

Entrant's Names:	Argyle Communications: Daniel Tisch APR, FCPRS, Roanne Argyle, Misty Meeks, Louis Payette, Irene Poon, Taryn Wismer, Sarbjit Kaur, Samar Abdourahman
Client Organization:	Electrical Safety Authority
Award Category:	Division A, Crisis Communications
Title of Entry:	Communicating Public Electrical Safety: 2013 Ice Storm
Time Period of Project:	March – December 2013

ENTRY SUMMARY

For Ontario's Electrical Safety Authority, a massive December ice storm affecting hundreds of thousands of homes in one of North America's densest urban areas became the flashpoint for an organization seeking to establish itself as the province's leading voice in the promotion of electrical safety, and the culmination of a year spent refining its issues management protocols, communications channels and crisis capabilities. With hundreds of thousands of homes and buildings going dark around the Greater Toronto Area, the ESA became a guiding light for Ontarians desperately looking for the safest way to stay warm while keeping their cool in the wake of the one of the worst storms in the province's history.

1) OVERVIEW

The ESA is a delegated administrated authority of the Ontario government, tasked with the mandate of raising awareness of electrical safety with Ontarians and bringing the number of electrical-related deaths and injuries to zero. In early 2013, the ESA and Argyle Communications worked together to refine the organization's overall crisis preparedness. Given the low public awareness of the ESA and its mission, and the low media profile of its key officials, the organization needed to fill some key gaps to ensure it would be ready to respond in a timely and effective manner at a time when events related to extreme weather were more likely than ever to cause major service disruptions and put public safety at risk.

2) STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Audience	Characteristics
Contractors / Inspectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are familiar with ESA and engage with the organization regularly to arrange permits, inspections and updates on regulation. These relationships can be contentious as the ESA has a mandate to regulate their industry. During a crisis, this audience would be a primary target and conduit to communicating safety messages to the general public. Also need to connect with them with operational information to ensure a smooth power restoration process and consumer protection (waiving certain overtime ESA fees that are typically passed through to the customer).
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness levels of the ESA were low. Interest in understanding electrical safety hazards was also low, except at key trigger moments such as during home renovations, floods or storms resulting in downed power lines and power outages. In order to have the greatest impact on electrical injuries, communications would focus on facility owners and homeowners. There was a need to reach anyone who might require repairs to their home or business' connection to the grid in order to expedite power restoration and mitigate safety hazards.
Key Stakeholders (Government officials & LDCs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In crisis situations, government officials require a constant information flow between concerned parties and have confidence things are well in hand as to not create complexity or barriers to execution of response strategy. Most Local Distribution Companies rely on ESA to help explain the safety hazards and what repairs are necessary to restore power to homes.

3) GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Research	Insight
<p>Evaluate the ESA's response capability and ability to manage a crisis both from an operations and communications perspective: to help identify gaps and determine a course of action to ensure the organization had the necessary tools and protocols in place. This was done through a comprehensive table-top crisis simulation.</p>	<p>Strengths: The ESA had an Enterprise Risk Management process, managed at the executive and board levels and an issues management process for engaging cross-functionally around issues. It also had a culture of action and service, and the team demonstrated good collaboration during the crisis simulation.</p> <p>Weaknesses: The ESA had communications protocols that pre-date today's widespread use of social media and had never "road-tested" an integrated crisis response plan for a large-scale crisis. Gaps in inter-departmental communication were exposed during the simulation. Limited media exposure of key spokespeople and small communities on ESA's newly established social channels (Twitter and Facebook).</p> <p>Opportunities: Mobilize the entire ESA team behind a vision. Create internal issues working group and establish clear accountability and corporate response process. Use public communication as a cost-effective education, risk reduction strategy. Be a credible source of information on electrical safety in news and social media. Capitalize on partnerships with other players in the industry/crisis to extend reach of safety message.</p> <p>Threats: Erosion of public confidence if ESA were ineffective or unresponsive. ESA perceived as a bottleneck in restoration of power (negative impact on reputation). The greater risk of fatality due to uninformed public could put citizens at risk and force government to question ESA's effectiveness.</p>

- **No fatalities or serious injuries as a result of the ice storm:** As part of its five-year goal to achieve a 30% reduction in electrical-related fatalities, the ESA's primary aim was to ensure a natural disaster of this magnitude would not adversely impact safety. Effective communication of safety risks and procedures was strongly correlated to audience awareness, understanding, compliance and preventative behaviour.
- **Reach and penetration of key electrical safety messages via news media:** Secure a minimum of 25 million media impressions and MR²P quality score of 75% with at least 90% key message penetration (company and spokesperson mention, while beneficial, would be secondary to the need for the program to communicate important public safety messages).
- **Growth of ESA's Facebook and Twitter page and engagement:** ESA's social accounts were widely used by contractors and local distribution company and government officials, and less so by the general public at the program's outset. We set a goal to reach an estimated audience of 2,000,000 individual timelines through influencers, and targeted and quality social media communications.

4) PLANNING

Strategy (pre-crisis)	Tactics
Identify strengths and gaps in organization's crisis response and communications plan	Undertake a complete review and update of crisis plan including staging a tabletop simulation involving multiple business areas and stakeholders to test current management processes and evaluate readiness. One simulation involved a severe winter storm — many months before the actual event happened. The simulation helped improve collaboration between units (e.g., operations, customer service, communications, human resources, public affairs, etc.) and refine internal and external communication protocols.
Build credibility with expert spokespeople	Conduct rigorous media training sessions and create a message map tool that enabled spokespeople to articulate ESA's vision as Ontario's guardian of electrical safety.
Establish infrastructure to respond quickly and efficiently to requests for information	<i>Internal:</i> Initiate issues management working group, crisis response plan and clear lines of accountability and ownership on crisis response. <i>External:</i> Commit to build social channels (Twitter and Facebook communities) and share content with public safety influencers online. Begin to build relationships with key news outlets for public safety spokespeople.
Strategy (during storm)	Tactics
Raise awareness of risks and promote safe behaviour	Communications reinforced safety messaging at every public touch-point via news and social media, and through updated content on ESA's website: <u>Dec. 19:</u> Forecast calling for ice storm prompts ESA to issue news release, update website's main page to land on storm info and resources, advise LDCs that ESA had issued storm safety tips to pass on to their customers; post regulate updates on Facebook and Twitter. <u>Dec. 22-31:</u> 14,000 information sheets delivered to homes requiring repairs. Issued series of news releases directed to consumers on topics like: hazards associated with downed powerlines, portable generators, checking for electrical damage, potential flooding, arranging for repairs before power can be restored and importance of using a Licensed Electrical Contractor. <u>Jan 10, 2014:</u> As a result of a quick thaw, ESA issued flooding news release and updated the website, Twitter and Facebook accounts to stress continued electrical safety vigilance. This was also shared with LDC partners to distribute to customers.
Showcase ESA's leadership & increase share of voice	<u>Starting Dec. 22,</u> the team conducted media outreach to secure interviews for ESA public safety spokespeople. On <u>Dec. 29,</u> ESA CEO David Collie participated in a press conference with Premier Wynne to communicate need for affected homeowners to check for damage and hire a qualified contractor. From <u>Dec. 22-early January</u> the team managed an intensive schedule of Facebook and Twitter updates and analyzed social media chatter daily during the height of the crisis to identify and respond to key issues or flashpoints.
Extend the reach and life of coverage through media-ready broadcast content	To build awareness for post-storm safety concerns, the team issued an audio news release on <u>Dec. 28</u> featuring Chief Public Safety Officer Scott Saint for distribution to local radio stations.

5) EXECUTION

Budget

Activity	Budget
Tabletop Simulation	\$20,000
Media Training	\$4,000
Social Media – Content Creation and Community Management	\$6,000
Media Outreach and Interview Positioning	\$3,000
Audio News Release Script/Production	\$7,000

Challenges & solutions:

Timing: If the extent and widespread nature of the damage from the ice storm weren't challenging enough, the timing during which it occurred – during the holiday season – would severely test the mettle of the ESA. Many ESA staff lost power themselves. In a spirited and resilient way, the organization and its partners rallied around a common goal: to effectively coordinate resources and logistics to facilitate the safe reconnection to the grid of thousands of people across Ontario.

Customers' Impatience: As the outage dragged on, and with conflicting information circulating about the length of time it would take to have everyone's power restored, one of the biggest worries was the public's patience threshold and whether frayed nerves would lead people to take unnecessary risks to try to keep the power and lights on. By ensuring public communications were accessible, empathetic and safety-focused (vs. regulatory and process-oriented), we were able to be the voice of reason and calm in the midst of much chaos.

6) RESULTS

Measure	Objective	Result
30% reduction over five years in electrical-related fatalities	Ensure a natural disaster of this magnitude would not adversely impact safety	There were no known fatalities or critical injuries from electrical damage or equipment during the ice storm.
Good penetration of key electrical safety messages via news media	Secure a minimum of 25 million media impressions and MR ² P quality score of 75% with at least 90% key message penetration.	39 stories which generated 30M+ media impressions with MR ² P quality score of 78.85 % and key message penetration of 100% .
Growth of social media channels	Support goal to reach an audience of 2 million+ through influencers, and targeted and quality social media communications	3,981,867 impressions through social media to date; Twitter following grew 70% during ice storm.

Business Impact

While a crisis communications plan is something one never hopes to put into action, the ESA recognized that protecting the public meant investing time and resources in keeping its plan fresh and top of mind. With Argyle's strategic and executional support, the ESA embarked on an ambitious program to stand "at the ready" when the situation arose, one that would help the organization fulfill its mandate with foresight, confidence and poise.

The term "perfect storm" is used to describe an actual phenomenon that happens to occur in such a confluence, resulting in an event of unusual magnitude. The 2013 ice storm was just that for the ESA, with the organization coming together at a critical juncture, being called upon to be the guardian of Ontario's electrical safety, during an event that could make or break its reputation.

Reputation and trust aren't easily quantifiable; media analysis alone cannot fully convey the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the public, contractors, local distribution companies, and government officials about the ESA's accessibility, empathy and responsiveness during the crisis.

The most positive outcome of all, however, ties back directly to ESA's core mission: there were no known fatalities or critical injuries from electrical damage or equipment during the ice storm.