

Media Relations

Even the best crisis media plan can be put to the test under the most difficult of circumstances, as evidenced by what occurred at Virginia Tech. In today's technological era, your students, not your professional media staff, may become your school's initial "spokespeople" and "shapers of your messages."

Hours before Virginia Tech President Charles Steger and Police Chief Wendell Flinchum held an evening press conference to provide official details, the media utilized unfiltered information, solicited and unsolicited, from students who were feeding media resources with their accounts through technological tools, including:

- **Eyewitness Accounts via Camera Phones and Digital Stills:** Virtually instantaneous reports can be created on CNN's website via its I-Report citizens journalism initiative. One of the most popular entries regarding the Virginia Tech shootings was a cell phone video shot from outside Norris Hall, with bullets heard in the background. The network reported that the video drew at least 900,000 hits on *CNN.com* in the first several hours.

Students also contributed digital still photos of what they saw firsthand. Networks such as CNN created galleries of these snapshots, plus commentary from the students who submitted them.

- **Journalistic and Non-journalistic Networking Websites:** As the tragedy unfolded, students used blogs, social networking sites, and podcasts to tell the story to the watching world. Members of the Virginia Tech community uploaded photos, videos and text about the shootings for all to see and hear.

With their web server down, contributors to Virginia Tech's newspaper, the *Collegiate Times*, filed blog entries on their parent company's website.

Facebook participants almost immediately posted questions trying to determine what was happening. With the University's official website jammed from high traffic, the social networking sites also set up message boards so students could let people know they were safe. These sites became a primary tool for communication.

Communicating in Times of Crisis

As we've learned from this incident, students who stay connected with one another through phones, IMing and social networks are going to spread information long before it is realistic for an "official memo" to be composed and distributed. Consider this comment from one of the students interviewed by CNN, "I had received a text message from a friend saying there was a shooter on campus. I didn't know if that was a rumor until I got the [campus] e-mail."

How can a campus combat this when technology is so readily available to students to express themselves to the media?

Consider the following ideas:

- Incorporate the posting of critical alert messages and communications onto social networking sites such as Facebook and message boards into your public relations protocol.
- Research the possibility of creating an emergency mass text message alert system through cell phones. Some companies who offer this service are:
e2Campus at www.e2campus.com/notification_services.htm
Fenestrae at www.fenestrae.com/
The NTI Group at www.ntigroup.com/
- Install a message alert mechanism at campus entranceways, similar to those found on major highways, to notify commuters and guests that the campus has been locked down or evacuated.

Take some time to brainstorm creative and effective ways to communicate with your student population in times of crisis. While this won't deter them from talking with the media, it will help you quickly distribute facts—and dispel rumors.

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