Project Design Summary
A three part study will provide a qualitative review of which organizations are more likely to use the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate and gather information during a crisis. The research will use questionnaires, focus groups and telephone interviews to test the validity of the study’s hypothesis, which suggests that a strong relationship exists between an organization’s use of the Internet’s interactive tools to communicate during a crisis and the size of the organization’s public relations department. Participants will be culled from a group of attendees of the 2006 National Hurricane Conference who hold the title of public information officer. A mailing list of conference attendees will be purchased from the conference organizers. To comply with East Carolina University Institutional Review Board exemption rules, the study data will be collected and recorded to ensure participant confidentiality.

Public information officers who attended the National Hurricane Conference were sampled because they generally work for coastal governments, which have significant external communication requirements during a storm. In addition, it is theorized that this sample has a wide range of experience in using the Internet to communicate during a crisis because most coastal communities experience weather events often, requiring communication with a diverse population of stakeholders.
Phase 1 – Questionnaire
Summary

A one and a half page questionnaire will be mailed to 100 (N=200) randomly selected attendees of the 2006 National Hurricane Conference who hold the title of public information officer. The study consists of 10 close-ended questions to encourage a strong response rate. Nominal data will be collected and a Chi Square test will be used to verify confidence in the hypothesis.

All participants will voluntarily complete the survey with no compensation or freebies offered. The questionnaire will be mailed to each participant with an enclosed pre-addressed, stamped envelope. In addition, the following note will appear on the envelope to help ensure the survey is not thrown away: “Crisis communications survey enclosed – please do not discard.”

Phase 1 of the research consists of:

- Introductory email asking participants to monitor their mail for the questionnaire
- Introductory letter and questionnaire
- Follow up letter (to be sent 10 days following questionnaire mailing)

The survey questions were reviewed to ensure clarity and impartiality. A telephone number and an email address will be provided to give participants ample opportunity to obtain additional information.

This approach was chosen due to feasibility and economy. A pilot test will be conducted and three participants will be used.

I expect a return rate of 30 per cent.
Phase 1 – Questionnaire
Introductory Email

Subject: Use of the Internet’s Interactive Tools for Crisis Communications

Dear Communications/Public Information Professional:

We would like to ask for your help in researching the use of the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. In the next 5-10 days you will receive a questionnaire in the mail with my return address. Please do not discard this survey. We need your help in determining which organizations are using the Internet’s interactive features to communicate during a crisis. Together, we can work to identify how the Internet is changing the science of crisis communications.

Survey and final study results will be posted on our web site, www.xxxx.com, so that you can better understand how your peers are using the Internet during a crisis. All responses will be confidential.

Thank you in advance for your input.

Sincerely,

Roberta Thuman
rthuman@yahoo.com
252-441-5508
Phase 1 – Questionnaire
Letter Accompanying Questionnaire

Date

RE: Use of the Internet’s Interactive Tools for Crisis Communications

Dear Communications/Public Information Professional,

We would like to ask for your help in researching the use of the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. In particular, this study focuses on the use of the Internet’s interactive features, such as online chat, threaded dialogue, and electronic bulletin boards, to communicate during a crisis.

Why Participate?
We need your help in determining which organizations are using the Internet’s interactive features to communicate during a crisis and which aren’t. Together, we can work to identify how the Internet is changing the science of crisis communications.


All responses will be confidential. Please complete the questionnaire and mail it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope that has been provided for your convenience.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Thank you for volunteering your time to assist us in our research.

Sincerely,

Roberta Thuman
rthuman@yahoo.com
252-441-5508
Phase 1 – Questionnaire
Follow Up Letter

Date

RE: Use of the Internet’s Interactive Tools for Crisis Communications

Dear Communications/Public Information Professional,

You should have recently received a questionnaire in the mail regarding the use of the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. We hope that you have taken the time to assist researchers in better understanding how the Internet is changing the science of crisis communications.

If you have been unable to complete the questionnaire, please take the time to do so. Your input is critical.

If you have questions or need a copy of the survey, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Roberta Thuman
rthuman@yahoo.com
252-441-5508
Phase 1 – Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Background

Do you hold the job title of public information officer for your organization?
Yes _____ No _____

For whom do you work?
Local Government _____ County Government _____ State Government _____ Federal Government _____ Other _____

How many full time employees work for your organization?
1-100 _____ 101-500 _____ 501-1000 _____ 1000+ _____

Does your organization have a public relations, public information, or communications department?
Yes _____ No _____

If you have a public relations, public information, or communications department, how many employees are working within the department?
1-10 _____ 11-25 _____ 26-50 _____ 51+ _____

If you do not have a public relations, public information, or communications department, how many employees in your organization have external communication responsibilities?
1-Me _____ 2-5 _____ 6-10 _____ 11+ _____

If you have a public relations, public information, or communications department, what is that department’s annual budget?
Less than $10,000 _____ $10,000 - $25,000 _____ $26,000 - $50,000 _____ $51,000 - $100,000 _____ $101,000+ _____

Has your agency faced a crisis in the past 24 months that has required external communications?
Yes _____ No _____

If your organization experienced a crisis in the past 24 months, did you use the Internet to disseminate information related to the crisis?
Yes _____ No _____
If you used the Internet to communicate information to the public during a crisis, what tools did you use? (Check all that apply)
- Posted news release to organization’s web site
- Posted information to Internet newsgroup
- Posted information to web log (blog)
- Sent email to broadcast list
- Participated in electronic chat
- Other (please list)

What means do you currently use to communicate crisis information externally? (Check all that apply)
- News Release to media outlets
- News Release to organization web site
- Email broadcast
- News conference
- Kiosk or bulletin board posting
- Newsletter
- Web log (Blog)
- Internet news group
- Electronic chat

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please place your response in the enclosed self addressed envelope. The envelope has been stamped for ease of return.
Phase 2 - Focus Groups
Summary
A focus group of ten survey respondents, who hold the title of public information officer, will convene on a conference call to further determine if larger public relations departments are more likely to use the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. The focus group will consist of public information officers from a sampling of east coast government organizations. This sample will include organizations with a diversity of populations and crisis communication requirements. All focus group responses will be confidential.

I will act as the group’s moderator.
Phase 2 - Focus Groups
Focus Group Invitation Letter

Date

RE: Use of the Internet’s Interactive Tools for Crisis Communications

Dear Communications/Public Information Professional,

Thank you for participating in our recent survey regarding research on the use of the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. Your input is crucial to an improved understanding of how the Internet is changing the science of crisis communications.

I would like to invite you to participate in the next phase of our study. A group consisting of ten of your peers will be convened to further study the use of the Internet’s interactive features during a crisis. A toll free number will be provided for group members to participate in a joint conference call scheduled for 9 a.m.-11 a.m. Thursday, January 10, 2007.

Why Participate?
Our initial questionnaire was only the first step in identifying how the Internet is changing crisis communications. This study phase will allow researchers to explore in more detail why or why not an organization is using the Internet’s interactive features to communicate externally during a crisis.

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please send me an email at rthuman@yahoo.com. As always, all input will be confidential and used solely for study purposes.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Roberta Thuman
rthuman@yahoo.com
252-441-5508
Phase 2 - Focus Groups
Focus Group Questions

What types of crises has your organization experienced in the past 24 months?

During a crisis, how does your organization distribute information to the public?

If your organization uses the Internet to disseminate information during a crisis, which of its tools does it use?

If your organization does not use the Internet to disseminate information during a crisis, why not?

If your organization uses the Internet to disseminate information during a crisis, but did not use the web’s interactive tools, why not?

Which Internet tools does your organization find to be the most helpful in disseminating information to the public during a crisis?
Phase 3 - One on One Telephone Interviewing
Summary

Telephone interviews of five survey respondents will determine the validity of the questionnaire and focus group findings. The sample will be randomly pulled from the focus group participants. This sample will include organizations with a diversity of populations and crisis communication requirements. An 800 telephone number will be provided to the participants. All telephone interview responses will be confidential.

I will conduct the interviews.
Phase 3
One on One Telephone Interviewing
Invitation Letter

Date

RE: Use of the Internet’s Interactive Tools for Crisis Communications

Dear Communications/Public Information Professional,

Thank you for participating in our recent group discussion regarding the use of the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate information during a crisis. Your input is crucial to an improved understanding of how the Internet is changing the science of crisis communications.

I would like to invite you to participate in the final phase of our study. I will be conducting one on one telephone interviews to further explore the reasons behind the use of the Internet’s interactive features by organizations during a crisis. In particular, I will be exploring the reasoning behind your organization’s use or non-use of particular Internet tools.

Why Participate?
The final phase of our research will enable us to confirm study findings.

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please send me an email at rthuman@yahoo.com. As always, all input will be confidential and used solely for study purposes.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Roberta Thuman
rthuman@yahoo.com
252-441-5508
Phase 3  
One on One Interviewing  

Interview Questions

Has your organization used online chat, threaded dialogue or electronic bulletin boards to communicate externally during a crisis? If so, what are your thoughts on these tools and will your organization use them again during another crisis? If your organization has not used online chat, threaded dialogue or electronic bulletin boards to communicate externally during a crisis, why not?

Do you feel there are barriers to your organization using the Internet’s interactive tools during a crisis?

During the focus group meeting, you stated that your organization posted news releases to an electronic bulletin board, but that your organization did not feel that online chat was a viable option for crisis information dissemination. Why do you think your organization felt this way?

If your organization has not used the Internet’s interactive tools to communicate during a crisis, are there plans to do so in the future?