEMA in a disaster or a food processing plant working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration in a salmonella outbreak, communication protocol should be outlined before it is needed.
- (3) *During crisis, actively consider the entire wellbeing of those affected by the crisis – not just their physical health and safety, but their mental, emotional and psychological health as well.* Considering the entire well-being of crisis victims will help organizations respond to the public's needs and concerns and will protect the organization from criticisms of callousness. Fraud and dishonesty will occur in crises; but in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, communicating compassionately with victims should be prioritized over catching dishonest people.
- (4) *Before crisis and during normal operations, establish connections with diverse populations and the community/communities in which the organization works.* Connections to diverse populations help the organization understand and relate to cultural differences, plug the organization into high-risk populations most in need of aid during crisis, and provide channels for the organization both to receive and to respond to concerns.

These lessons can, not only be applied to Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina, but also to the expanding literature on the best practices. As the best practices continue to be vetted and tested, their utility as an assessment tool increases. The following conclusions and implications provide direction for this process.

### Conclusions and implications

Rapid and clear communication increases the quality of decisions in a crisis (Kahai and Cooper, 2003), while breakdowns in communication can increase harm (Veil *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, the literature is filled with examples of miscommunication making a crisis much worse. Thus, post-crisis assessments often end with "poor communication" as one of the challenges of the response; and "improve communication" becomes a goal of the organization to prevent similar challenges in the future. But how? In what areas? With what audiences? In what context? By using

the best practices in risk and crisis communication as an assessment tool post-crisis, organizations can look at each specific communicative practice rather than trying to examine communication as a whole. Or worse, considering media relations in the midst of the crisis the only communicative practice worthy of individual assessment.

Through a best practices assessment learning opportunities can be more detailed, allowing for increased capacity to make changes. For example, Red Cross did indeed find that it needed to improve partnerships with collaborating agencies. According to the recently released *Five Year Report on Response to Hurricane Katrina* (ARC, 2010), Red Cross partnered with more than 150 agencies in the recovery phase. In addition, 700 members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are now volunteers for Red Cross (ARC, 2010). Details regarding how Red Cross intends to communicate with all those agencies were not included in the report. Red Cross's *Five Year Report* also touts almost quadrupling the number of trained disaster volunteers. The screening and training process for those volunteers was not explained.

The purpose of this study was to use a well-known case like Red Cross and Hurricane Katrina, that has been analyzed from several directions by several organizations, to demonstrate the utility of the best practices in risk and crisis communication as an assessment tool. In professional practice, the best practices encourage organizations not only to plan for the typical who, what, where, and when of the response, but also to consider the how of communication from accepting uncertainty to communicating compassion to coordinating networks with the individuals and organizations who will be essential to the response. As an evaluation tool in the post-crisis stage, the best practices provide an outline for organizations to question whether their planning was sufficient and their strategies and responses met the needs of their stakeholders. Following a model set of standards and guidelines can improve communication quality and efficiency in a crisis, but the communicative response also needs to be assessed post-crisis to assure the organization learns from missteps and failures to improve the next response.

In research, continuing to apply the practices to organizations in multiple industries and sectors of society can confirm and reinforce the validity of the practices. Changes, additions, and subtractions should also be considered when assessing crises through the best practices. For example, the best practice: "acknowledge and account for cultural differences" was added by Sellnow and Vidoloff (2009) after the original list of best practices was published by Seeger (2006). The need for the application of that practice was reinforced in this study of Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina. This study provided the case implications of:

- maintain flexibility in the crisis plan;
- develop a crisis communication protocol with partners;
- consider the affects of response procedures on the emotional and psychological health of crisis victims; and
- establish connections with diverse populations and the community/communities in which the organization works.

While no additional best practices were added, these implications provide context for better understanding the best practices. This study provides reason for continuing to

develop, study, and apply the best practices in risk and crisis communication as both a tool for planning and for post-crisis assessment. Best practices as an assessment

## References

- American Red Cross (ARC) (2010), *Bringing Help, Bringing Hope: The American Red Cross Response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma*, available at: [www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/corppubs/Katrina5Year.pdf](http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/corppubs/Katrina5Year.pdf)
- American Forces Press Services (2005), "Progress made on Katrina evacuations", *American Forces Press Services*, September 8, available at: [www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=17375](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=17375)
- American Psychologist* (2006), "APA's response to international and national disasters and crises: addressing diverse needs", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 61 No. 5, pp. 513-21.
- Brinson, S.L. and Benoit, W.L. (1996), "Attempting to restore a public image: Dow Corning and the breast implant crisis", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 44, pp. 29-41.
- Brown, K. (2007), *Testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of the House Committee on Ways and Means*, September 25, transcript available at: <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/Hearings/Testimony.aspx?TID=1833>
- CNN (2005), "New Orleans braces for monster hurricane", *CNN*, August 29, available at: [www.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/08/28/hurricane.katrina/](http://www.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/08/28/hurricane.katrina/)
- Cole, T. and Fellows, K. (2008), "Risk communication failure: a case study of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina", *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 73 No. 3, pp. 211-28.
- Creswell, J. (1998), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Traditions*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- David, C. (n.d.), "Head of American Red Cross resigns; charity criticized after Hurricane Katrina", Canadian Press, available at: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=n5h&AN=MYO302364215005&site=ehost-live>
- Depths (n.d.), available at: [www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/depths.swf](http://www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/depths.swf)
- Diamant, J. (2006), "Of the private donations, half went to Red Cross", *Star-Ledger*, August 29, available at: [www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm/bay/content.view/cpid/486.htm](http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm/bay/content.view/cpid/486.htm)
- Fishman, D.A. (1999), "ValuJet flight 592: crisis communication theory blended and extended", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 345-75.
- Goehner, T. (2007), "A web site to tell them you're OK", *American Red Cross*, August 24, available at: [www.americanredcross.com/article/0,1072,0\\_312\\_6963,00.html](http://www.americanredcross.com/article/0,1072,0_312_6963,00.html)
- Government Accountability Office (2005), *Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Coordination Between FEMA and the Red Cross Should be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season (GAO-06-712)*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.
- Hicks, P. and Burton, K. (2005), "FEMA/Red Cross Katrina response a disaster", *Gulf Coast News*, September 27, available at: [www.gulfcoastnews.com/Katrina/GCNOpinion/FEMAKatrina.htm](http://www.gulfcoastnews.com/Katrina/GCNOpinion/FEMAKatrina.htm)
- Jaques, T. (2008), "A case study approach to issue and crisis management: Schadenfreude or an opportunity to learn?", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 192-203.
- Kahai, S.S. and Cooper, R.B. (2003), "Exploring the core concepts of media richness theory: the impact of cue multiplicity and feedback immediacy decision quality", *Journal of Management Information Systems*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 263-99.



- Katrina graphics archive (2009), NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), NOAA, Silver Spring, MD, available at: [www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2005/KATRINA\\_graphics.shtml](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2005/KATRINA_graphics.shtml) (accessed April 19, 2009).
- Knabb, R., Rhone, J. and Brown, D. (2006), *Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Katrina*, NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), Silver Spring, MD, August 10, available at: [www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/TCR-AL122005\\_Katrina.pdf](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/TCR-AL122005_Katrina.pdf)
- Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (2006), *Reports of Missing and Deceased*, Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Baton Rouge, LA, August 2, available at: [www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/page.asp?ID=192&Detail=5248](http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/page.asp?ID=192&Detail=5248)
- Macias, W., Hilyard, K. and Freimuth, V. (2009), "Blog functions as risk ad crisis communication during Hurricane Katrina", *Journal of Computer Mediation Communication*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 1-31.
- Murphy, V. (2005), "Fixing New Orleans' thin grey line", *BBC News*, October 4, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4307972.stm>
- Peters, K. (2008), "FEMA to take over mass care role formerly held by Red Cross", *Government Executive*, March 7, available at: [www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0308/030708kpl.htm](http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0308/030708kpl.htm)
- Pikes Peak American Red Cross (2006), "American Red Cross remembers Hurricane Katrina", available at: [www.pparc.org/news/Red%20Cross%20Remembers%20Hurricane%20Katrina%208-06.pdf](http://www.pparc.org/news/Red%20Cross%20Remembers%20Hurricane%20Katrina%208-06.pdf)
- Roundtable discussion (2009), *Charity Navigator*, April 10, available at: [www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=katrina.article&cpid=456](http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=katrina.article&cpid=456)
- Sandman, P.M. (1993), *Responding to Community Outrage: Strategies for Effective Risk Communication*, American Industrial Hygiene Association, Fairfax, VA.
- Sandman, P.M. (2006), "Crisis communication best practices: some quibbles and additions", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 257-62.
- Schramm, W. (1971), "Notes on case studies of instructional media projects", working paper for the Academy for Educational Development, December, Washington, DC.
- Seeger, M.W. (2006), "Best practices in crisis communication: an expert panel process", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 232-44.
- Sellnow, T.L. and Littlefield, R.S. (2005), "Lessons learned about protecting America's food supply", North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND.
- Sellnow, T. and Vidoloff, K. (2009), "Getting crisis communication right", *Food Technology*, Vol. 63 No. 9, pp. 40-5.
- Sellnow, T.L., Ulmer, R.R. and Snider, M. (1998), "The compatibility of corrective action in organizational crisis communication", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 60-74.
- Sellnow, T.L., Ulmer, R.R., Seeger, M.W. and Littlefield, R.S. (2009), *Effective Risk Communication: A Message Centered Approach*, Springer, New York, NY.
- Spence, P., Lachlan, K. and Griffin, D. (2007), "Crisis communication, race, and natural disasters", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 37, pp. 539-54.
- Stamp, T. (2006), "Charities must heed the lessons from Hurricane Katrina", *Charity Navigator*, available at: [www.charitynavigator.org/\\_asset\\_/articles/2006/charities\\_must\\_heed.pdf](http://www.charitynavigator.org/_asset_/articles/2006/charities_must_heed.pdf)
- Strom, S. (2006), "Red Cross sifting internal charges over Katrina Aid", *New York Times*, March 24, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/national/nationalspecial/24cross.html?pagewanted=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/national/nationalspecial/24cross.html?pagewanted=1)

- Ulmer, R.R., Seeger, M.W. and Sellnow, T.L. (2007), "Post-crisis communication and renewal: expanding the parameters of post-crisis discourse", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 130-4.
- Ulmer, R., Sellnow, T. and Seeger, M. (2007), *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Veil, S.R. and Ojeda, F. (2010), "Establishing media partnerships in crisis response", *Communication Studies*, Vol. 60 No. 4, pp. 412-29.
- Veil, S.R. and Sellnow, T.L. (2008), "Organizational learning in a high-risk environment: responding to an anthrax outbreak", *Journal of Applied Communications*, Vol. 92 No. 1, pp. 75-93.
- Veil, S.R., Reynolds, B., Sellnow, T.L. and Seeger, M.W. (2008), "CERC as a theoretical framework for research and practice", *Health Promotion Practice*, Vol. 9 No. 4, pp. 26-34.
- Venette, S. (2008), "Risk as an inherent element in the study of crisis communication", *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 73 No. 3, pp. 197-210.
- Walden, R. (2005), "The Red Cross money pit", *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/25/opinion/op-redcross25>
- Waymer, D. and Heath, R.L. (2007), "Emergent agents: the forgotten publics in crisis communication and issues management", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 88-108.
- Yin, R.K. (2003), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Young, D. (2006), "Red Cross plans new partnerships, better control of donated drugs", *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, Vol. 63, p. 407.

### Further reading

Timeline: who knew when the levees broke (2006), *NPR*, February 10, available at: [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5200940&sc=emaf](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5200940&sc=emaf)

### About the authors

Shari R. Veil, MBA, PhD, is the Director of Risk Sciences and an Assistant Professor of Communication in the College of Communications and Information Studies at the University of Kentucky. Shari R. Veil is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [shari.veil@uky.edu](mailto:shari.veil@uky.edu)

Rebekah A. Husted is a Graduate Student and Research Assistant in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma.

**This article has been cited by:**

1. Douglas Powell, Benjamin Chapman Risk Communication during Foodborne Disease Outbreaks: The Four Rs 383-404. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Anne Laajalahti, Jenni Hyvärinen, Marita Vos. 2016. Crisis Communication Competence in Co-Producing Safety with Citizen Groups. *Social Sciences* **5**, 13. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Satu Nätti, Suvi Rahkolin, Saila Saraniemi. 2014. Crisis communication in key account relationships. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* **19**:3, 234-246. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]