

## **THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS SITUATIONS CASE STUDY: FIRE IN SWITCH BUILDING OF VODAFONE NETHERLANDS**

**Ayça GÜZÜNLER MENTEŞ\***

### **Abstract**

In today's media environment, news of crisis can reach the outside world within minutes. The moment at which a crisis becomes widely known is the most vulnerable moment for an organization. In the absence of information, rumours will fill the void. Uncontrollable rumours can be devastating. The same applies to speculations or assumptions by company spokespersons who are not well prepared. Therefore it is extremely important that the media do not get a distorted picture or the wrong idea. The initial picture forms the basis for all future elaboration and adjusting this picture is extremely difficult. Good communication is therefore essential to retain the existing customers and ensure reputation of company is affected as minimum as possible.

This is the success story about an unusual week at Vodafone Netherlands in April 2012, dealing with fire in Rotterdam switch building which was serving 3,5 million customers, using effective Social Media & Crisis Communication Strategies - as a result: preventing churn.

**Keywords:** Telecommunications, Crisis Management, Business Continuity, Emergency, Recovery Procedures, Resilience, Redundancy Planning, Social Media, Reputation and Image Impact

## **KRİZ DURUMLARINDA İLETİŞİM VE SOSYAL MEDYANIN ROLÜ ÖRNEK OLAY: VODAFONE HOLLANDA SWITCH BİNASI YANGINI**

### **Özet**

İlk mobil telefon konuşmasının yapıldığı 1 Ocak 1985'ten bu yana, Vodafone önemli bir yol kat etmiştir. İngiltere'nin Newbury bölgesinde küçük bir operatör olarak başlayan firma, 25 sene içerisinde global bir şirkete dönüşmüştür. Bugün, dünya genelinde 7. en değerli marka olarak saygı görmekte ve 30'dan fazla ülkede 403 milyon aboneye hizmet vermektedir.

Kabul edelim, teknoloji ve bilişimin rekor seviyede geliştiği bir çağda bulunmaktayız. İçinde yaşadığımız topluma katkıları tartışmasız büyük olan bu durum, dış dünya ile aramızdaki mesafeyi de neredeyse yok denecek seviyelere indirmiştir. "Kara haber tez yayılır" diye boşuna dememişler. Artık herkes her şeyi görüyor, duyuyor ve başkalarına aktarabiliyor. Nerede olursak olalım, sosyal medya ve diğer kanallar aracılığı ile kesinti haberleri kısa surede büyüyerek geniş kitlelere ulaşabiliyor. Bu nedenle, Vodafone gibi firmalar için kriz yönetimi oldukça kritik bir konu haline gelmektedir.

Kriz yönetim planlarını oluşturmak şarttır, ancak tek başına yeterli değildir. Şirketlerin kriz yönetim prosedürlerine ek olarak kriz esnasında kullanılacak iletişim stratejilerini de geliştirmeleri gerekmektedir.

İletişimin önemini kavrayan ve bunu lehine kullanan bir firmanın yaşadığı olay ne kadar büyük olsa da, bu durumdan daha az zarar ile sıyrılması mümkündür. Buna en güzel örnek, Vodafone

---

\* Vodafone Hollanda, Kıdemli İş Sürekliliği ve Risk Yöneticisi, [ayca.guzunler@vodafone.com](mailto:ayca.guzunler@vodafone.com)

Hollanda'nın 4 Nisan 2012'de yaşadığı yangın ve toplum dinamiğini çözerek kriz yönetiminde uyguladığı iletişim stratejisidir. Ülke genelinde en çok değer verilen şeffaflık, samimiyet ve şartlar ne olursa olsun pozitif mesajlar verme ilkesini iletişim stratejilerine yansıtan firma, iletişim tekniklerinde çeşitli ilklere imza atmış ve hizmet veremediği süre uzun olmasına rağmen müşteri memnuniyetini düşürmemeyi ve abone kaybı yaşamamayı başarmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Telekomünikasyon, Kriz Yönetimi, İş Sürekliliği, Acil Durum, Kurtarma Prosedürleri, Yedekleme Planları, Sosyal Medya, İtibar ve İmaj Etkisi.

## Introduction

A crisis is characterized by sudden disruption of normal routines, which easily leads to uncertainty, fears and a sense of lack of control. There is always a clear and fundamental need for information and reassurance, both delivered in terms that people can relate to immediately and avoiding statistics, jargon or odd comparisons.

Crisis Communications has largely been represented as comprising what is said by an organisation in the media during and after a crisis. While Crisis Communication and Media Management are important facets of Crisis Management, they focus almost entirely on outward facing activities. Any organisation in crisis also tends to have a range of internal needs that require resolution; therefore an effective and timely crisis response consists of disseminating information at appropriate times both internally as well as externally, ensuring clear communication objectives are set, not only for the incident itself.

External communication management during a crisis is likely to be very different from “business as usual” communications, where communication is much more controlled by the organisation dealing with business reporters and editors. In a crisis situation it is likely that there will be difficult questions posed from stakeholders, as well as tabloid and investigative reporters who are seeking an interesting story and have no regard for the sensitivities of the organisation.

It is therefore essential for survival that Vodafone was well prepared to respond quickly and effectively to any media involvement in a crisis situation and to protect our corporate reputation during Rotterdam fire incident.

## The Incident

On April 4<sup>th</sup>. 2012 at 05.00 hours in the morning a fire started in an industrial building close to Rotterdam. Adjacent to this building an important MTX (Mobile Telephony Exchange – Switch) location of Vodafone Netherlands was located and the fire quickly spread to the outside of the MTX site. Network equipment was exposed to severe heat, as well as water damage from the Fire Department attempting to extinguish the fire. On instruction from the Fire Department, concerned for human safety, the power to the MTX was cut and battery backup disconnected. At this point all services to all customers serviced from the Rotterdam MTX were lost. The Rotterdam site is estimated to serve around 3.5 million customers. Situated in the most densely populated area of the Netherlands, this network location was handling almost 20% of all national traffic for Vodafone

Netherlands and played an important role in signalling traffic and interconnection traffic to other operators (national & international) as well in handling international traffic.

### **Business Continuity Management System of Vodafone**

Vodafone's Business Continuity Management System (BCMS) defines the basic roles, structure, accountabilities, responsibilities and elements for the BCM-approach and includes a scenario-independent Crisis Management procedure to ensure an effective response in case of unknown major incidents, threatening the whole company. All business critical processes and activities, assets and resources, systems and network elements are taken into account.

Contractual commitments with suppliers and other third parties, who are relevant for ensuring the continuity of business critical activities, are in place. These third party contracts reflect Vodafone's approach to Business Continuity Management and ensured fast deployment of spare staff & equipment to respond quickly to the Rotterdam-fire crisis.

### **Service Restoration**

The fire was initially noticed by the NMC (Network Management Centre) who saw an unexpected raise of the temperature in the MTX location. Although there was at that moment no direct impact for the Vodafone services, after a discussion with the fire brigade on-site and the initial impact analysis by Vodafone the internal crisis management procedure was started at 06.00 hours, due to the high potential impact. A crisis management team was formed, relevant staff was mobilised, the two designated crisis war rooms became fully operational and a mobile disaster recovery truck (containing of a spare MTX and transmission equipment) was send on site. According to the established recovery procedures backups of the data was made to prevent data loss in case of equipment failure or destruction. Luckily, due to the fact that both buildings were unmanned at the moment of the fire, there were no human casualties or injuries.



**Figure 1. Netherlands Map and 2 of V FNL Switch/MTX Locations**

Although the Vodafone building was not directly impacted by the fire itself, the other building was completely destroyed. Due to the construction of the two buildings, the magnitude of the fire and the required extinguishment work of the fire department, extinguishment water and soot particles massively entered the Vodafone switch location. To prevent electrocution danger, the fire brigade ordered at 10.40 hours a complete shutdown of the power in the Vodafone building (including UPS and diesel generator). Due to their redundant set-up, many of the affected core network systems switched over to another location. However, due to the amount of traffic handled by the Rotterdam network node, severe congestions and loss of service appeared in the Vodafone network. Impact: approximately 12.00, 2G and 3G sites went off air, interconnects (national & international) were lost and 33% of customer voicemail boxes were destroyed. As a result, all customers (approx. 1 million) in the impacted area (including the capital – Den Haag- and the Rotterdam harbour area) were left without any voice and data service (see figure below – affected radio access network area’s). As the MTX location in Rotterdam was also handling traffic for another area in the Netherlands, a service degradation was also noticed in the Utrecht region. Also many enterprises who are using the M2M (machine to machine) portfolio of Vodafone to offer their services to the public were affected. Public transport in Rotterdam, Schiphol national airport, government agencies, harbour companies and many others encountered degradation in service levels.

At 12.00 hours the recovery truck arrived on site. Unfortunately, due to the risk of collapsing of the destroyed building, the fire brigade did not allow to deploy the truck and connect them to the Vodafone network.

At 16.39 hours access to the switch-building was allowed again and a first inspection round was performed. The building and equipment were seriously damaged by water, smoke and soot preventing to reconnect the equipment to the power. It soon became clear that the damage to the building and equipment was of such a nature that none of them could be reused any more. At the same time, the fire brigade declared the site and environment safe again and the process to deploy the mobile switch and connect the disaster recovery equipment to the network started. Once connected, the mobile switch could take over the functionality of the Rotterdam building enabling to bring the affected 2G and 3G sites on air again.

At the same time, preparations started to bring the VTC (Vodafone Test Centre) in “operational mode”. This VTC contains all equipment of a switch location, but is used to test new services and as such is not connected to the live network. By connecting the VTC to the network and rerouting traffic towards the VTC, additional capacity and functionality became available. Already from the point in time that the power was cut, the network management centre started to reroute traffic from the affected area to other MTX locations with spare capacity.

By existing agreements – as part of the disaster recovery capabilities with our network equipment suppliers we were able to fly in and deploy additional network equipment. As an example, to enhance network coverage, additional BSC’s (Base Station Controllers

– 2G) and RNC's (Radio Network Controllers – 3G) were deployed in 4 days, where a typical deployment process under normal circumstances can take several months.

As a result of all these effective recovery operations and crisis management activities, the first call in the impacted area was made at 01.50 hours on April 5<sup>th</sup>, less than 20 hours after the start of the incident. In the following days and weekend (Eastern weekend) all affected sites were gradually brought on air again. On April 7<sup>th</sup>, all 1.4 million affected mail boxes were restored. On April 9<sup>th</sup> basic 2G voice & data coverage was restored in the affected area. 3G services were fully restored on April 14<sup>th</sup>. On April 10<sup>th</sup>, the first business day after the Eastern weekend and traditionally a day with a severe load on the Vodafone network, the network proved to be stable again by handling all the load without any major issues. On April 11<sup>th</sup> all services were fully available to our customers again.

Vodafone's NL business continuity management capabilities proved to be effective in restoring the basic voice and data services. The agreed, implemented and regularly tested incident management and -recovery procedures with our main network management partner Ericsson helped in effective communication and restoration actions thus limiting the impact for our customers as much as possible. Agreed change management process (including emergency change procedure) assured coordinated restoration actions. Technical staff from other Vodafone OPCO's, Ericsson and other suppliers from several countries were mobilised and flown-in to help. Procedures to deploy extra staff quickly in emergency situations are part of the BCM processes both within Vodafone and Ericsson.

### **Crisis Management**

Vodafone NL has an established crisis management procedure that was used during this incident.

The issue was initially noticed by the Vodafone NL NMC (Network Management Centre) who saw a raise of temperature in the Rotterdam switch location. After contacting the fire brigade, the NMC was informed on the fire in the adjacent building and the potential risk to the Vodafone building. The normal escalation procedure was involved and the HEMO (Head of Escalation Manager Operations) was informed. Seen the risk and the potential impact, the HEMO immediately declared a crisis situation and invoked the crisis management plan. The GMT (general management team) was informed and the CIO was appointed as crisis manager.

Two teams were formed:

- One team was situated in Maastricht (where most of the technical people are located). This team consisted mainly of the TLT (Technology Leadership Team) and was led by the CTO/CIO. This team was mainly focused on the technical recovery and restoration of the services to our customers. They were responsible to involve technical resources, define & prioritize technical recovery actions and alignment with Ericsson and other suppliers. In the first days after the incident this team was operating on a 24/7 basis.

- The other team was located in Amsterdam (Vodafone NL headquarters) and was mainly formed by the remaining GMT members. This team was responsible for internal and external communication, media and customer interaction.

Each hour a video conference was held between the two teams to provide a status update and agree on next steps. A logbook was created and maintained to record all decisions made and actions agreed.

Initially, the focus of the recovery activities was mainly on the reactivation of all the impacted 2G and 3G sites. Once this process was on-going, the focus was shifted to restore all the impacted services (to accommodate this, a dedicated work stream per service was set up). On the Sunday and the Monday of the Eastern weekend (when coverage and services recovery was exceeding 90%) the focus was shifted towards network stability (in order to be prepared for the traffic load and peak on the first business day after the Eastern weekend).

The Crisis Communications Plan of Vodafone Netherlands described the principles and approach which:

- Clearly define streamlined communication structures that enable ownership and action at appropriate levels, with clear identification of responsibilities;
- Maintain organisation structures and reporting lines in the event of a crisis.

Crisis Communication Team was responsible for the following tasks:

- Monitoring all media reports on the organization and the incident;
- Internal communications to staff;
- External communications to various external stakeholders;
- Informing and talking to the media.

For this team, it was paramount to define to ‘real’ problem, both short and long term, and to define it through the eyes of the affected stakeholders: it is important to think “outside in”. Also assume the “worst case” scenario and prepare for it.

The following principles guided any crisis communication situation during the Rotterdam incident:

- Show respect for the concern raised and appropriate empathy,
- Be clear and honest at all times – avoid superficial or patronizing information,
- Be as factual as possible, admit the unknown and commit to a continuous flow of information as it becomes available,
- Evaluate the need to take responsibility while investigating the blame,
- Do not speculate no matter the extent of the speculation,
- Acknowledge the crisis at the earliest stages – even if the facts or implications may not be known yet it is,
- Comforting to know that leadership seeking solutions is aware of the crisis,
- Assign the spokesman role to someone who is trained and in a position of authority and has the ability to ensure that Vodafone Netherlands follows through on any statements or commitments - try not to change this person throughout the crisis,

- Using straightforward facts and statements,
- Not being afraid to state “We do not know,” when it is the truth,
- Quoting recognized authorities on the facts whenever possible.

In summary, the 5 C’s of good crisis communication were applied: **Concern, Clarity, Control, Confidence and Competence.**

Communication on the incident and the recovery status was perceived by all (including customers) to be extremely effective. In order to inform our customers and all other relevant parties, Vodafone NL took the following initiatives:

- Regularly official statements were released on the Vodafone.nl website and direct to the press agencies.
- Regular e-mail messages were sent to all our customers to inform them on the status.
- Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Forum) were used to provide status updates.
- SMS were used to inform impacted customers on the status of their voice mail box recovery.
- Rob Shuter, CEO of Vodafone NL, released several video’s on YouTube to interact directly with our customers (including an apology video and a video recorded in the impacted switch location to visualize the damage). The use of social media (YouTube) by the CEO was innovative, providing a “personal touch” and was well received by customers. The fact that videos were recorded on a smart phone with no corporate production, giving a “fly on the wall” view of the CEO at the site talking directly to the audience, was highly effective.
- A dedicated web sites were put online where our customers could follow all the restoration activities, get regular status updates and consult other information.
- There was direct contact with larger customers, giving them regular updates on progress and expected recovery for their specific situation.
- Public bodies such as the Government, Opta and Agentschap Telecom were given constant updates by Corporate Affairs on the outage.
- Friendly gesture: During the crisis, Vodafone announced an offer of 4 days free national calls and SMS for all Vodafone customers in NL (or a discount on their next bill where customers already had free calls and SMS as part of a bundle). This was a gesture to keep customers happy. It was agreed that the offer would take place in the week of Queens Day, four weeks after the outage.

### **Post Crisis**

On April 14<sup>th</sup> the crisis was officially closed down.

Several post crisis work streams were set-up (for example: an insurance work stream to prepare and submit an insurance claim, a supplier management work stream to ensure damaged/destroyed equipment was replaced as soon as possible, a communications and legal work stream to deal with all the legal aspects of this incidents, etc.). Most of these work streams are today no longer in place, while others are still operational

After the closure of the crisis, an extensive evaluation was performed to check the access & core network architecture and the crisis management and -recovery procedures for flaws and/or possible improvements.

On the network side, a program called “Fast Forward” has been launched to implement several innovations and improvements /mitigations. The 4 Fast Forward-goals are:

1. Prepare the network for future innovations.
2. Improve capacity & radio coverage and introduce 4G-technology.
3. Improve network resilience by reducing the number of switch-locations and build a fully geo-redundant “super-switches” architecture.
4. Transformation to “All IP”- network thus improving traffic engineering capabilities and improving network resilience.

The Business Continuity plan has been extended with a new recovery-process. In corporation with the Dutch ministry of Economic Affairs an agreement has been reached between Vodafone NL, KPN and T-Mobile on the so called ‘Regional Roaming’ process. This means that in case of a future outage with a wide geographically spread impact, the impacted operator can use the networks of the other two operators to provide their customer with temporary network coverage from another operator, allowing them to use mobile services.

### Power of Social Media

Social media has become a part of everyday life in Netherlands as in many other parts of the world, according to a study by Multiscope, looking at 13,000 people in the Holland (from Telecompaper, 13 December 2012).

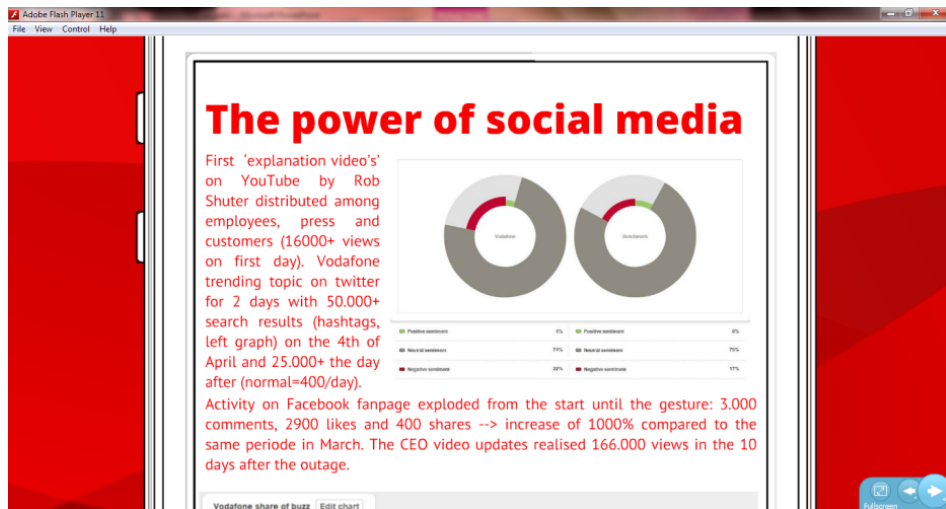


Figure 2. Social Media Messages during VF NL Rotterdam Crisis



In 2010, Dutch people spend 40 million hours networking online; this has now risen by 50 percent to 60 million hours. 62 percent of all time on social media to Facebook spends, compared with 16 percent two years earlier.

People use social media not only to keep in touch with friends, colleagues and family, share photos and as a pleasurable pastime. They also keep track of everything going on in their society via using these tools.

Companies use social media as a tool for direct contact with customers and marketing, whereas during a crisis this tool becomes crucial for information sharing, updates and story-telling.

### **Conclusion**

Things are subject to interpretation in mind and perception is the new reality.

What Vodafone Netherlands have accomplished during Crisis Management process of Rotterdam fire via focusing on Communication and using effective social media had become a best practise and gained major benefits to the company such as managing the brand image and retaining customers even after a major disruption.

This is a good practise, that all other companies – no matter which sector they operate in - can use as reference and build similar strategies within the organization.

### **Related video links:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwm7fG4fdbM>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFB534Mwr34>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPmydD3LR7k>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8S43MqZnck>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBp0pab\\_qgk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBp0pab_qgk)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRY6-YBYSxI>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m\\_R7cxtauw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m_R7cxtauw)

