

The **Instant** Messenger

Business students must be prepared to lead through a crisis, says **Cinta Putra**, CEO of emergency notification communications company 3n. They need the perspective and know-how to help their organizations recover and survive.

by **Tricia Bisoux**

IM. SMS. E-mail. Wifi. Texting. When it comes to the business of one-touch, “one-call-to-all” crisis communications, Cinta Putra often speaks in a rush of acronyms and technological lingo. As CEO of 3n (National Notification Network), a leading emergency communications systems provider based in Glendale, California, Putra knows that organizations can better survive a crisis if they can communicate instantly and reliably to everyone in their networks when disaster strikes.

Putra graduated with her BBA from California State University in Fullerton in 1989; she earned her MBA from Cal State in Dominguez in 1993. She knew early in her business education that problem solving was her passion, she says. That passion has largely driven her entrepreneurial success. In the wake of the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, Putra and her three business partners—Steve Kirchmeier, James Keene, and Patrick Stuver—realized how tragic it can be when organizations and emergency service providers are unable to communicate with their people in a crisis.

Together, the partners founded 3n, which provides technology that allows organizations to send important messages to everyone in their database across all communication paths, including voice mail, instant messaging (IM), short messaging service (SMS, or text messaging), and e-mail. They also can receive real-time reports that track who has received the message and who has yet to respond. Since its founding, 3n has provided communication services to organizations during Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Southeast Asia, and other emergency situations.

Recently, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg selected 3n to provide its new emergency communication system, a plan already in the works before a gunman shot 32 students and faculty members on its campus in April 2007. Using the system, named VT Alerts, campus administrators can send emergency messages to students, faculty, and staff via phone calls, e-mails, and text messages sent to mobile devices; the school also can send instant messages through AOL, Yahoo, and MSN. Moreover, the system allows subscribers to list emergency contacts, including parents, spouses, and other friends and family.

As a business leader—and a wife and mother of four children—Putra knows a thing or two about crisis management. She emphasizes that unexpected emergencies are inevitable in business, and each requires a calm response and unique solutions. To manage through them and rise above them, business students must do more than rely on standard business models and traditional solutions. They must communicate effectively, work well with those around them, and think on their feet to attend to the problem at hand.



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School administrators are now paying more attention to their institutions’ crisis communications capability. What do university administrators need to know when it comes to communicating quickly to everyone in their communities during a crisis?

They need know what to expect from different communication paths and that different communication paths behave differently. They also need to realize that it’s not just what they say, but how they say it. We can provide them with sample letters and e-mails that will help them increase adoption rates of the technology within their communities. We can also help them conduct more effective tests to successfully achieve a first alert.

In your experience, what is the biggest difference between a higher education institution and a business organization when it comes to effective mass communication?

In the corporate world, cell phones and business phones are typically the first communication paths; then, it rolls down to e-mail. It almost never goes into instant messaging. But in higher education, a large percentage of students select IMs as their first communication path. You have to pay attention to those kinds of nuances. So, in this case, schools must make sure that students make the emergency notification system part of their IM buddy list, so that they’ll be sure to get the notification.

As 3n’s CEO, what are the most important lessons you’ve learned about crisis management?

I think people sometimes waste valuable time at the onset of a crisis, because they deny that it has happened. Or they try to figure out exactly what happened or find someone or something to blame. But in a crisis, time is critical. The first step in crisis management is to accept that the crisis happened and figure out how to manage through it.

What do you think business schools can teach students about crisis management so they’ll be ready for the unexpected difficulties they’ll face in their careers?

Lesson No. 1 is that there will always be a crisis. The job of crisis management, then, is to ensure the survival of the organization. The question for a crisis manager to answer is this: What kind of recovery plan do we put in place so that, should a crisis happen, it doesn’t wipe out the organization?

When you launched 3n in 2003, the market already included several well-established critical communications

companies. What did you learn about launching a company and product in a market with established competition?

No matter what company you launch, what market you face, or what point in time it is, there will always be established competition. But new companies and products, no matter what they are, all start by fulfilling a need, by solving an existing problem. The question isn’t just whether you can fill that need or solve that problem, but whether you can do it better, faster, or cheaper than what is currently available.

When PCs first came out, they were competing against the established mainframe. When Google started, Yahoo was already the established player. But PCs and Google entered the market on the premise that they could deliver a product that was better, cheaper, or faster than what was available from the competition.

What was better or different about your product compared to what was already available?

When we first started, communications technology existed primarily as on-site solutions that used only a couple communication paths. There were many single points of failure, and the technology needed a lot of maintenance and know-how. We realized that organizations would increase their chances of communicating in a crisis if they utilized all available paths of communication—not just voice and fax, but also instant messaging and e-mail.

We also recognized that technology changes all the time. Fax was “in” a couple years ago, but few people use a fax to communicate today. Today, the cell phone may be “it,” but tomorrow, it may not be. We saw a need for a plug-and-play platform that was simple and worked quickly on a large scale. It needed to accommodate not only the communication paths available now, but also those that may be available in the future.

Many business students in entrepreneurship classes are planning to launch their own companies, as you did. If you were acting as their mentor, what advice would you give to help them succeed, or at least fail with grace?

That there are no shortcuts to success! Success is still 99 percent perspiration and 1 percent inspiration. The idea—the launch—is just the beginning of the journey. That’s the 1 percent. From there it’s hard work. Luck certainly plays into it, but you must be prepared and willing to do the 99 percent, over and over again.

And most entrepreneurs will fail many times before they hit on the idea that makes it.

From there it's **hard work.**"



That's true. My first entrepreneurial attempt failed miserably! It's a funny story. It was during electric deregulation in California. A friend of mine thought this would be a great market, so we began buying electricity from the California Power Exchange and selling to the end consumer. For a while, we were actually doing well, getting the business up and running.

But then that summer, Enron came along. The price of electricity went from \$14 a megawatt to \$2,000 a megawatt. We were stuck in the middle. We had customers at the end with contracts we had to fulfill, but we couldn't buy the electricity. So, we died overnight.

It was very painful, but I learned some important lessons from that experience. I realized that, in the end, persistence will prevail. You don't always succeed on the first try—you just don't. But you have to have the passion for what you're doing. You've got to have the emotional maturity and stomach for it. You can cry if you have to, but you get up and do it again.

What have been the biggest changes in your industry—in terms of both trends and technological advancement—since you launched?

There are more communication paths and better ways of getting back responses, especially via instant messaging. Five years ago, communication paths didn't really include IMs or SMS.

On the adoption side, the biggest change I see is that the market recognizes that an organization, be it a school or corporation or municipality, has the responsibility to communicate with its constituents, be they students, employees, or residents. That's true especially if the information they communicate could potentially prevent loss, remove people from harm's way, or even save lives. Such recognition moves the critical communication tool from a nice-to-have to a must-have.

You mention that plug-and-play communication platforms need to accommodate future technologies. What new technologies do you see in store?

Near term, I think we're going to see more connectivity through more communication paths. Not just phone, e-mail, SMS, and IM, but also radio, electronic signs, and alarms. I see that coming very quickly.

In the medium term, I think we'll see more location-based notification and content. Today, it's more of a static, list-based notification. When something happens, an organization sends a message to the set of people in its database. In the future, though, it will be more dynamic and location-based. That is,

as you, the individual, enter an area, the location somehow knows that you are there; then, pertinent information will be delivered to you, regardless of whether or not you're on a set list.

We've been discussing the challenge of keeping up with changing technology. Have you also faced specific challenges working in the IT industry, a field with so few women in positions of leadership?

For me, the challenge hasn't been in leading a company in a male-dominated field. The greatest challenge has been balancing all the demands of being a woman, a parent, a wife, a sister, a daughter, a friend, *and* a CEO.

Women are just wired differently than men. I don't think my husband would drive home from an important board meeting and then suddenly realize, "Oh, I need to pick up some milk! I need to make costumes for the kids!" It's not that I think my husband doesn't want to take care of those things—he just doesn't think of them. Whether we like it or we don't, women face these extra challenges. It's just who we are.

How do you balance those demands?

That's a deep question! I think we make difficult choices. The question for women has always been, "Can you have it all? Can you have a happy family and kids and a career?" I have found that, if women choose to have a family and a career, they must have the support of their families. My decisions have an impact not just on my life, but also on my family's life. So we sit down and decide what we give up and what we keep, because we certainly can't keep and do everything.

For example, we decided as a family that we would give up home-cooked meals. But we chose to keep game nights, because those are important for the kids. We make choices, and sometimes we must make sacrifices.

Did business school prepare you for this balancing act?

No. I learned to handle this juggling act as I went through it. Business schools teach the thought processes of business, but not the day-to-day realities. For women, especially, it would help if business schools could highlight the fact that, for a woman, a business career does come with extra obstacles and challenges. That's not something to cry about; it's just a fact. Then, they also should point out that women do succeed in spite of all these challenges and obstacles.

Given these challenges, how would you advise business schools to attract more women to business careers?

“What separates one graduate from another is his or her passion for life. People with passion stand out.”

I think it would help to hear from more role models, more real people, who can share their real successes and failures. How have these women accomplished these things? How did they deal with personal challenge? And why, at the end of it all, do they still love what they do? If I were a young woman and undecided about my future career, I would be very interested in hearing those stories.

Have you found the mentors and role models you needed to succeed?

Throughout my life and career I've had a number of people I'd call mentors, who passed along their principles to me. For instance, from my father I learned the concept of fairness, of believing in people and giving them second chances.

But overall, there are many people who have touched my life in different ways—some very casually over just one conversation, and some over many years. In many cases, I picked up their principles not by design, but by circumstance. I often didn't understand the importance of these lessons in their entirety at the time. And that's the way it often works: It can take years of personal experience for all you learn to finally sink in. One day, years later, you sit back and say, “Oh, that's what she meant!”

What has been the lesson you've valued the most?

The most important thing for me was the moment I realized that, no matter what my point of view is, no matter how certain I am about my set of facts, it's still just one point of view. For a long time, I looked at the set of facts that I had and applied *my* knowledge and *my* experience, looking at it from *my* chair through *my* glasses. Then, from that, I made a decision. Because I was seeing only one set of facts, one reality, I thought my conclusion was the only one possible.

But one day I realized the importance of perspective—that other people in different environments with different experiences look at things differently and do things differently. They could all make different decisions, and they could also all be correct. It was a good day when I realized that. That helped me move forward in business and understand other people better. I can look at problems from multiple points of view and not always judge situations only from my perspective.

How well do you think business school prepared you for your business career?

Business school prepared me to think through an issue. Every situation generally has a logical dimension to it,

which is what business school teaches students to address. Business schools help students learn certain nuances, so that every time students walk into a familiar situation, they'll recall certain things that worked and certain things that didn't work.

But in real life, issues have more dimensions and complexity than business schools can teach in the classroom. There's the emotional dimension, the circumstantial dimension, and all the other colors that are unique to the particular situation, the time, and the person. It's one thing to learn how to build your budgets according to certain assumptions, run sensitivity tests on models, and propose solutions based on market changes. It's quite another to make real-time decisions that you know will potentially impact people's lives and change the future of the organization.

Real-life situations require people to have another level of emotional maturity if they're going to make certain kinds of real-time judgment calls. To really deal with complex issues, we still need to go through them ourselves and learn as we go.


What does it take for business graduates to be hired at 3n?

What separates one graduate from another is his or her passion for life. People with passion stand out. They really care about something, and they take a stand for what they believe in whether they're right or wrong. People with passion are more likely to win in life than those who may be right, but don't have passion.

What's your own passion?

Solving problems and delivering value. I like looking at a problem and asking, “What's missing? What's not working? How do we solve it?” I enjoy looking at a bigger picture, solving an issue, and bringing value that way.

You've obviously already learned to weather a crisis during California's electricity debacle. What most concerns you when it comes to your company's future?

I think my biggest worry is how to make sure we don't fail our customers—ever. Our business is in emergency communication, and our customers rely on us at critical times. We need to ensure the reliability and availability of our system, no matter what. We need to prepare continually, look at all possible scenarios, and keep adding, improving, mitigating, planning, and building redundancies. It's a never-ending process. We cannot fail our customers. That's the biggest thing on my list. 

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Valerio Zanini co-founded and manages Goozex.com, an online video game trading portal. Matt Fleischer started and runs Hook & Ladder Brewery. Zoey Rawlins created Shop DC, the popular upscale retail shopping guide.

What do these successful entrepreneurs have in common? They all created their businesses as MBA students at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business.

By encouraging and financing student idea generation and business creation at every level, the Smith School, driven by its Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship, is developing a new generation of entrepreneurs.



Two years after Zoey Rawlins founded Shop DC, it was bought by The Washington Post Company, one of the nation's leading media companies.



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