



**Richard E. Nicolazzo** is president and CEO of [Nicolazzo & Associates](#), a strategic communications and crisis management firm headquartered in Boston, Mass.

April 16, 2009

## MESSAGE TO DOMINO'S: CONTINGENCY PLANNING STILL RULES THE ROOST

By Richard E. Nicolazzo

Just over a century ago, The Boy Scouts of America adopted a motto that is as poignant as ever: "Be Prepared."

It may sound old-fashioned, but the [disgusting video prank that damaged the Domino's Pizza brand](#) once again proves that major companies are not spending enough time on contingency crisis communications planning.

How else can you explain the comments of the company's spokesperson when asked about a YouTube video that depicted two employees in a North Carolina store putting nasal mucus on sandwiches and putting cheese up their noses?

The spokesperson, Tim McIntyre, told the website [ragan.com](#), "...Right now, it (the video) is on websites and blogs. It's not on ABC, CNN or *USA Today*."

So what? The damage had already been done.

By the time Domino's posted its own YouTube video and apology on its corporate web site, an estimated one million people had already seen the original.

Worse than that, the social media phenomenon Twitter helped spread the YouTube video like wildfire. Things got so bad that Domino's (once again about 48 hours after the first video appeared) had to create its own Twitter account.

Like it or not, social media explosions like this one can quickly cause real loss of business. BrandIndex, a daily online consumer brand perception service, reported that Domino's "buzz score" had dropped significantly from April 10 to April 14.

While it is too early to assess the long-term damage to the Domino's brand, one could imagine a scenario whereby hundreds of thousands of consumers call Pizza Hut instead of Domino's. The lost revenue in just a few days could amount to millions, or even hundreds of millions.

### Some Things Never Change

Having practiced crisis communications for more than 30 years, I continue to be astounded at the lack of real, in-your-face contingency communications planning.

I'm not talking about the kind of planning that results in a binder on a shelf containing the names of top company executives who should be contacted in a crisis. Or a boiler-plate crisis communications checklist posted on a company's Intranet. Or even the availability of a company spokesperson who can speak to the media.

In case after case, it's not what is said when the house is burning, but what has been done to prevent the fire in the first place.

FREE  
Cision Tip Sheet

"To Blog or  
Not to Blog?"



Gain tips and  
insights for  
targeting,  
engaging and,  
profiting from  
the blogosphere.

Download Now →

CISION

The Domino's flap is particularly troubling in that the company had not likely prepared for a YouTube or Twitter scenario. If it had, the responding video from the president would have been posted on day one, not 48 hours later. Similarly, the Twitter account could have gone live within hours of the YouTube video.

Even more puzzling is a New York Times story that indicated the company learned about the original video the day after it appeared, but decided not to respond aggressively, hoping the controversy would subside. "What we missed was the perpetual mushroom effect of viral sensations," said the Domino's spokesperson.

This is another indication that Domino's – and likely hundreds of other major companies – have not adequately addressed contingency communications planning as it relates to social media flare-ups.

While online media will continue to evolve, moving faster and faster in the weeks, months and years ahead, nothing is likely to replace the need for contingency planning that stays ahead of the curve.

A company's best communications talent (and outside counsel whenever necessary) needs to have a seat at the table right next to the CEO. Still, in too many cases, the crisis is handed to the spokesperson without the benefit of a rock-solid crisis communications contingency plan in place.

### **Old School is New School**

Companies should not let new mediums like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and other yet-to-be-invented services intimidate them. Instead, they need to focus on the fundamentals of sophisticated contingency communications planning. Here's a checklist of processes to consider:

- As part of the risk management process, appoint a "brand-threat" team charged with the responsibility of monitoring online sites, broadcast and print media 24-7. Have a system in place to direct problems right to the CEO.
- Explore organizational vulnerabilities. Get the company's top five executives in a room and discuss three to five worst-case scenarios. Hold nothing back.
- Develop a written plan, one with situation analyses, objectives, strategies, key audience definition, key messages, implementation tactics, and social media protocols.
- Establish a crisis team that includes senior management, communications and legal counsel (inside and outside), marketing, customer service and other key executives.
- Maintain transparency. We are long beyond the days when a company in crisis can say "no comment." Your customers and others demand answers. What is said should have its roots in the crisis communications plan.
- Invest in training. There is still no real substitute for media training and presentation training. Top executives and spokespersons need constant refresher courses. In a crisis, the CEO might need to post a YouTube video within hours.
- Stay current. Today's lightning-fast information environment demands a mix of young, mid-seasoned, and veteran communicators. There's nothing like a "20-something" to know what's hot.

- Pay for measurement. Don't assume that your message is getting through and mitigating brand damage. There is no shortcut to quantitative analysis. The nation's top polling firms can deliver results in 24 hours.

As time has proven, no company is fully immune to a crisis. But remember, more often than not it's not the crisis itself that does the damage, but how well management responds.

Truth be told, in our free-speech online society there is no way to truly stop people from pulling stupid stunts like the one that bashed Domino's.

A better plan, though, might have averted what amounted to a lynching by social media.

\* \* \*

**Richard E. Nicolazzo** is president and CEO of *Nicolazzo & Associates*, a strategic communications and crisis management firm headquartered in Boston, Mass.

[Archive of PR Commentary](#)



[return to main page of odwyerpr.com >>](#)



[Click here to print](#)



[E-mail to a friend](#)



[Tell O'Dwyer's what you think](#)

Commentaries on subject matter are welcome. Personal attacks are not allowed. O'Dwyer's reserves the right to cover any story it deems newsworthy.

---

**Responses:**

---

[Editorial Contacts](#) | [Order O'Dwyer Publications](#) | [Site Map](#)

Copyright © 1998-2009 J.R. O'Dwyer Company, Inc.  
271 Madison Ave., #600, New York, NY 10016; Tel: 212/679-2471 or Toll Free: 866/395-7710