

# Evaluating public relations campaigns

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## Case study: Putting Lessons Learned to Work in the Management of Communications after a Campus Shooting - Northern Illinois

Northern Illinois University, which is a public research university located in DeKalb, Illinois, sought out to successfully manage all aspects of crisis communications, from emergency alerts, news conferences and message development to media relations, event management and speechwriting after the shooting incident on February 14, 2008 shortly after 3 p. m.

In efforts to address this situation, the Northern Illinois University webmaster spoke to her Virginia Tech counterpart to learn new web communication techniques; the department head attended a national higher education meeting at which Virginia Tech administrators shared lessons learned; and Public Affairs staff participated in an exhaustive, line-by-line review of the Virginia Tech Review Panel report. Thus, the NIU crisis communications plan that was enacted on February 14, 2008 was greatly informed by the collective wisdom of the aforementioned experts, as well as the generosity of their counterparts at Virginia Tech.

The outcome objectives of the campaign included: (1) to keep all audiences, particularly students and parents, as widely informed as possible throughout crisis, (2) to use website to provide updates to all audiences, including the news-hungry media, (3) to treat news media as partners, as they have communication tools necessary to reach primary audiences, (4) to maintain institutional credibility through maximum timely disclosure, (5) to manage the message- Victims and their families are first priority, (6) to re-establish reputation as a safe and caring campus community.

Among the output objectives of the campaign were: (1) issuing of a report

praising the NIU's response and excellence in crisis communication by the Illinois Governor's Task Force on Campus Security, (2) commissioning of a report on the NIU's incident in which crisis communication is held up as exemplary by the U. S Department of Homeland Security, (3) praising of the NIU institution for " transparency and candour" by the Chicago Tribune. As a result, to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign, Applications from prospective students continue to rise, and only 19 of 300+ students directly affected by the shooting left the university. NIU Public Affairs staffs are in demand as speakers and consultants for other universities developing crisis plans. No lawsuits have been filed in connection with the February 14, 2008 shooting. Spontaneous and unsolicited gifts for scholarships and memorials total more than \$1 million. In turn, an additional evaluation method I would recommend for this campaign is speaking directly to the students so as to evaluate those who need help even if they do not ask for it so as to prevent similar incidents in the future.

#### References

Chigani, Amine. A campus situational awareness and emergency response management system architecture. Blacksburg, Va.: University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2011. Print.