

Best Practices

Online Crisis Management: 30 Top Colleges/Universities Respond to Katrina

Summary

Hurricane Katrina has been a study in online crisis management for colleges and universities around the U.S. With students, alumni, and employees either personally affected or eager to help in some way, institutions of higher learning have used their Web sites to offer student aid, notify alumni of their classmates' whereabouts, and announce fund-raising rallies. Universities following Best Practices used blogs and message boards to quickly gather and disseminate information; at the other end of the spectrum was a university that announced on its homepage that Katrina would delay mail delivery, but otherwise offered no further information to its constituents.

	Worst Practices	Standard Practices	Best Practices
Viewpoint	"Katrina didn't affect us."	"We should publicly discuss Katrina's impact."	"We need to help all of our constituencies — students, faculty, staff, alumni — deal with Katrina."
Strategy	View Katrina as not impacting the educational mission.	Deal with Katrina within established processes and Web site design.	Treat Katrina as a crisis that impacts the overall college community and urge people to think "outside the box."
Process	Standard Web site content and processes remain.	Broadcast of generated and received information.	Interactive gathering/receiving of information.
People	No mobilizing of people.	President & Office of Public Affairs issue statements.	Many departments and constituencies are involved.
Technology	No mention of Katrina, or a difficult-to-find hyperlink on the home page.	A mention of Katrina on the home page and a Katrina mini-site.	Blogs and message boards help constituents distribute information in real time.

Katrina: A Study in Online Crisis Management

Hurricane Katrina has had a massive impact. The Category 4 hurricane not only decimated the Gulf Coast and displaced 500,000+ people, it also altered the online world. The Red Cross saw its Web site traffic double in a day. At the same time, media sites altered their layouts and content mix as they scrambled to deliver stories, pictures, and videos to Web visitors hungry for information.

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Besides impacting relief agencies and media companies, Hurricane Katrina had an effect on major colleges and universities around the United States. While reporters concentrated on discussing displaced students — and how colleges were making arrangements to take them in — other college constituencies were affected as well. Students wanted to help, alumni wanted to know what had happened to classmates along the Gulf Coast, and teachers and administrators offered their expertise and time. Because students, alumni, and employees were dispersed across the country — especially at the end of summer vacation — colleges quickly turned to the Web as a communications vehicle and embarked on an exercise in online crisis management.

This report studies how top institutions of higher education altered their online personas to handle the crisis. Did they imply that Katrina wasn't germane to their educational mission by not mentioning it on their home page? Did they issue a press release detailing their institutional stance? Or did they set up blogs and message boards as a way for everyone who was interested to connect up in some way?

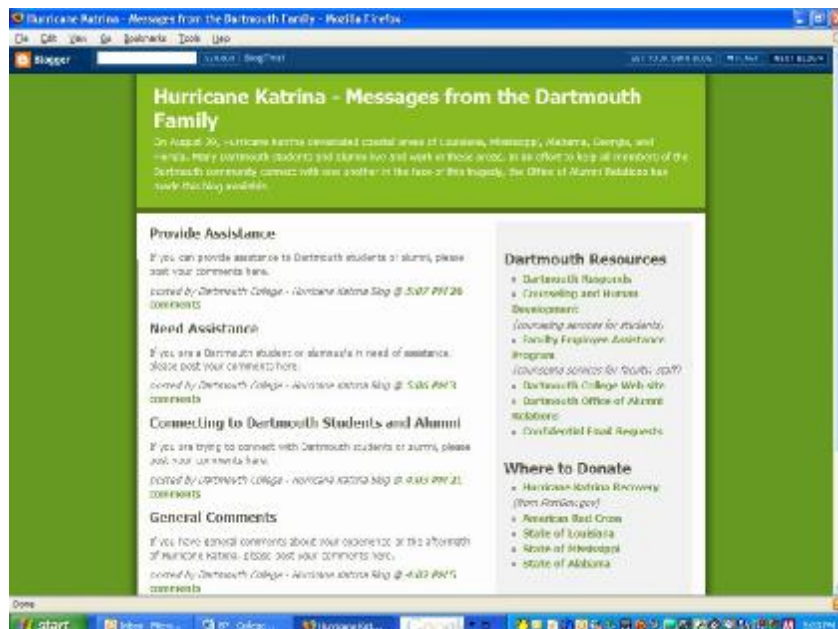
Methodology

On Monday, September 5, 2005 — one week after the disaster — Ballardvale Research reviewed the Web sites of thirty top colleges and universities in the United States. The institutions are the top 15 national universities (Brown, CalTech, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, MIT, Northwestern, Princeton, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Washington University, and Yale) and the top 15 liberal arts colleges (Amherst, Bowdoin, Carleton, Claremont McKenna, Colby, Colgate, Davidson, Grinnell, Hamilton, Harvey Mudd, Haverford, Middlebury, Pomona, Smith, Swarthmore, Vassar, Washington & Lee, Wellesley, Wesleyan, and Williams) as defined by [U.S. News & World Report](#).

Best Practices

Three universities stand out in how they reacted to the crisis: Dartmouth, Duke, and MIT. All three took the view that they needed to quickly get information out to — and receive information from — the university community at large.

Dartmouth created a Katrina blog at: <http://dartmouthkatrina.blogspot.com/>. A quick and dirty solution (in that it used Google's free Blogger service), it nevertheless let the different Dartmouth communities share information with hardly any Dartmouth IT involvement (other than pointing to the blog and putting up some affiliated information).



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Duke set up a comprehensive Katrina page (<http://www.duke.edu/hurricanerelief/>). Besides listing the relevant press releases, it had had hyperlinks at the top for all involved groups (Gulf Coast students, volunteers, etc.), as well as a listserv.

MIT created probably the cleanest page (<http://web.mit.edu/katrina/>), with constituent links at the left. It also set up a message board for MIT alumni to contribute engineering ideas: <https://alum.mit.edu/comments/View.dyn?id=363>.

All three administrations recognized that students, alumni, and employees would be hungry for information, and resolved that it was the university's mission to foster information exchange during this extraordinary crisis. In addition, these institutions decided that they needed to break away from their normal Web site design, and instead use blogs or message boards to speed the communications process.

Standard Practices

The majority of the surveyed colleges and universities reacted to the crisis in a less interactive fashion. While they quickly posted Katrina links on the home page or set up a Katrina mini-site, they also took more of a broadcast approach. In other words, rather than creating specialized pages for the different groups and some form of interactive communication, they put up a general page that listed press releases and notices for all to read.



Carleton (<http://apps.carleton.edu/news/?content=content&module=&id=133300>) followed this model, in which updates are posted on a Katrina page for all site visitors. Others using this "toss everything together approach" included:

- Harvard (<http://www.news.harvard.edu/press/pressdoc/pr-050901-katrina.html>)
- Johns Hopkins (<http://www.jhu.edu/news/katrina/>)
- Stanford (<http://hurricanekatrina.stanford.edu/relief/>)

Some colleges and universities offered a more muted response, issuing a single press release. For example:

- Colby (<http://www.colby.edu/president/>)
- Hamilton (http://www.hamilton.edu/news/more_news/display.cfm?ID=9747)
- Northwestern (<http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2005/09/northwestern.html>)
- Swarthmore (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/news/releases/05/displacedstudents.html>)

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Worst Practices

Two weeks after Katrina, Grinnell College and Harvey Mudd College still hadn't acknowledged Katrina on their homepages; Amherst College did so, but rather slowly, finally putting up a press release (and eventually a Katrina page) on the afternoon of September 5th, a week after the disaster and three days after its peers.

Caltech, with 19,000 living alumni (and presumably some living along the Gulf Coast), talked about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on its home page by stating that mail delivery would be impacted:

Restrictions on Mail Delivery to Hurricane-Affected Areas

As a result of the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina to the coastal and inland areas of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Florida panhandle, the United States Postal Service, UPS, and FedEx have issued statements regarding the shipment of mail and packages. Please click on the headline for details. If you have further questions, contact campus Mail Services at ext. 6371.

While any institution of higher learning is not required to create a Katrina mini-site or post a press release describing the university's response, not doing so is certainly atypical, compared to its peers. For example, CalTech's description of Katrina as creating a mail delivery problem is in stark contrast to the more caring tone of its East Coast rival. MIT (<http://web.mit.edu/katrina/>) posted a message from President Hockfield, listed upcoming events such as blood drives and benefit concerts, suggested ways for site visitors to help, and offered a message board for MIT graduates to propose engineering ideas for the upcoming reclamation projects.

Recommendations

The United States has now suffered through two major disasters within four years: 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. While it's difficult to predict if and when the next one will occur, it's clear that colleges and universities need to have a plan in place for quickly communicating with students, alumni, and employees via the Web.

These institutions should think about breaking the normal Web site mold in a time of crisis. The Webmaster(s) must be ready to create a special page or mini-site, put a hyperlink in a pre-defined spot on the home page, and set up blogs and message boards in a hurry. Institutions of higher learning are not known for their ability to move quickly — all the more reason to plan for it, so that when the crisis hits, administrators aren't told, "Oh, we don't do it that way, or "Hmm, it can't be done."

It's really up to the college or university as to whether to aim for Standard or Best Practices. In both cases, interested groups can eventually find the information they're looking for. The distinction between the two is one of ease-of-use and update speed: (1) how easy it is for a specific group to find information tailored to its needs, as well as (2) how quickly that information is refreshed.

However, given the current state of online practices, it behooves an institution to avoid Worst Practices. With large alumni constituencies as well as the intense competition for excellent students, a university seeming callous about — or oblivious to — disasters that displace or kill thousands of people is not the way to increase alumni giving or woo top students. In today's Internet world, the institutional Web site *is* the institution, at least to those not on campus. Colleges and universities who ignore that modern truth do so at their own peril.