

**Global Alliance COMM PRIX Awards Entry
'Issues Management' – Manawatu Gorge project**



Narrative Case Study

Overview

On 18 August 2011, a large landslide closed State Highway 3 through the Manawatu Gorge, New Zealand's main East-West transport link for the lower half of North Island.

After a two month cleanup, the road was about to be reopened when overnight, everything changed. A massive slip came crashing down in the same location - the largest road slip in New Zealand's history.

The impact on the Manawatu region was devastating. Motorists were forced onto Saddle Road, a long, winding detour. This brought thousands of vehicles every day, including trucks at night, rumbling through the peaceful town of Ashhurst.

The detour meant businesses in Woodville lost the passing trade they relied on. The beloved Bridge Cafe temporarily closed. Freight, tourist operators and other businesses faced higher costs from the longer route, and Vision Manawatu estimated that the closure cost the region \$63,000 every day.

Goals and objectives

The NZ Transport Agency is the government agency tasked with funding and operating New Zealand's state highway network. As such, our key organisational objective here was to ensure the safe and efficient management of the highway network – that is, to get the gorge highway safely reopened while effectively managing the alternative routes.

We were also responsible for keeping our stakeholders informed about our activities, and to do so a manner that helped to maintain or create public confidence in our organisation. This fed directly into our three key PR goals:

- Fully inform all affected parties about the NZTA's gorge recovery effort
- Achieve balanced and informative media coverage
- Ensure stakeholders felt fully informed

Stakeholder analysis

The slip affected a wide range of stakeholders with various concerns:

- Local councils – impact on constituents; local roads used as detours
- Emergency services – reliant on safe, efficient route
- Freight operators/businesses – safety, additional time and cost
- Motorists / Automobile Association – additional time and cost, general inconvenience, safety
- Woodville residents/ businesses – loss of passing trade, increased severance

- Ashhurst residents – traffic noise and disruption
- Tourist operators – desirability, accessibility and perceived safety of Manawatu as a destination
- Government – nationally important route, perceived performance in crisis, safety and economic productivity
- Media – creating stories that inform the public and hold their interest
- NZTA Board and staff – assurance that NZTA doing its job effectively

Planning

The unforeseen nature of the event meant that planning occurred concurrently with the event's development. We were guided by the following simple strategy:

- Provide regular, responsive and accessible information and communications to stakeholders
- Be responsive, competent, empathetic and upfront
- Communicate in plain English

We didn't know how long the road would be closed until early 2012. However, desk research, the Vision Manawatu study, and advice from contractors reflected the early impact of the slip on the region.

Feedback we sought from stakeholders indicated they needed a clear, constant flow of information. Stakeholder mapping and 'referrals' helped us identify with whom we needed to communicate and how. Experience from managing communications for previous transport disruptions informed our approach. Our research also showed that our stakeholders preferred direct contact, preferably by email. They were not big users of social media.

Ultimately, we needed to help people understand why their lives and livelihoods were being disrupted for so long, and that everything possible was being done. This meant giving the public a front row seat to our slip recovery operation. And to keep them on the edge of it, month after month.

Execution

Highways manager David McGonigal was the boss – and face – of the operation. He was media trained, credible, empathetic and knowledgeable. David became an increasingly prominent public figure and provided input into all communications.

A weekly email update from David to stakeholders was set up. Special updates informed people of pressing milestones and setbacks.

Our approach was 'transparency first', to remain open, credible, and visible. This would help dispel misinformation, which tends to fill information vacuums during crises.

We encouraged people to contact us directly through a special email address. A dedicated web page - www.nzta.govt.nz/manawatu-gorge - was built, linked prominently from the NZTA's home page, and became a rich source of information and images. Media releases were issued at least every week, and we published opinion pieces in the local press to inform and thank the public.

We often prepared communications in 'real time' as events shifted on Mother Nature's whim, meaning the writing and sign-off process was often compressed into an hour or two. We kept updates simple in format to ensure they could be produced and distributed at short notice.

A charity open day, attracting 5,000 people, was organised to offer the public a close encounter with the slip. A child-friendly 'fun facts' leaflet was distributed, and slip workers chatted to the public. The event supported the regional rescue helicopter and drew positive TV, radio and press coverage. Radio and press advertisements promoted the Open Day and free charter buses to the event. Advertisements later informed the public about controlled partial openings of the road.

NZTA staff were informed through milestone emails, intranet stories, and presentations at staff meetings.

Resources were limited, so the communications work was entirely done by in-house staff. We remained heavily reliant on editorial media and direct communication.

We received constant feedback that the slip's magnitude only sunk in when people saw pictures. Providing eye-popping images and media photo opportunities such as onsite briefings and helicopter charters helped people understand the sheer scale of the disaster. We circulated images with almost all communications, often annotated to explain what was going on. These images - and those taken by photojournalists we hosted - were extensively used in media.

Like an old weekly radio serial, we told the tale of man battling - and ultimately triumphing over - Mother Nature. It was an unprecedented, multi-faceted engineering operation, but our audience weren't engineers. We needed to

explain it in plain English, outlining exactly what we were doing, while keeping it fresh, clear, entertaining, personable, and newsworthy.

To keep information flowing, we produced weekly communications whether or not there were major developments. The updates took on an unexpected life of their own, becoming more informal – and sometimes humorous - while still respectful of the gravity of the situation. We also expressed empathy and gratitude to the public for their perseverance. On slow weeks, we focused on interesting trivia. This was so successful that media enthusiastically reported about a bulldozer dubbed 'The Bandit', grass growing on the replanted hillside, and concrete drying on the rebuilt bridges.

We developed close ties with the community, providing Open Day 'hard hat' tours, lending a digger as an entrance archway for Woodville's charity 'Gorge-eous Ball', speaking at public meetings and visiting struggling businesses.

While messaging was adapted as the event progressed, we built key communications around the below messages:

- We know that the slip is affecting lives and livelihoods, and we're grateful to the public for hanging in there
- We need to put the safety of the public and slip crews first
- To safely reopen the road, we need to clear the dirt, then secure the hillside, then rebuild the road and bridges. This is a massive job and we're doing everything we can to get it done
- This is the largest road slip that New Zealand has ever seen
- The slip is so big that its dirt would overflow Wellington's Westpac Stadium, or fill a bathtub in every New Zealand household

Results

The road was entirely or partially closed for 13 months. We provided 63 media releases, 54 email updates, three opinion pieces, one 'fun facts' flyer, numerous radio and press advertisements, onsite briefings and helicopter charters, and hundreds of photos, reactive media statements and interviews.

Word spread about David's email updates as people asked to be added to the distribution list, and copies were posted on noticeboards by retailers. Unprompted praise for the communications approach flooded in from stakeholders, and is included in the accompanying material.

Media analysis showed resounding pick-up of our messaging, especially given the adverse nature of the event. Over 700 press, radio and television articles were generated, largely by our media releases. 98% were positive or balanced, with no negative articles in the last seven months of the closure.

Independent media analysis noted the NZTA 'took the lead in generating timely press updates' that 'underscored its reputation as efficient and responsive', 'attracting strong headlines and positive editorials', with David McGonigal 'quoted positively as usual', 'attracting much favourable sentiment', and that the media had 'seized on details on the scale of the slip, eg that the material would overflow Westpac Stadium'.

Analysis noted that NZTA had won kudos for its handling of the closure, when it had the potential of being a 'public relations, as well as a natural, disaster.' It concluded that the NZTA was positively portrayed as working hard to improve safety, and being efficient and responsive to local businesses and the community.

Media seized on our language. TV and press reported our analogy that the dirt could fill a bathtub in every NZ household. One editorial said they were impressed with David's 'no-nonsense', 'refreshingly honest' approach.

Results from a survey sent to stakeholders after the Gorge fully reopened were overwhelmingly positive, and are included in the accompanying material.

The project was recognised as category winner in both New Zealand's Plain English Awards and the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand Awards.

The disruption caused by the Manawatu Gorge slip was huge, but the positive feedback and favourable media coverage has shown the value in informing communities clearly, openly, responsively and empathetically, regardless of how complex the underlying issues are. The approach was immediately adopted for the lengthy State Highway 2 Waioeka Gorge slip closure in 2012, attracting further praise and positive coverage, and was also employed successfully when State Highway 6 in Harihari was washed out in early 2013.

Summary

The Manawatu Gorge closure was five times longer than the previous worst closure of a NZ highway. Our audience were not bystanders rubbernecking at a natural disaster. They had a personal stake. Our communications approach recognised this, and helped an entire region come to terms with and understand an unprecedented natural disaster.