



INSIGNIA

Reputation management and communications consultancy

# The Effect Of Social Media On Breaking News: A Media Perspective

→ *The Impact of Social Media on Reputation Management*



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# INTRODUCTION

*“We were covering a serious incident: an armed gunman had barricaded himself inside a Detroit hotel bedroom.*

*I was on TV every 20 minutes speaking about the siege, but I could not get a hold of the police chief, no matter how much I tried. I called his office, I called his cell phone, I called all over, but to no avail.*

*A guest who was only four rooms down from the incident began tweeting using the relevant hashtag.*

*I started tracking what was happening inside the hotel, based on his eyewitness account, not unlike having direct phone access to this person and doing live interviews, but in this case the broadcast platform was Twitter.*

*Next, I direct messaged the police chief on Twitter and received an immediate response: he texted me the information he had just received from police dispatch.*

*So now, the other three reporters covering this story were reporting on hearsay and no official statement. Meanwhile, I had eyewitness accounts and official police information, scooping the competition and moving forward with a huge head start”.*

The situation described above by US broadcast journalist Roop Raj vividly describes the impact which social media has had on breaking news stories and the demands it places on the providers of “official” information.

Every major crisis, whether a product recall, major accident or allegations of corporate fraud, has a social media dynamic these days. One of the key changes is the way in which social media and so called ‘citizen journalism’ has impacted traditional media channels.

This report brings together the experience of more than thirty journalists, reporters and correspondents who break news every day on TV, radio, in print and, of course, online. Their

geographic spread encompasses Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and North America. We thank them for their time and insight which has enabled us to produce such an interesting and valuable report.

Their insights have serious and far-reaching implications for how organisations plan and implement their crisis communication. Anyone responsible for reputation management and protection would do well to reflect on the views of our media representatives and consider whether changes are required to crisis management planning as a result.

We hope you enjoy the report. More than that, we hope you act upon it.



Jonathan Hemus  
Managing Director, Insignia Communications

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The key findings and implications of the research are:

- ➔ Traditional media believes that its importance is undiminished by the arrival of citizen journalism (90% believe that their importance remains intact)
- ➔ However, the traditional media is clear that its role has changed as a result of social media (87% agree with this statement)
- ➔ The speed at which stories break and the pressure this imposes on traditional media outlets is the single biggest change mentioned by respondents
- ➔ This increased pace and fierce media competition make accuracy and quality of reporting increasingly challenging
- ➔ Social media makes it much easier for reporters to secure access to sources (official and unofficial) and content (interviewees, images, video)
- ➔ None of our respondents can confidently predict the exact future evolution of social media , but they all expect it to play an increasingly important role in breaking news
- ➔ Organisations who want to be successful in protecting their reputation when facing crises and issues must adapt their crisis communication protocols to meet the needs of a social media age
- ➔ To retain influence over the way in which a crisis plays out, our respondents suggest they should use social media to:
  - » Communicate more quickly
  - » Communicate more frequently
  - » Provide richer content
  - » Engage in dialogue rather than broadcasting messages
  - » Adopt an appropriate tone of voice
- ➔ Organisations wishing to remain the authoritative source of information in a crisis must re-evaluate their crisis communication planning to ensure that they are properly equipped to meet this challenge

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1 Traditional Media Retains Significant Influence

Somewhat surprisingly, nine out of ten respondents do not believe that the proliferation of social media and citizen journalism has reduced the importance of traditional media outlets.

Whilst they could be accused of self-interest or denial in reaching this conclusion, the media representatives make a powerful case for a continuing special role for traditional media outlets in breaking news.

Key to this is the perceived accuracy, perspective, analysis and credibility which an established media outlet confers on breaking news.

BBC correspondent, Ben Ando, commented:

*“Social media is a useful source of material but it is the least authoritative. It gives us a steer on the type of people who might know more about a situation or story, but it has to be treated with scepticism.”*

As Richard Gaisford, chief correspondent for Good Morning Britain, said: “Citizen journalists are a critical news source. However, they don’t replace the need for professional journalists who are able to curate and distill multiple sources into a trustworthy representation of the story.”

European broadcast and print journalist Martin Roberts more pointedly observed:

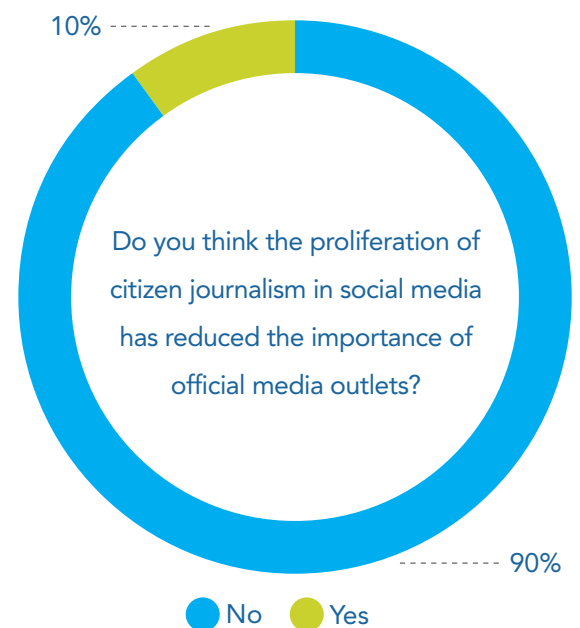
*“Journalism is a profession like any other and needs to be practised by qualified individuals. Citizen journalism is an oxymoron, just like citizen dentistry”.*

Some journalists make a strong case for traditional media being even more important as the quantity of communication increases, creating in the words of one respondent “a blizzard of information”.

As a consequence, according to one of our broadcast correspondents: “although the information is quickly spread, people still rely on official media outlets to confirm it”.

Another who writes for a well respected national business publication said:

*“There’s an awful lot of “stuff” out there that isn’t credible information. Verification and analysis therefore becomes ever more important, especially for a business audience which is looking for actionable insight”*



### → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

For organisations communicating in a crisis, it is important to understand which commentators on social media are truly influential and which are simply part of the “noise”. Traditional journalists with high credibility, influence and reach will undoubtedly form part of the former group.

Building relationships (or simply following them on Twitter) ahead of a crisis will help organisations to communicate more effectively with them if an issue occurs. Monitoring key influencers in a crisis is also important to understand and ideally shape how they are driving the narrative.

## 2 Social Media Has Changed The Role Of Traditional Media In Breaking News Stories

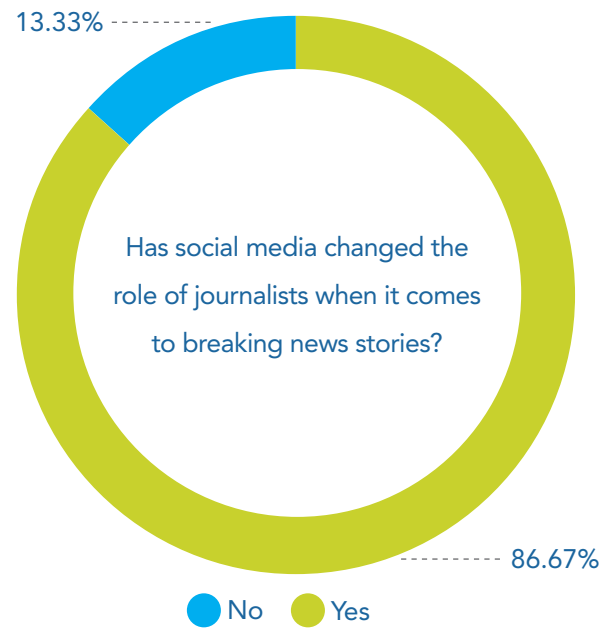
Despite the traditional media's strong view that its importance in shaping the news agenda remains solid, there is an equally clear recognition that social media has changed their role in breaking news stories. Indeed, nearly nine in ten respondents subscribed to this view.

The key dynamic which has changed is speed. As one respondent said, "everything has to be instant".

The competition to be first and fast was mentioned by many respondents to our survey. As US news director Barb Roethler said:

*"I would say you have to be faster than your competition and that has made it more challenging".*

As Roop Raj explained, this has also had an impact on the demands made of the organization in crisis: "The story will go to air. We don't decide not to do a story, nor do we decide to minimise the length or the gravity of how we are going to tell a story based on whether or not an official source engages with us or not. We instead do the story in the absence of that official source".



### → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Organisations wishing to be successful in influencing how their crisis plays out, must be equally swift in communicating.

## 3 Social Media Makes Access To Sources Much Easier

Journalists reflected on how social media has allowed them direct access to a range of sources (not just the "official" line).

As Ben Ando said:

*"Social media can be useful in bypassing official channels for information, and tweets can give a reporter something else to talk about if they are at the scene of an ongoing situation for a 24 hour channel but nothing much is happening".*

Interestingly, social media is also giving reporters access to new sources within the organization.

As Roop Raj explained:

*"Media are increasingly seeing social media as a quicker and more direct route through to organisations compared with calling corporate communications. The difference is that those interactions are visible to everyone else.*

"For example, when I had a question regarding an automotive product recall, I direct messaged one of the social media admins at the manufacturer and received an answer within three minutes. Had I called corporate communications, I believe my answer would have come hours, not minutes later".

➔ CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Organisations at the centre of an incident will not be the only source of information about their crisis. Far from it. But they do have an opportunity to fill the information vacuum and feed the hungry beast of 24 hour news channels with regular updated information. Doing so will cement the organisation's position as one of the pre-eminent sources of information and serve to shape the narrative.

Make sure that your frontline (including your social media team) are briefed on how to respond to incoming media enquiries. Equally, ensure that your PR or communications team is able to respond to media requests at a pace which matches the demands of social media.

4 News Usually Breaks First On Social Media

Several journalists commented that big stories almost always break first on social media these days, rather than via a national newspaper or major TV news programme.

As one respondent said:

*"Twitter is increasingly seen as the place to break news stories"*

Another broadcast correspondent added:

*"It seems more important to get it social before on air. I'm not sure if I agree with that, but it seems that's the way we are being pushed these days".*

➔ CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Organisations must have robust social media monitoring in place as their first line of defence. You cannot begin managing a crisis until you are aware of it.

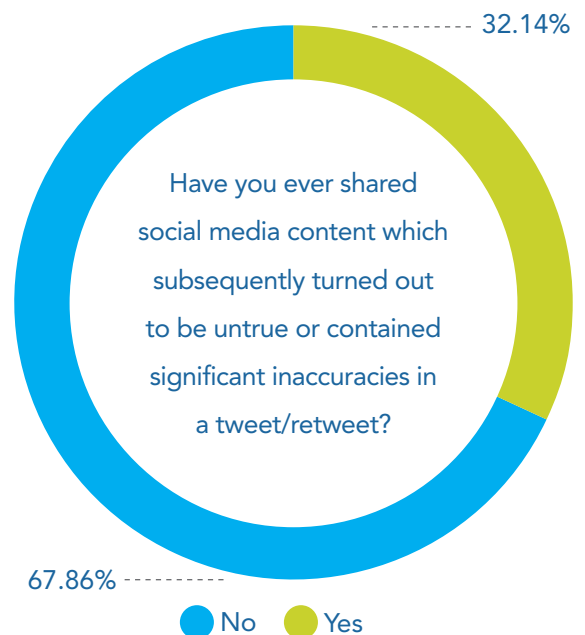
5 Social Media Is Affecting Accuracy And Quality

Echoing earlier comments about the credibility and trust imbued in traditional media channels, some of our respondents believe that competition is driving higher quality.

As one respondent from the Middle East said:

*"There is competition to break stories, but with that comes more competition to be accurate and reliable which I think is great for journalists. Competition makes us all better"*

The idea that competition drives quality is appealing, but on occasions it has the reverse effect. One in three of our respondents said that they had retweeted information which subsequently turned out to be untrue or contained significant inaccuracies.



Roop Raj explained some of the causes of this: "That sense of immediacy has rushed us to a point where everything is a 24 hour news cycle. Under this time pressure, there is a real sense of not doing the journalism in the way that we used to.

*"There is a danger that our trigger happy fingers are tweeting too quickly: we need to stop and remember that it's important to process information and give the proper perspective and context".*

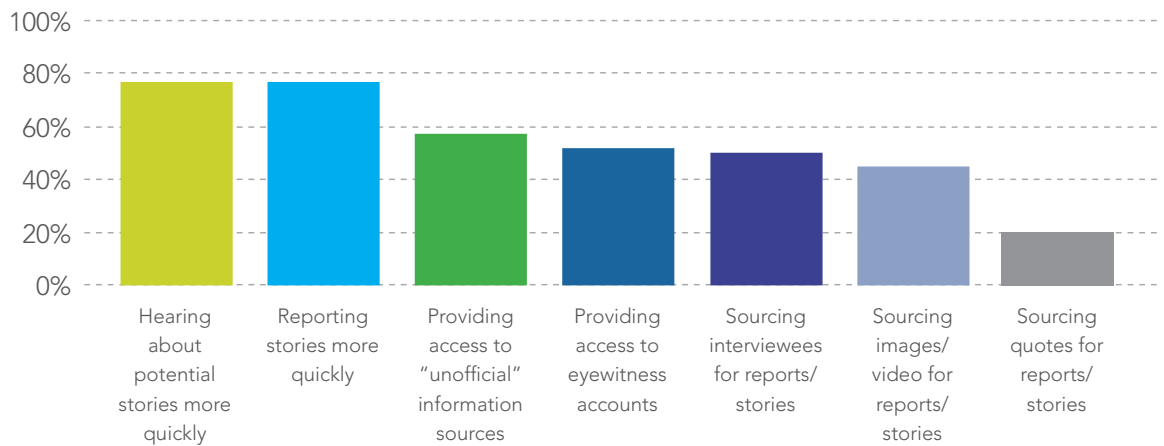
As one correspondent reported, the mantra from one of their bosses was "never wrong for long".

➔ CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Given the credibility assigned to information communicated by traditional media channels, any errors pose significant challenges for organisations in crisis. It once more underlines the importance of robust social media monitoring so that inaccuracies can be quickly spotted and corrected. It also further strengthens the case for organisations to be pro-active and prolific in communicating in order to establish themselves as a key source of authoritative information.

6 Social Media Plays a Broad Role In Sourcing And Reporting Breaking News

What role do Twitter and other forms of social media play in the following elements of how you source and report breaking news?



Three quarters of our respondents said that social media is either essential or important in bringing potential stories to their attention earlier and getting news out more quickly.

As Roop Raj commented: "Even after hours I continue to monitor news alerts, so even when I am standing in line at the coffee shop, I have pop ups on my phone. It's something that is a part of my life, pretty much through the day".

Half of the journalists we surveyed rated access to eyewitness accounts, unofficial information sources and the ability to source interviewees, video footage and images as essential or important.

➔ CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Organisations wanting to play their part in shaping the narrative of a breaking crisis need to be prepared to move at the same speed as the media.



Ben Ando explained how the process works: "It is a useful source for gathering pictures, particularly when it is a one hit story. For example, when a bus or a light aeroplane crashes, the story tends to be the image and social media is often the first place you'll see pictures appearing. We contact the person responsible for taking the picture and ask if we can use it".

This allows them to paint a broader and often more vivid picture of a breaking situation, but it doesn't have to exclude the organization at the heart of it.

Ben commented:

*"We wouldn't use an image or video without knowing the provenance of it. Trust is one of the BBC's core values and we can only retain this if we verify our sources."*

"This means that we are often slower than other media outlets to issue a story because we will always check and verify our facts."

Feedback from our journalists showed that they will generally take time to check their facts: they don't want to be wrong and they hold dear their position as the trusted source of information.

## → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

The desire of the traditional media to report accurate news, provides organisations affected by crisis with the opportunity not just to verify information, but also to begin to set the agenda.

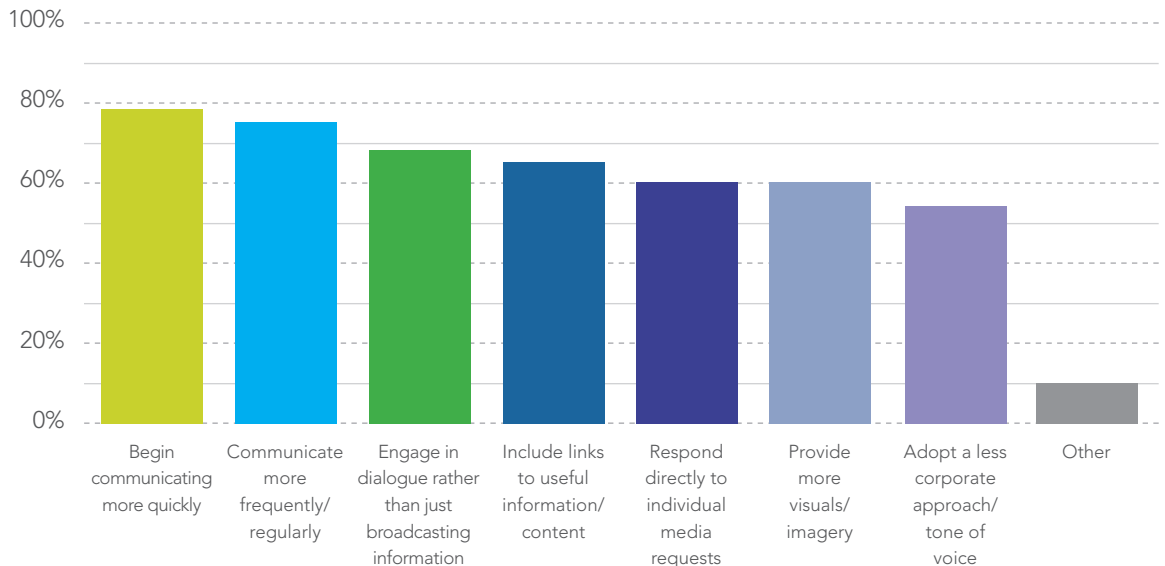
This is underlined, for example, by the fact that whilst half say that sourcing interviewees via social media is essential or important, only one in five say the same thing about lifting and publishing quotes directly from social media.

As Ben Ando said:

*"I mostly use Twitter to trawl for eyewitnesses to a major event so that we can interview them ourselves. We are very wary of mentioning Tweets without checking first"*

# COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS HANDLING A CRISIS

How could businesses and other organisations use social media to communicate more effectively with the media and other stakeholders during a crisis?



When asked how organisations could use social media more effectively to communicate with media and stakeholders in a crisis, the top two suggestions were to begin communicating more quickly and to update more frequently.

Roop Raj shared an example where a business got this just right:

*“I asked Delta Airlines why it was that people were unable to get the information they needed. Upon seeing my Tweet and knowing we have a considerable audience that could be affected, they started communicating with me directly. They were able to get information out there much quicker, both on Twitter and also on the air, because I was on TV within 12 minutes of receiving a Tweet, indicating the status of their website and their updates”*

This desire for early and regular information from the organisation at the heart of the situation not only meets the media’s desire to secure verification of a breaking news story from a credible source,

it is also to the organisation’s advantage. The opportunities to fill the information vacuum and shape the narrative are critical elements of reputation protection.

## Links to Useful Content

Two thirds of journalists suggest that organisations should provide links to useful information and other content.

### → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

The first step to meeting this demand is planning in advance where you will host your online information hub and creating template “dark sites” ready to be populated and made live in the event of an incident.

Equally, if the organisation can provide its own footage, images and talking heads then the media will often gratefully accept them.

As a Middle East based reporter said:

*“Instead of just a press release, organisations could send broadcasters a link to a 30 second video from their CEO or another executive”.*

## → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Preparing for this eventuality in advance as part of crisis management planning, is essential if you are to be able to fulfill this demand in the heat of a crisis. Some of this material – site photography, corporate facts and figures etc – can be prepared beforehand.

Additional content will need to be prepared during a crisis. Make sure you have the resources and capability to, for example, record and upload a YouTube message at short notice.

Another plea from seven in ten of our journalists was for organisations to engage in dialogue rather than simply use social media to broadcast information. Given that relationships are never more important than in a crisis, this is a wise recommendation.

As BBC business presenter Mike Johnson said:

*“Engage when the talking points are potentially negative, rather than just when they are positive”.*

## → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Using social media to interact with stakeholders via social media during a crisis requires organisations to become comfortable and proficient with it during “business as usual”. Doing so has the twin benefits of building relationships with your stakeholders and establishing an appropriate tone of voice.

When considering tone of voice, one Middle East TV broadcaster advised:

*“Organisations should try to match their social media presence to their corporate identity and be true to that. So, there is no point in Goldman Sachs trying to be ‘down with the kids’ nor a start up sneaker company trying to be Goldman Sachs. It’s an opportunity to express your corporate personality. And as soon as you try and pretend to be something you’re not, that’s when you get caught out”.*

The importance of relationships was endorsed by Roop Raj who said: “It’s important to build a relationship with your key audiences beforehand and to continue that relationship after a crisis is finished”.

An organisation will be best served in a crisis if it is able to establish itself as a central source of credible and authoritative information about its incident or issue. Following the advice provided by our journalists will go a long way towards achieving this objective.

# FUTURE TRENDS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA AND BREAKING NEWS

None of our respondents believe social media is a passing fad. Most see it continuing to increase in importance and influence over the next few years, but few can predict the precise way in which it will evolve.

## Ever-Increasing Speed

Some expect “more of the same”, especially with regard to speed and proliferation. For example, Richard Gaisford said:

*“Social media will continue to increase the speed of breaking news as the global community of citizen journalists grows”*

Ploy Radford, deputy editor of the publication HealthInvestor, predicted this will continue to impact traditional media: “There will be more pressure on journalists to produce more news more quickly”.

## Impact on Quality and Accuracy

Despite the traditional media’s treasured roles as providers of trusted information, some are concerned that the demands of social media will begin to erode this.

As one respondent said: “Pressure to break stories will further increase and this may well lead to more errors or misleading stories.”

And Barb Roethler echoed their thoughts by saying: “I would guess that the accuracy of reporting will continue to diminish”.

A more optimistic view was put by another respondent who said:

*“I’m hoping there will be less breathless reporting and a greater focus on verification of stories and high quality information again. But that may be wishful thinking!”*

## Pre-Eminent Source Of Breaking News

Some expect social media to become known as the key place to find emerging news.

As one newspaper reporter said:

*“Social media is highly likely to be the first source of breaking major news stories”*

One respondent elaborated on this and damned social media with faint praise, saying that it “will essentially be seen as a less trustworthy Reuters or Bloomberg breaking news feed”.

## Richer, Broader Content

Others commented on new opportunities for social media to enhance the way in which breaking news stories are reported.

Freelance journalist (print and broadcast) Alison Roberts expects to see social media becoming “more packaged with pictures and sound”.

One of our respondents has an even wider vision for social media seeing it as a possible window on previously hidden issues in developing countries.

Suzanne Meredith, a print journalist in Europe, commented:

*“Hopefully, as developing countries (especially in Africa) become more connected, the focus of headline news will widen its geographic scope and social slant to pick up stories that are often under-reported or even ignored”.*

The bottom line is that our media representatives all see the influence of social media increasing over the coming years.

## → CRISIS COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Organisations wishing to protect their reputations in a crisis should not be considering whether they should be engaging with social media, but how. Thorough planning, capability development and testing through social media crisis simulations are all important parts of this process.

# INSIGNIA COMMUNICATIONS

Insignia is a reputation management consultancy specialising in crisis communication. Around the world, we help organisations create, sustain and protect their reputations. We do this through:

- Reputational Risk Assessments
- Scenario Planning
- Crisis Handling
- Crisis Management Plan Induction Sessions
- Crisis Media Training
- Crisis Simulation Exercises
- Social Media Simulations
- Crisis Management Plan Development

Our business is built on our expertise in reputation management so that clients can be reassured that they are equipped to respond professionally and successfully should a crisis emerge. More than this, our passion and determination to give best advice to each client means that they always trust us to deliver against our promises.

## In Their Own Words



*"Insignia clearly exceeded expectations with many participants commenting that this was their best ever training experience. I was extremely impressed by Insignia and found them one of the most professional and pleasant teams I have worked with."*

Kate Hudson, Associate Programme Director, Henley Business School

*"We never felt that this was an 'off the shelf' solution, but rather something tailored for our business and one that will grow as we do. Insignia brings professionalism to a critical business issue."*

Sue Boxall, VP Human Resources, Lundin Mining



*"Insignia's expertise in crisis management was evident. The team was professional and flexible throughout the entire project and they gave us confidence that they knew exactly what they were doing."*

Chris Scarrott, Chief Executive, Roquette UK

**Ready to start protecting your reputation?  
Contact Insignia Communications**

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