



# Water Crisis Communications

## Batten down the hatches!

*Lessons learned in a water crisis*

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MACO Summer Conference  
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# Agenda

- Mental Noise
- Messaging
  - Three key messages
  - What not to say – United Airlines
  - Message mapping
- Social Media
- DC Water
- Checklists

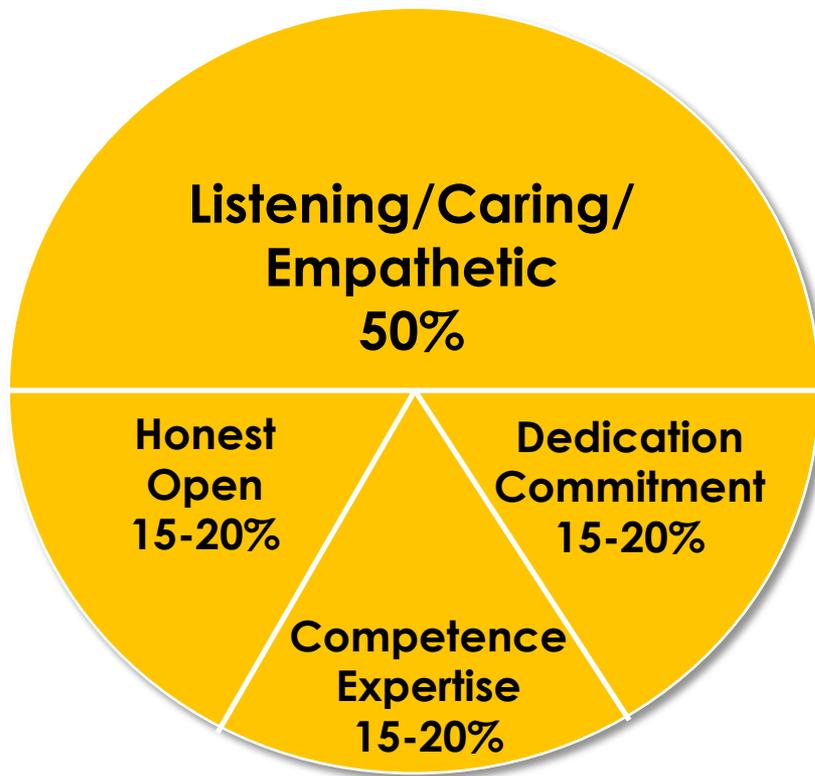
# Mental Noise in a Crisis



- Ability to process info drops by 80%
- Harder to hear, understand, remember
- Greater focus on negative than positive
- Comprehension level drops four points

# Three Key Message Themes

## ➔ The Crisis Trust Factor



*In normal situations, perceptions of trustworthiness are based on competence & expertise*

# Three Key Message Themes

- 1) **Express sincere empathy**, caring for the people impacted
- 2) **Take responsibility**
  - Don't pass on blame
- 3) **Describe next steps**
  - The resolution
  - Process to investigate and fix
  - How to avoid in future

# What Not to Say



# What Not to Say

*This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation.*

**- Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines**

## **“Re-accommodate”**

- ➔ All about United
- ➔ Legal language didn't address issue
- ➔ Didn't recognize impact on passengers
- ➔ Didn't discuss next steps

**Value of United  
dropped by \$750 million**

# What Not to Say

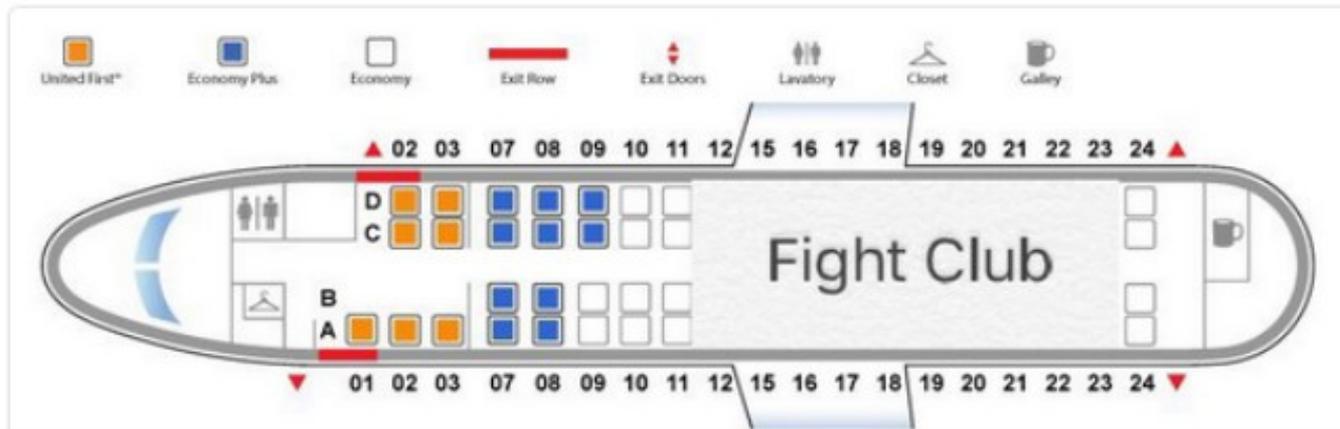


**McNeil** ✓

@Reflog\_18

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United Airlines is pleased to announce new seating on all domestic flights- in addition to United First and Economy Plus we introduce....



# What Not to Say



# What Not to Say



**Dave Cindrich**  
@capcindrich

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@Reflog\_18 Continental Airlines pilot vs  
United Airlines pilot:



5:03 PM - 11 Apr 2017

# What Not to Say

New photo of United Airlines asking for volunteers to deplane



# Message Mapping

## ➤ Mapping Process

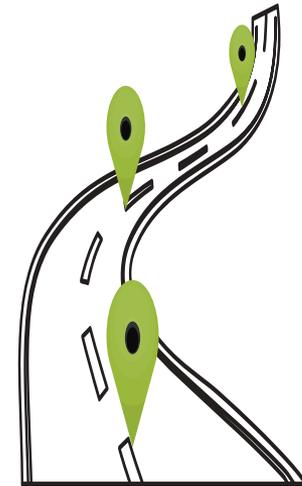
- ID stakeholders
- ID stakeholder questions
  - Analyze questions for underlying concerns
- Develop key messages
  - Develop supporting facts
- Deliver through appropriate channels



# Message Mapping

## ➤ Answering Questions

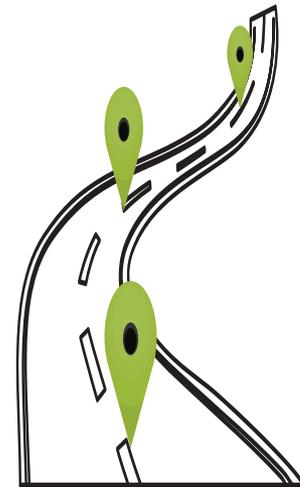
- Limit to 3 key messages
  - Maximum of 3 supporting facts for each
- Most important messages first and last



# Message Mapping

## ➔ Water Contamination Emergency: Top 12 Questions

- 1) How long until tap water is safe?
- 2) How do we get safe water?
- 3) What can we do at home to make it safe?
- 4) How dangerous is contaminant?
- 5) What is the contaminant?
- 6) Who is affected?
- 7) What if I drank the water?
- 8) Symptoms & long term effects of exposure?
- 9) Plans and processes for restoring water?
- 10) Where to get more information?
- 11) What uses of tap water are still safe?
- 12) How long has it been in water system?



# Social Media

- Only one tool in toolbox but increasingly vital
- Key information resource for journalists
  - 25% of Twitter's users
  - More than 50% are regular users
- Fastest method of disseminating information



# Social Media

- ➔ Helps maintain “partner” relationship w/ public
- ➔ Can be early warning signal from community
- ➔ Provides key influencers with information
- ➔ Excellent educational tool



# Social Media

- Post ASAP
- Continue posting & monitoring
  - Message can deteriorate in seconds
  - Reply quickly
  - Frequent posts showing progress and status
- All posts from one central source
- Must be 24/7, at least in a crisis
- Cancel pre-scheduled posts if not relevant
- Retweet trusted sources



# Crisis Within a Crisis

D.C. Politics

## D.C. officials defend not issuing landline, cell alerts to warn of water problems



Pipes at a D.C. Water pumping station. A problem Thursday evening at a pumping station caused low pressure in the system, leading officials to issue a boil-water advisory for parts of Northeast and Northwest Washington. (D.C. Water)

- ➔ Drop in water pressure
- ➔ Tested positive for coliform
- ➔ 100,000 residents impacted
- ➔ Boil water order issued

# Crisis Within a Crisis

## ➤ DC Government

- No reverse 911 calls although EPA recommended
- Alert DC text/emails
  - Only 14% of population enrolled

## ➤ DC Water

- Media
- Twitter, Facebook
- Robocalls
  - Took 8 hours, missing breakfast and lunch hours
  - 34K customers called, only 22K working numbers
- Website crashed

# Crisis Within a Crisis

- Other-language community outreach lagged
  - First tweet by Latino Affairs 3 hours behind
  - Linked to English-language website
  - Additional 3 hours to post precautions in Spanish
- Scant responses on Facebook
  - Residents replied to other resident posts due to vacuum

# Pre-Crisis Checklist

- ✓ Lay solid foundation of trust
  - ✓ Insights into operations throughout year
- ✓ Anticipate different scenarios
  - ✓ Staff roles
  - ✓ Messaging & deployment
- ✓ Establish approval processes & decision trees
- ✓ ID alternate communications staff in case of absences
- ✓ Create key partner/agency coordination processes
- ✓ Establish employee media policy



# Pre-Crisis

- ✓ Schedule periodic list updates
  - ✓ Media
  - ✓ Government officials
  - ✓ Partners
  - ✓ Key stakeholders
  - ✓ Third party validators
  - ✓ Target audiences
  - ✓ Resources for the community



# Pre-Crisis

- ✓ Create messaging library
  - ✓ Use Message Mapping process
  - ✓ Pre-written & approved
    - ✓ Initial announcements
    - ✓ Holding statements
    - ✓ Core messaging
    - ✓ Instructions for residents
    - ✓ FAQs
    - ✓ Message templates
    - ✓ Social media posts
    - ✓ Press releases



# Pre-Crisis

## ✓ ID channels of communication

- ✓ Dedicated phone line
- ✓ Website
- ✓ Blogs
- ✓ Media
- ✓ Social Media
- ✓ Email

- ✓ Site visits
- ✓ Presentations
- ✓ Internal communications
- ✓ Reverse 911
- ✓ Text messages
- ✓ Bill stuffers



What are customers' primary sources of information?

# Immediately Before Crisis

- ✓ Use all appropriate communications channels to inform stakeholders of steps you are taking
- ✓ Provide preparation guidance to stakeholders
- ✓ Inform stakeholders of all resources for ongoing information



# During Crisis

- ✓ Take ownership
- ✓ Communicate first and often
- ✓ Be transparent
- ✓ Provide guidance
- ✓ Maintain strong social media presence
- ✓ Use the opportunity to educate



# During Crisis

- ✓ Use external validators
  - ✓ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
  - ✓ Public health agencies
  - ✓ Universities



# Three Key Message Themes

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# Water Crisis Communications

**EPA: Effective Risk & Crisis Communication During Water Emergencies**

**American Water Works Association Emergency Planning**

*In a crisis, don't hide behind anything or anybody.  
They're going to find you anyway.*

*Bear Bryant*

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