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Challenges faced by Remote and Rural Communities
in North Eastern Ontario

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Abstract

Factors such as remoteness, distances, low density of population, technological challenges and weather all impact the implementation of crisis communication plans in rural and remote communities. The organization studied experiences those challenges. It is a large, decentralized health care organization in north eastern Ontario that provides health care services to people who live in 42 per cent of the province's geographic area. Staff members of the organization were asked what they think are the most effective communications tools to utilize in a crisis. They agreed that the tools must be adaptable and that creative systems must be put in place not only to recognize the challenges, but to successfully overcome them. The research found that traditional, tried and tested conventional communication methods and direct human interaction are preferred, and are more effective than more modern, technology-based tools.

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Background

June 2003 – the City of Toronto is recovering from a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic. The SARS legacy includes 361 reported cases, 33 deaths and a severe economic impact on the tourism industry in Ontario (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003). The SARS epidemic highlighted the need for emergency planning and organizational readiness throughout the health care system, at all times.

In May 2009, H1N1, also known at the time as the Mexican Swine Flu, is being labelled as a possible, imminent pandemic. Most medical and political leaders state that Canada is much better prepared for this given the lessons learned from SARS. However, despite the attention given to pandemic and emergency response readiness, research shows that not everyone is operationally ready for a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 2001).

An integral part of emergency preparedness has to be communications. Given its particular geographical challenges, the North East CCAC has no choice but to be creative, innovative, and responsive in order to provide effective and efficient communications. It is important to note that both internal and external communications are equally important. Despite advances in technology and the globalization of communications, the reality is that it has become more difficult to reach all key audiences simultaneously (Falkheimer and Heide, 2007). Yet, faced with a crisis, immediate or timely communication is essential (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 2001). It has been proven that organizations are successful if they are able to communicate immediately after a crisis occurs, thereby proving the importance of timely communications. It is also important to note that even during times of crisis when an organization might be tempted to focus on its own interests or concerns rather than communicating with its external audiences, it is of the utmost importance for those organizations not to do so. Instead they need to ensure that the input, feedback and questions of all its stakeholders are heard and answered (Flynn, 2006).

Northern Canada and Northern Ontario are unique and very different from other regions in North America. Statistics prove that most communities are quite small and isolated, some without road access. The rural and remote communities “lag behind” (Ramirez, 2001: 1) the larger urban communities with regards to infrastructure as well as services and professional human resources. Factors such as remoteness, distances, low density of population, technological challenges and

weather will impact the implementation of a crisis plan as well as any communications plan (Ontario Hospital Association, 2008).

Many companies, organizations and government ministries believe that the internet is the solution for communications challenges faced by residents in rural and remote areas (Singh, 2004). However, that contention can be disputed. In 2004, Statistics Canada undertook a study to determine if rurality affects internet use. This study was undertaken because of the attention that Information and Communication Technology had been receiving as being the best method of delivering information to rural and remote areas. Previous Statistics Canada research had shown that fewer rural Canadians were using the internet compared to urban Canadians (McLaren, 2002). The results of this recent research indicated that in fact, rurality does appear to be an independent constraint on internet use (Singh, 2004). This is important information given the significance organizations place on internet communications.

Communicating via the media with remote and rural Northern Canada populations has recently become more difficult. On March 25, 2009, CBC president and chief executive officer, Hubert Lacroix, announced that the public broadcaster would cut a total of approximately 800 full-time positions at CBC/Radio-Canada. Direct impacts of these cuts would be the reduction of regional noon-hour programs, as well as job losses in areas that include remote and rural audiences: Windsor, Thunder Bay and Sudbury in Ontario; Quebec City; Moncton and Saint John in New Brunswick; Sydney in Nova Scotia; and Corner Brook, Gander and Grand Falls in Newfoundland and Labrador. There would also be budget reductions at CBC North. One-person bureaus in La Ronge, Saskatchewan, and Thompson, Manitoba, would be closed (CBC News, March 26, 2009). "Another slap in the face for Northern Ontario" wrote Rejean Grenier in his March 31, 2009, Northern Life editorial. He went on to detail how half the jobs at CBC Radio in Sudbury and Thunder Bay will be lost as a result of this announcement. Those reductions represent 20 per cent of all the job cuts across the country, this despite the fact that these stations have some of the highest ratings per capita in Canada (Grenier, 2009).

Garnering less attention than the CBC cuts, CTV also announced at the end of March 2009 that it would not renew its over-the-air licenses that transmit to 45 Northern Ontario communities such as Wawa, Chapleau and Kirkland Lake, resulting in some viewers losing their only source of local television news (Mills, 2009).

North Eastern Ontario's geography is mostly rural and remote. As the Statistics Canada studies show, internet communication, although an important medium, cannot be the only or the main communication tool utilized for both internal and external audiences. Traditional media channels such as the CBC and CTV Regional News can no longer be the principal tools used in regional external communications. Yet the communications needs are increasing, and in crisis situations, it becomes imperative not only to be able to disseminate information but also to receive feedback in a timely, efficient and effective manner. This study attempts to identify the preferred methods of communications in remote and rural North Eastern Ontario, as well as identify what some of the less traditional, more innovative, and creative, *Made in the North* solutions might be. Strategies must be in place to ensure that communication takes place, no matter what the crisis.

Organization Studied

The North East CCAC was created on January 1, 2007 when six CCACs in North Eastern Ontario became one. The North East CCAC is now responsible for delivering services to 42 per cent of the geographic area of the province, including the cities of Greater Sudbury, Timmins, North Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Kirkland Lake, Timiskaming Shores, and Parry Sound, but only 2.54 per cent

of the province's population (see map, Figure 1). More than 40 per cent of the North East's population live in centres of fewer than 13,500. Car travel is not always possible between all the communities as the provincial highway system does not extend above the 50th parallel. The North East CCAC serves more than 16,000 clients on any given day, with 55 per cent of these clients being over 65 years of age. There are also cultural factors to consider: 30 per cent of the population are Francophones and there is a large First Nations population (impossible to determine numbers due to census inaccuracies). Internally, the North East has 460 direct employees located in 31 office sites, in addition to hospital sites, and thousands more are contracted service providers working for agencies such as the Red Cross and Bayshore Home Health.

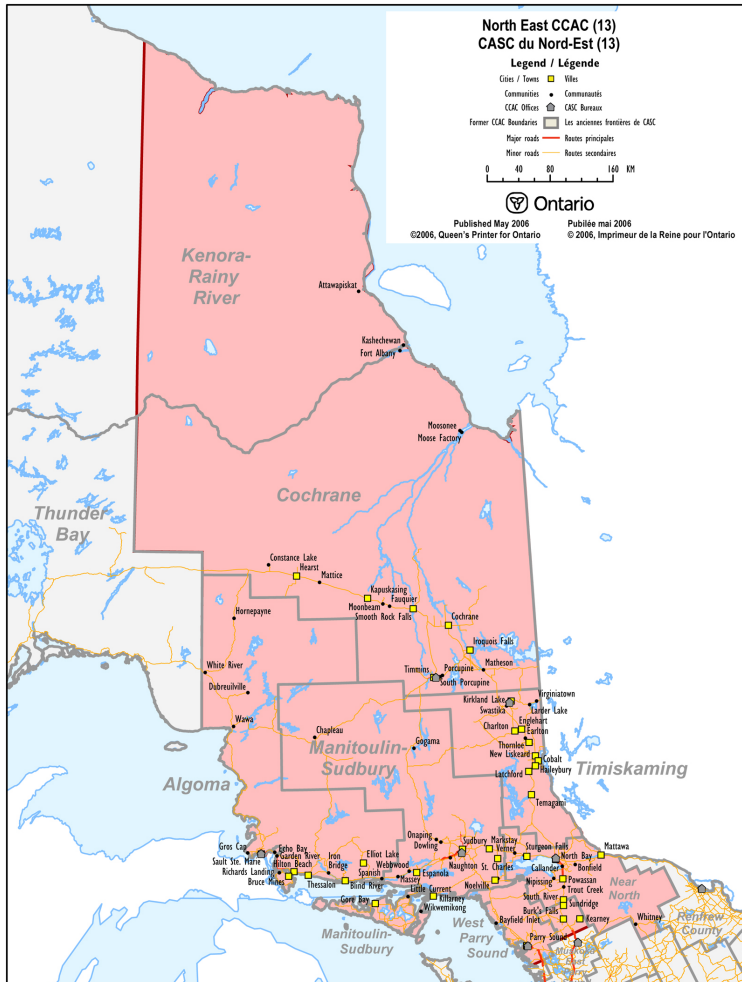


Figure 1: Map outlining the North East Community Care Access Centre's geography and main municipalities (Ontario, 2006)

Hypothesis

Because of the particular geographical and technological challenges in remote and rural areas such as North Eastern Ontario, standard and usual communication tools cannot be the only communication vehicles utilized during times of crisis.

Literature Review

To ensure effective and efficient communications in the event of a crisis, it is expected that traditional communications methods such as media and telephone will be important, but that, more and more, electronic communications such as the Internet and E-mail will be utilized (Jaeger et al. 2007).

According to Ratzan (2005), there are several goals in crisis communication:

- of utmost importance is two-way communication with stakeholders (both internal and external)
- getting and keeping the trust of those stakeholders
- effective media relations
- clarity of messaging
- and being prepared.

For instance, Intranet sites can be invaluable internal communication tools during a crisis as they provide direct contact with staff members (Coombs, 2007). For external audiences, the news media continues to be a favourite vehicle utilized to share information immediately. Other popular methods include web sites/internet, e-mail and voice mail messaging (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2008) even advocates the use of social media tools such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter as crisis communications tools, specifically for crisis response. He goes on to say that these tools can also be utilized for feedback because stakeholders can ask questions, post comments and provide general information.

As Ramirez (2001) points out however, information and communication technology (ICT) is not the same in all areas of Canada, or Ontario. The rural and remote communities “lag behind” (Ramirez, 2001: 1) the larger urban communities with regards to infrastructure as well as services and professional human resources. This problem is compounded by the weak demand for these types of services, dispersed populations and cultural issues (Ramirez, 2001).

Organizations face regular communications challenges every day. The important thing to note is that during a crisis event, these challenges are often occurring simultaneously, due to the high demand for information from multiple audiences (Hale et al. 2005). If a communications breakdown occurs, it has the potential to add to the crisis situation, effectively making it worse. Conversely, good crisis communication planning and delivery can reduce the impact and effects of a crisis (Hale et al. 2005).

Some of the most successful crisis communications strategies were developed from lessons learned from previous crises. Take for example, Hurricane Isabel. At its worse, Hurricane Isabel disrupted electric service to more than 850,000 U.S. customers (Brown, 2003). Connectiv Power Delivery had a crisis communications plan in place, which management immediately activated, resulting in regularly timed media briefings, daily press releases, public response lines and an internal communications strategy for all staff, even reaching the crews in the field (Brown, 2003). This is a lesson in how good planning can and does work during the worst of times.

The Hurricane Katrina experience did not go as smoothly, and there are also important lessons to be learned from that crisis. This is an ideal example of how poor planning and inadequate execution of a crisis communications plan can actually add to a crisis situation. Of the many lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, the need for thorough, strategic crisis communications planning was at the top of the list. However, another communications issue jumped out, that being the need for adaptability in the framing of messages and selection of communications tools used for the intended audience. The needs of the target audiences, and their unique challenges, be they educational, economic or geographic, must be factored into any crisis communications plan (Cole and Fellows, 2008). Heath, Lee and Ni (2009) not only concur with the issue of adaptability of

messaging and tailoring of communications tools to specific audiences, they strongly encourage the idea of “situational and strategic” (Heath, Lee, and Ni, 2009: 17) crisis communications.

Objectives of Research

The objective of the research was to determine the most user-friendly, efficient and effective communication tools necessary to overcome the geographical challenges of North Eastern Ontario. This research could assist other remote rural communities in northern Canada that face similar problems. The results are informational and can be used not only for internal purposes of planning, but can be shared externally to other organizations sharing the same challenges.

Methodology

For this case study, the evidence comes from two major sources: interviews with North East CCAC management staff; and a survey of internal staff. Three interviews were completed in January 2009 for the purposes of a previous case study on pandemic planning. The first individual interviewed is located in the North Bay Branch office, one is located in the Timmins Branch Office, and the other is located in the Sault Ste. Marie Branch Office. The purpose behind this selection was to capture the different geographical realities and needs of the region. For the purposes of this study, only the responses directly relating to crisis communications have been reported.

The survey was administered to all staff (460) located in the 6 different branch offices of the North East CCAC covering all of the North East (Timmins, North Bay, Kirkland Lake, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and Parry Sound). The survey was conducted via E-mail, was anonymous and cross-sectional. It must be noted that all staff have access to an E-mail account, regardless of their location. The survey questionnaire was launched on April 20, 2009 and was available until May 6, 2009. A reminder to respond was sent to all staff one week after the launch.

By interviewing and surveying people in the field in different locations across North Eastern Ontario, the author wanted to identify what communication tools those staff members believe to be the most effective in times of crisis; the tools that they feel comfortable using, and that they feel will meet the needs of internal and external stakeholders. The author also wanted to gain additional information and feedback as to other non-conventional communication tools that could be used as a back-up strategy.

Results

The in-person interviews indicated that there is a feeling in the branches that the geographical challenge, while not ignored, has not been fully considered in emergency or crisis planning. When asked specifically about crisis communications, the existing *North East CCAC Administration On-Call Policy* was noted by all three interviewees as an effective communication tool. This telephone fan-out system has been in place since the spring of 2008 and appears to be functioning well. It is a written policy and seems to be well known throughout the North East CCAC. However, despite that, the need for a more specific call-out plan was identified (who calls who.) Important to note is the fact that during the latest Red Cross rotating strikes, a specific internal call-out procedure was established and was quite successful.

When asked about communications networks or tools that would be useful, the stakeholders mentioned the new telephone system Voice Over IP (VOIP) as well as the internet. Other suggestions were the use of satellite phones where cellular service is non-existent, fax messaging, and Public Service Announcements via the media. Another individual also added the provincial and

public health units communication network that are already identified and in place in case of a pandemic. An important risk with the aforementioned communications tools was flagged by one staff member: “There is a real risk in the event of a power failure given that we use VOIP, the Internet etc. ”. Another staff member said: “Have a command post in all areas (branches) and if the technology is affected, use search and rescue strategies as necessary.”

Other suggestions for two-way communications were teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and E-mail. The Health Partner Gateway project being implemented throughout the North East CCAC would enable the electronic transfer of secure and confidential communications between the CCAC and its service providers and could become an important communication tool in the event of a crisis. Health Partner Gateway is a provincially created electronic system that links directly to CCAC systems, sending and receiving information safely to and from service providers. It has all the advantages of an internal, secure network with external links to key stakeholders thereby facilitating communications at all times.

Of the 460 individuals who received it, 191 completed the survey. It can therefore be stated that the opinions expressed in this survey reflect the opinion of the entire North East CCAC within a confidence limit of +/- 5.43 per cent, 95 per cent of the time. There was good representation from every branch office (50 per cent of the staff in each branch office) as well as from each role within the organization. Figure 2 shows where the respondents are located. Figure 3 shows what their roles are in the organization.

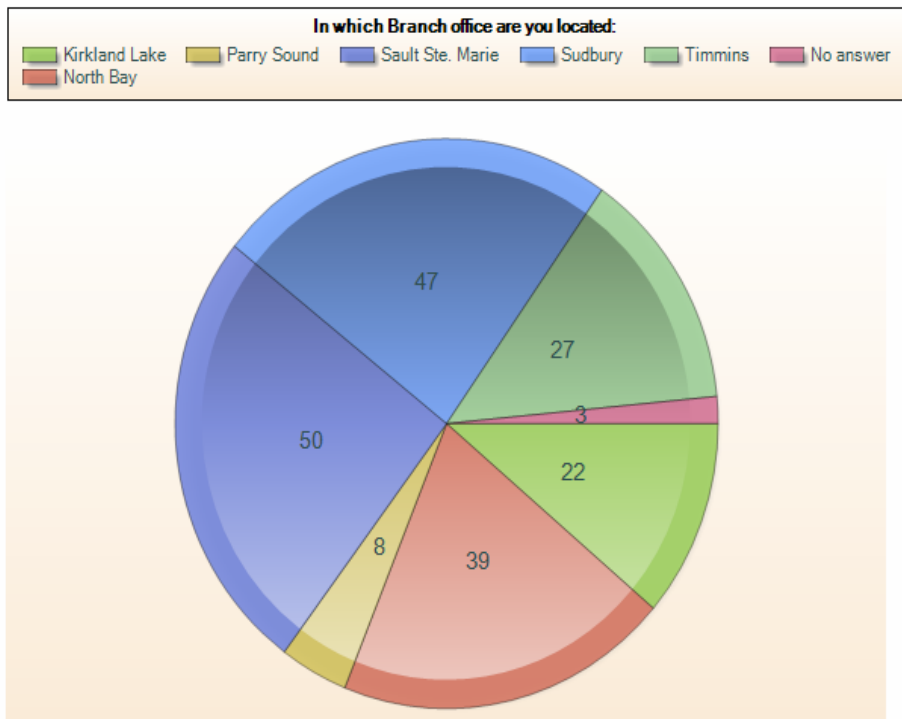


Figure 2: Office location of respondents (results in actual numbers) N=191

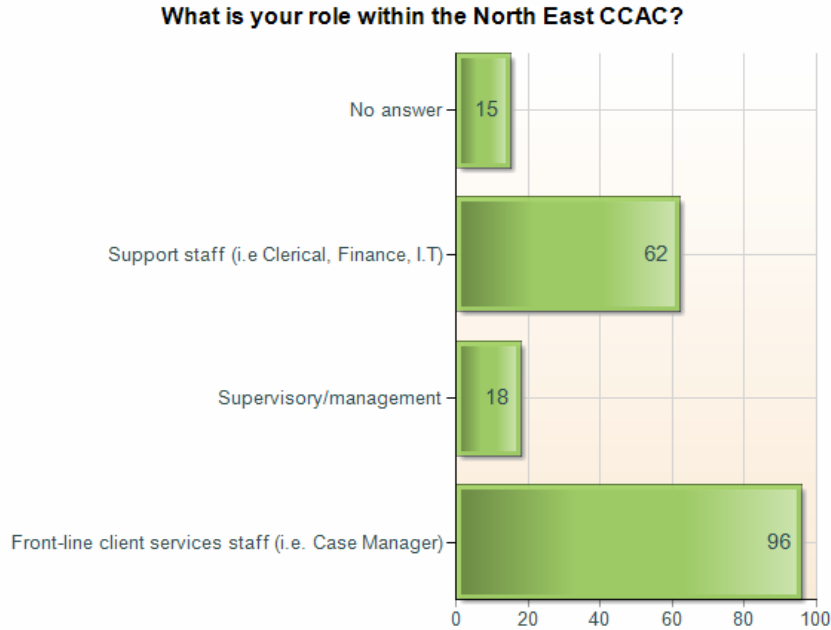


Figure 3: Role of respondents in the organization (results in actual numbers) N=191

When asked about effective crisis communications tools to be used for internal audiences, there was a clear preference (see Figure 4.) Voice mail blast is the preferred method, followed closely by E-mail. Usage of the Intranet was the least favoured option.

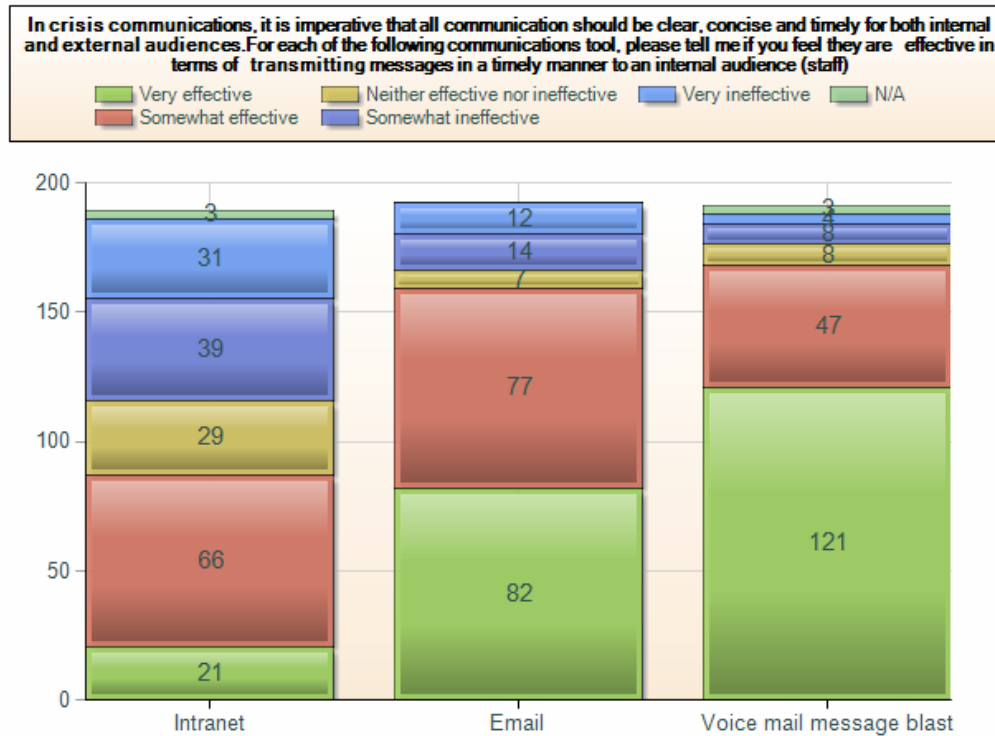


Figure 4: Crisis Communications Tools Used for Internal Audiences (results in actual numbers) N=191

When it came to recommending tools for external audiences, the results were also quite revealing. (see Figure 5) Media messaging (i.e. public service announcements) was by far the preferred method of communicating. A distant second was the use of command posts, that is communicating directly from each command post, or branch office, versus centralized communications. The Internet, the Health Partner Gateway and social networking were definitely not recommended as crisis communications tools.

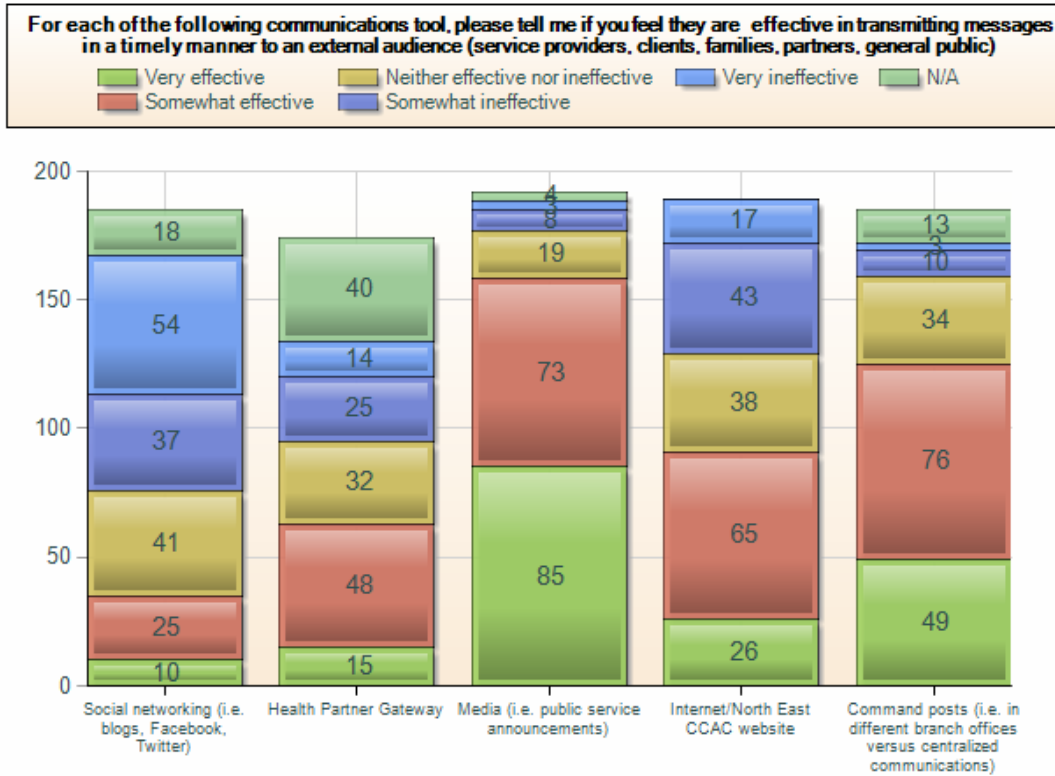


Figure 5: Crisis Communications Tools Used for External Audiences (results in actual numbers) N=191

Power outages create their own communication challenges, particularly in remote and rural Ontario. Many concrete suggestions were provided to answer the question of what communication tools should be used in the event of an electrical power outage. Many suggestions (120) were put forward and were then categorized. There were three suggestions that came up time after time. One was use of telephones such as cellular telephones, satellite telephones (type of mobile phone that connects to orbiting satellites instead of terrestrial cell sites and considered to be critical in natural disaster communications) or pulse phones (aka rotary dial versus digital; the advantage is in case of power outages, these phones still work). Second, was the use of transistor radios, which then involves media messaging. Finally, designating command posts in different branches was a preferred method of disseminating information at critical times to different audiences. Some other interesting suggestions included partnering with emergency services such as the police or fire departments, and having designated runners.

When it came to feedback, 173 respondents believe that symmetrical communications is essential in crisis communications. (see Figure 6)

Tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement: Feedback is an important vehicle in crisis communications

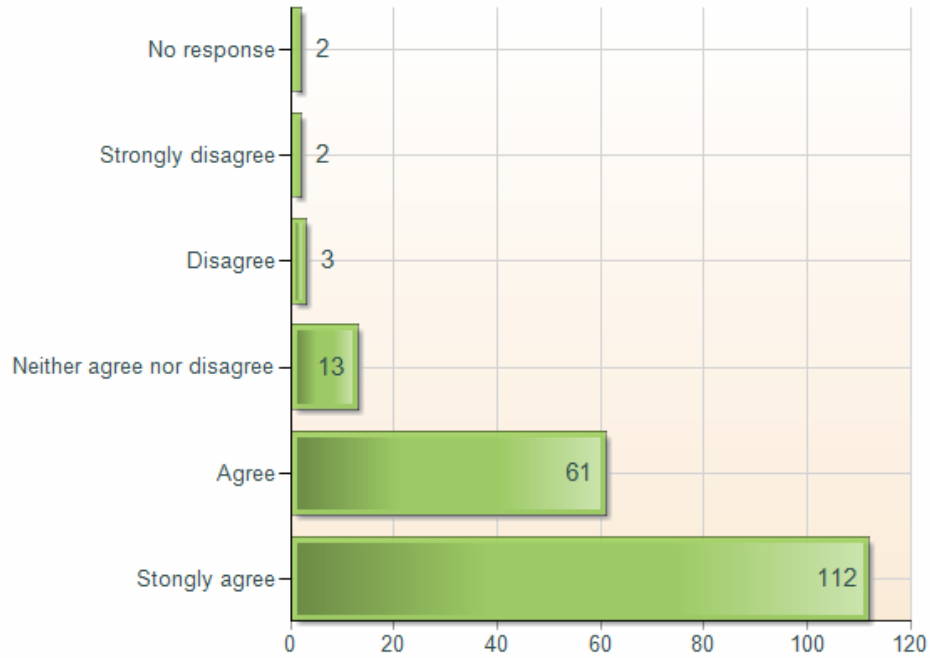


Figure 6: Importance of Feedback in Crisis Communications (results in actual numbers) N=191

When asked which tools would provide the best feedback mechanism (see Figure 7), the results strongly indicate that the internet has an important role to play; 166 believe an internet reply option would be a highly effective/somewhat effective tool. An electronic bulletin board through the internet also fared well with 133 respondents rating it as highly effective/somewhat effective. An intranet bulletin board also garnered a lot of support; 149 respondents answered highly effective/somewhat effective. However, overwhelmingly, the power of a real person doing the communicating won out; 177 respondents said having a toll-free information number would be highly effective/somewhat effective as a tool for two-way communication. Social networking did not fare well, with 88 respondents declaring it was not effective at all.

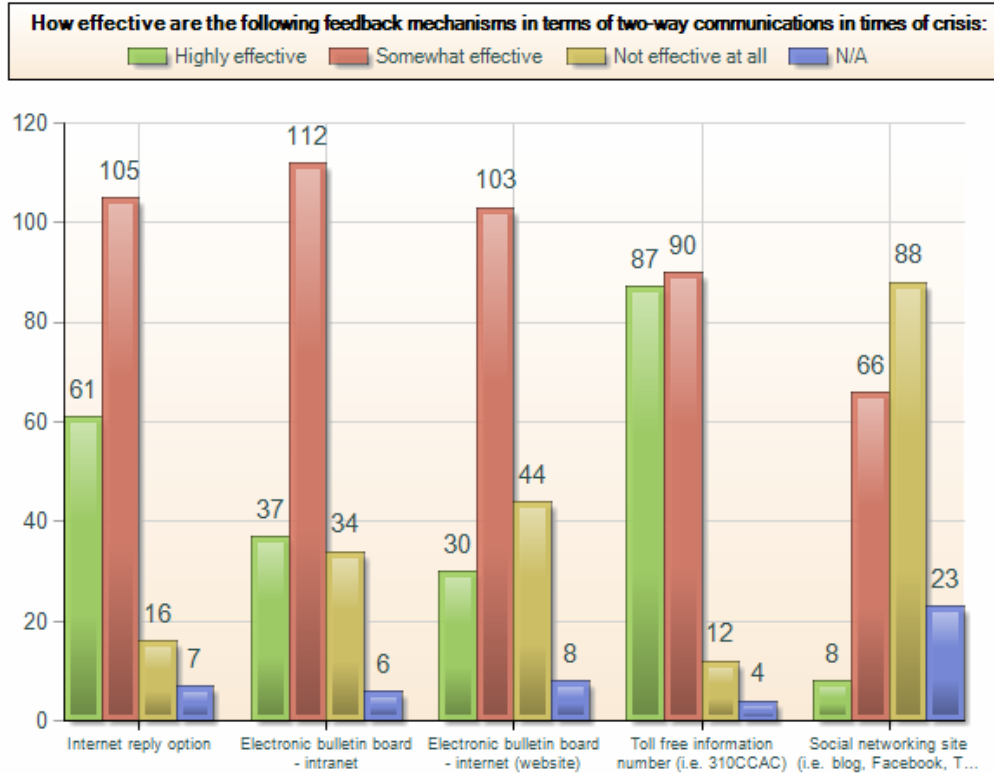


Figure 7: Two-way Communications Tools Used in Crisis Communications (results in actual numbers) N=191

When asked about other suggestions for feedback mechanisms in terms of crisis communications, 67 individuals responded with concrete examples. There might have been some confusion about this question as many of the suggestions mirrored the previous question. For instance, usage of the telephone was a popular suggestion, followed by E-mail, and regular mail. There were also many suggestions about face-to-face debriefing meetings once the crisis situation was under control.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this research clearly indicate that staff members believe there are definite strategies that the North East CCAC can utilize in order to communicate in the event of an emergency. By implementing staff suggestions, the North East CCAC is developing innovative, creative, and responsive communications tools and strategies that will satisfy both internal and external communication requirements.

As the survey results demonstrate, electronic communications is not the only way to go in North Eastern Ontario. Due to the geographic challenges, high-speed internet is not available to all residents. Cellular telephone service is not available in all areas either. Therefore, the challenge for a crisis communications plan is how to transmit important and essential information to all audiences in a timely way.

Both internal and external publics are equally important when it comes to effective, efficient and timely communications in times of crisis. The communications tools utilized to disseminate critical information must be reliable and fail-safe. The Administration On-Call policy is an excellent and

proven tool already in place for the internal communications piece of the North East CCAC's strategy however, it is but one piece of a much larger puzzle.

Of utmost importance for the North East CCAC is that all staff receives the same information at the same time; immediate, timely communication is essential (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 2001). Individuals in Hearst must get the same information and at the same time as an individual in Sudbury, Wawa, or Parry Sound. The communication must be accurate, timely, effective and efficient. Voice mail blasts and E-mail messaging must be at the forefront in the arsenal of communication tools as they are the chosen method of communication of staff. As for external messaging, Public Service Announcements via local media appears to have the biggest impact, followed by communications from local command posts. Given the recent decimation of local media outlets in North Eastern Ontario, a media relations strategy might prove to be more difficult to implement than previously thought. A media relations toolkit for use during crises will need to be developed in order to ensure that this messaging is activated effectively when needed.

All risks must be taken into consideration and substitute methods must be in place in the event of unforeseen challenges such as power outages. Back-up strategies need to be designed, tested and communicated to staff prior to any emergency. Preferred back-up telephone systems such as cellular telephones (where service exists), satellite phones and pulse phones are all strategies that can easily be implemented. Media messaging again could be harder to achieve given the new realities. Command posts, another popular suggestion, would ensure on-the-ground, face-to-face, timely and efficient communication with both internal and external audiences.

Two-way communications is also important in the event of a crisis. Not only is it important to get messages and information to staff, stakeholders, partners, clients and the public, it is also imperative to have a system in place to receive information from throughout the North East; the input, feedback and questions of stakeholders must be heard and answered (Flynn, 2006). User-friendly, accessible and efficient systems must be implemented to ensure that symmetrical communications occur regularly. These must also have back-up plans in case of unforeseen emergencies. As the results of this survey have shown, communications with a real person, via a toll-free telephone line is the preferred strategy. These results are not surprising given the challenges of technology in remote and rural Ontario (Singh, 2004). Electronic bulletin boards are also popular tools, both through the internet and Intranet. These tools need to be studied and considered within any communications planning exercise. Of utmost importance and what cannot be overlooked, is the debriefing aspect of crisis communications planning. This communication strategy was mentioned several times by respondents concerned with feedback mechanisms. Important lessons can and should be learned, and only through a thorough debriefing can this be accomplished.

Since the researcher is an employee in the Communications Department at the North East CCAC, it should be noted that there is the possibility of research bias in this study. A constant effort was made by the researcher to be objective and unbiased throughout the study. From the onset, the researcher believed that the results of this case study could be used to improve the North East CCAC Emergency Preparedness Planning process, the Crisis Communications Plan and the Pandemic Communications Plan. By studying theoretical approaches, interviewing key individuals from different branch offices and portfolios, and surveying staff members who work throughout the North East, the researcher's goal was to obtain objective, relevant, concrete and innovative strategies for the North East CCAC's formulation of a successful Crisis Communications Plan.

In remote and rural areas, not to be adaptable, situational and flexible with the message and communications vehicles used, would be a critical error and a sure way for a crisis communications plan to fail. The results of this case study provide concrete suggestions for the design and implementation of a successful crisis communications plan for remote and rural areas, specifically North Eastern Ontario. If similar research is undertaken in other jurisdictions facing remote and rural challenges, it would be interesting in order to see if the results would be the same.

Appendix A

Covering note to staff about Survey

Subject: Crisis Communications in North Eastern Ontario

I am asking your assistance in filling out this short questionnaire. The purpose of this survey is to determine what are the most efficient and effective communication tools that should be used in crisis communications at the North East CCAC.

Your views are extremely valuable in helping us to identify what are the most user-friendly and preferred methods of communicating in times of crisis. In addition, we are interested in knowing some of your ideas and suggestions regarding alternate, less traditional methods of communications. As employees working out of the six different branch offices of the North East CCAC, your experience and first-hand knowledge of the communication challenges we might face will assist greatly in the development of an all encompassing crisis communications plan for the North East CCAC.

The survey will take approximately 5 to 7 minutes to complete. You have until Wednesday, May 6th, to respond to the survey. This survey is confidential. Your participation is voluntary and if you come to any question you prefer not to answer, just skip it and go on to the next. All responses will be anonymous. Your time and opinions are very much appreciated. Once the responses are tabulated, the results will be available on the Communications portal of the Intranet.

Should you have any questions or comments, please contact me directly.

Kim T. Morris

Director of Communications
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Survey Questions

In crisis communications, it is imperative that all communication should be clear, concise and timely for both internal and external audiences.

1. For each of the following communications tool, please tell me if you feel they are effective in terms of transmitting messages in a timely manner to an internal audience (staff)

Very effective somewhat effective neither effective nor ineffective somewhat ineffective very ineffective No response

1 2 3 4 5 6

- Intranet
- E-mail
- Voice mail message blast

2. For each of the following communications tool, please tell me if you feel they are effective in transmitting messages in a timely manner to an external audience (service providers, clients, families, partners, general public)

Very effective somewhat effective neither effective nor ineffective somewhat ineffective very ineffective
No response

1 2 3 4 5 6

- Social networking (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter)
- Health Partner Gateway
- Media (i.e. public service announcements)
- Internet/North East CCAC web site
- Command posts (i.e. in different branch offices versus centralized communications)

3. In the event that the crisis situation impacts electrical power, what are your suggestions for less traditional, innovative, communications tools/strategies which could be used?

4. Tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Feedback is an important vehicle in crisis communications

- ⇒ Strongly agree
- ⇒ Agree
- ⇒ Neither agree nor disagree
- ⇒ Disagree
- ⇒ Strongly disagree
- ⇒ No response

5. How effective are the following feedback mechanisms in terms of two-way communications in times of crisis:

Highly effective	Somewhat Effective	Not effective at all	No response
1	2	3	4

- Internet reply option
- Electronic bulletin board – intranet
- Electronic bulletin board – internet
- Toll free information number (i.e. 310CCAC)
- Social networking site (i.e. blog, Facebook, Twitter)

6. Can you suggest any other feedback mechanisms in terms of crisis communications?

7. In which Branch office are you located:

- ⇒ Kirkland Lake
- ⇒ North Bay
- ⇒ Parry Sound
- ⇒ Sault Ste. Marie
- ⇒ Sudbury

⇒ Timmins

⇒ No answer

8. What is your role within the North East CCAC?

⇒ Front-line client services staff

⇒ Supervisory/management

⇒ Administrative/support

⇒ No answer

Thank you very much for your participation. The results will be posted on the Communications portal of the Intranet the week of May 25th.

Reminder E-mail message

Recently we sent you an invitation to participate in a brief internet survey about communication tools used in crisis communications. The questionnaire is short – 8 questions and should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

If you have already completed the survey, I would like to thank you for your time, as your responses are very important to the crisis communications planning of the North East CCAC. If you have not yet answered the questionnaire, I would like to urge you to take a few minutes do to so.

Thank you for your assistance.

Kim T. Morris

Director of Director of Communications

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