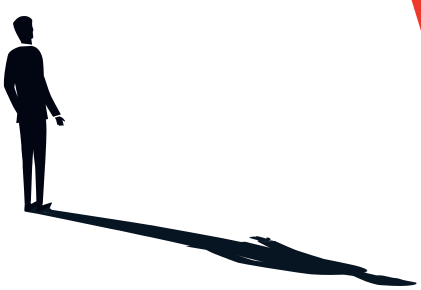
THE BOOK of CRISIS MANAGEMENT

A Guide to Preparing *for*, Mitigating *During*, and Recovering *After* Crises



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The New Normal

Previous iterations of this book have referenced the certainty of crisis, yet here we are in the midst of a global pandemic that has left no industry untouched. As we begin to adjust to the new normal in the age of COVID-19—both personally and professionally—we have recognized that there are some crises that are seemingly impossible for which to prepare.

Most, if not all, businesses have had to pivot their operations, some more successfully than others. While some industries may never quite rebound to their pre-COVID levels, how individual organizations reacted in the face of this crisis will be a strong indicator of how they come out of this on the other side.

This COVID-19 Special Edition—**Crisis Management: A Guide to Preparing for, Mitigating During and Recovering After Crises** has been updated with articles that discuss the importance of developing a robust, yet flexible, crisis plan, and preparing your team for a truly unforeseen crisis. It covers responding to media inquiries about employees testing positive for the novel coronavirus; communicating internally to keep staff motivated in particularly challenging times; and utilizing a multitude of channels to communicate flexibly to internal and external stakeholders.

We'd like to thank the contributors to this guidebook for sharing their insights and learnings, and wish you all the best.

Stay well,

The PRNEWS Editorial Team

Table of Contents

1

The Crisis Plan

How Visual Mapping Prepares Teams for the Crisis No One Saw Coming

By Peter V. Stanton

When the COVID-19 crisis struck, many corporate communication teams were caught flat-footed. Perhaps we can all be forgiven for not anticipating a worldwide pandemic that brought the global economy to its knees, and did so seemingly overnight.

On short notice, so many teams were charged with making complex decisions about what to say, to whom and when. Too much was unknown. Too many competing interests required immediate attention. Employees were scared, customers were confused, supply chains were disrupted.

It was hard to know where and how to begin. It's one thing to manage a product recall, labor dispute or financial crisis. It's quite another to communicate with certainty when the lives and livelihoods of people around the world are imperiled by a virus about which so little is understood.

While some of the best communications pros were prepared in advance with plans for events that could reasonably be anticipated, few saw COVID-19 coming. As a result, playbooks had to be rewritten, in real time, as the pandemic unfolded.

Process vs. Script

Those who moved swiftly and effectively most likely were prepared with a "process" rather than a "script." The script, or situational checklist, approach to crisis planning invariably misses the crisis that actually happens. An electric utility company, for example, may have a plan for communicating in the event of a prolonged power outage, but it likely does not have one for a circumstance in which line crews might be exposed to a deadly virus during the process of restoration.

A process approach is more flexible and far more effective. It focuses on the activation and mobilization of a team in which each member knows two things without question: what role they will play, and how decisions will be made.

This simplicity becomes even more powerful when it is expressed as a visual rather than a narrative playbook. Illustrating a procedure for making decisions under pressure in a disciplined and thoughtful fashion empowers the right people to engage in critical thinking and act in defined and coordinated ways. It also minimizes confusion, an essential need when operating in a crisis.

Defining the Crisis Core Team

Now that we have experienced a global emergency that impacts companies of all sizes, we must apply what we have learned to the next iteration of our crisis plans.

A process map can become a highly valuable tool for guiding the core crisis team through each stage of some future situation, lending structure to their discussions and providing criteria for escalation of action as it becomes necessary. With this approach, decisions are made by a multidisciplinary team functioning as an effective unit.

The Core Team

The core team process, as opposed to the situational approach, identifies the key players, their roles and responsibilities – as well as their authority– in crisis management well ahead of time.

Without this kind of pre-planning, many organizations get bogged down in deciding who should be enlisted when trouble occurs, further delaying the deliberate thought essential to a cogent response.

It is rarely the case that only a handful of PR professionals are needed to communicate in a crisis. In fact, many other people are essential, including operations leaders, human resources professionals, legal counsel and, certainly in the case of COVID-19, science and health experts.

Unfortunately, these non-communications professionals are unlikely, when under the pressure of the moment, to approach a crisis with a communications mindset. Creating a map of the process and each person's defined role enables everyone to understand the system he or she is mobilizing and his or her unique contribution to ensure the most appropriate action.

Guiding Preparedness Thinking

A solid crisis process map serves as a tool to facilitate planning and as a resource for the crisis team to understand their commitments.

In Planning

From a planning standpoint, a crisis map provides an illustration of how the team is organized and led. Using the map, the team follows a specific rubric for responses and assessments along the way to ensure a deliberate, yet timely, course of action.

For example, in one recent COVID-19 communication management session, it became evident that there was no individual in the room—or on the extended crisis management team—who could serve as a subject matter expert on the science of the pandemic. Actions, instead, were based on sometimes-conflicting information from government sources, local health officials and scientists from regional institutions who could be reached on short notice, and not always because they were the preeminent experts on the virus itself.

Utilizing a crisis mapping approach would have illuminated these blind spots in advance and given the team the chance to address them not only in drills and table-top exercises, but also in real time.

Engaging an outside science and health consultant can be far more effective than debating within your team over which public pronouncements or news reports are the most credible to utilize.

The crisis map also facilitates preparedness drills, either in the form of a tabletop exercise or live action session. These serve to test and reinforce your management process, enable critical thinking and foster collaboration that otherwise has a tendency to break down during actual crises. People have a capacity to act in a manner they believe to be in the best interests of the organization, but are not always in a fashion that reflects team consensus.

From an execution standpoint, a crisis map helps core team members stay cool under pressure, knowing they have a clearly defined system, accepted protocols and decision-making hierarchies.

In Action

In a crisis, people can either overreact or clam up. They're under a great deal of pressure, the situation can shift quickly and the correct course of action is not always clear. The crisis map brings structure to what might otherwise become a chaotic situation, allowing the team to follow a pre-determined path, instead of directing specific actions that may

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PROCESS MAP

This process map is intended as a guide. Every situation will vary and communication must be adjusted accordingly.

**Communication must adhere to all applicable industry, geographic, and legal/regulatory requirements.*

ADOPT A PRINCIPLED APPROACH CONSISTENT WITH COMPANY CORE VALUES

Integrity | Excellence | Respect | Humility | Generosity

1 ASSESS SITUATION

The crisis may be immediate or probable. Strategic communication may influence the potential impact of the issue on the brand reputation. Knowledgeable associates determine whether situation warrants crisis response.

DOES IT MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA?

An Event that Threatens Company's Brands and Reputation Internally and/or Externally
AND
Interferes with Normal Business Routine and Creates Uncertainty

2 FORM ISSUE CORE TEAM

BUSINESS ASSOCIATES: Focus on actions to remedy the crisis; **COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATES:** Collaborate with Business Associates with a focus on internal & external messaging & outreach.

COMMUNICATION MEMBERS | **BUSINESS MEMBERS**

A — AGREE ON ROLES

*EXAMPLE OF POSSIBLE TEAM MEMBERS

- C-SUITE COMMUNICATION
- BUSINESS / DIVISION
- LEGAL / REGULATORY
- PRODUCT SPECIALIST
- CUSTOMER FACING

B — AGREE ON PROTOCOL

Identify Waterline Consultants

Identify Stakeholders

Adopt Decision Making Model

C — MESSAGE APPROVAL

Timely

Technically Accurate

Legal/Regulatory Approval

Communication Consistency (Positioning, Tone, Aligns with Previous Messaging) not fit the actual circumstances.

Knowing your methodology rather than your pre-scripted statements and actions fosters critical thinking specific to the circumstance, an all-important element of successful crisis communications.

With a crisis map in hand, a company has a clear set of guidelines to drive actions and decision-making across the core team in any crisis.

Calm and Collected During a Crisis

In the event of COVID-19, your methodology might begin with Critical Analysis – asking key questions:

- Do we have people already affected? How many and to what extent?
- Where are our ongoing health and safety vulnerabilities?
- Who has the best insights into the magnitude of our risk?
- Where can we obtain unbiased and accurate science guidance?

From there, the process may move to Tier One Focused Communication: reaching those with the greatest immediate need for information. Most likely this begins with employees and moves progressively to customers and communities. Shareholder communication will occur later, but the people most likely to be personally affected come first.

At this stage, a Status Assessment may be undertaken to gauge response to your communication, the severity of the unfolding crisis and the occurrence of external events over which you have no control. This assessment enables the team to evaluate next steps and calibrate priorities from there.

With a crisis map as a visual guide, the organization has a roadmap for decisions and actions that can evolve to include Tier Two Communication, potentially reaching local governments, regulators and the media; Shareholder Outreach; Rapid Response; or Sustained Engagement, primarily with the employees, customers and communities with whom you interacted first.

Within this sequence, additional Status Assessments occur to ensure the core team is fully informed about developing events and appropriately deliberative about each new dimension of management and response.

No one ever wishes to face a global crisis such as COVID-19. Now that we have, we are better prepared to face the unthinkable. Now is the time to develop your core team and arm it with a well-conceived and tested crisis map. That way, you can be confident you know how to address even the unforeseen. ■

Peter V. Stanton is CEO of Stanton Communications. @stantoncomm

How to Plan for Every Crisis

By Ned Barnett

Today's novel coronavirus crisis, while unexpected in both scope and intensity, is nonetheless as predictable as your morning coffee. The same applies to 2019's hurricane season – headlined by Hurricane Dorian – which collectively caused more than $7.5 billion dollars in damages.

We know pandemics will hit – SARS was less than two decades ago, and the swine flu virus was just a few years ago. We also know hurricanes will hit – the Atlantic and Gulf coastal areas are dangerous places to live or work. But try telling Kansans it's dangerous to live in Tornado Ally – or Los Angelinos that it can be unhealthy to live on the fault line.

You can tell people this, but few will act on that information. Just as the latest natural disaster victims don't want to hear about the risks of living on the coast – they've long-since decided it's worthwhile to live in an at-risk geographic location – victims or potential victims of COVID-19 (virtually all of us) don't want to hear about what we all should have done, in advance of this outbreak. However, when the current pandemic ends, our first lesson should be that the next such disaster is just around the corner.

We will all survive disasters much more effectively if we first prepare ourselves, while we still can, for the next crises. Your business – or your client's business – doesn't have to be at the mercy of natural disasters – nor should it be the victim of recessions or other man-made turmoil. The point is simple: While anything can happen at any time, planning for crises you can anticipate will save you heartache and – potentially – millions of dollars.

All you have to do is plan in advance, test your plan periodically, update it as necessary, then keep your eyes open for the first sign of the next disaster.

Plan for Everything You Can

Weather crises and natural disasters, pandemics, recessions or more personal-to-your-business disasters can happen at any time. Even the best minds available can't plan for everything, but you'll be way ahead of the game if you create plans to address, in greater or lesser degree, any disaster you can imagine.

- If you're unionized, plan for a strike to occur at the worst possible moment.
- If you deal with volatile chemicals, plan a response to an explosion or environment-wrecking leak.
- If you deal with confidential information, plan in advance for a very different kind of leak – be it a hack from outside, or a disloyal employee on the inside.
- If your spokesperson is a celebrity, plan in advance to weather a bout of very public moral turpitude.
- If you have a high-profile CEO or board member, plan for a reputation-shattering scandal.
- If your business requires electricity, plan for a long-term grid collapse.
- If you have valuable data stored in computers or on the cloud, plan to be hacked.

How to Plan for a Disaster

Planning for a disaster is critical – and each disaster needs a separate disaster planning team. For example, the Secret Service designated "my" South Carolina hospital as a "receiving hospital" should the president have a medical emergency while flying between Charlotte and Augusta. Upon receiving this notice, I pulled together a crisis planning team that included:

- The county sheriff and civil defense director (for security and traffic control)
- The hospital safety engineer to set up an easily isolated press room, which was complete with word processors, phone lines and coffee
- Executives from the local newspapers and TV stations – their participation was vital to ensure that their reporters had equal access to the same press opportunities as the traveling presidential press corps

Because this last item relates directly to media relations, an explanation might be in order. The traveling Presidential press corps tends to have better access to breaking news than the local media. They are known to the Secret Service, they have photo-ID badges that identify them as members of the Presidential press, and because they represent major news media, they are used to getting their way. Often local reporters are brushed aside – or, in the vernacular of the Presidential press corps, "big-footed."

While, as the hospital's PR director, I made plans to accommodate the press corps with a press room, the longer-term interests of the hospital involved ensuring that the local press was treated with respect and provided access. By involving the newspaper publishers and TV station general managers in the planning process, those relations were strengthened even before there ever was a presidential health emergency which, fortunately, never happened.

This experience has wider implications for any organization that gets caught up in national news. While it's important to accommodate the national media, it's at least as critical to ensure the local news media is looked after. Local media will provide ongoing bread-and-butter press coverage for your organization long after the national press rushes off to the next big story.

The hospital's crisis planning team began the process with a face-to-face meeting – only after each participant had signed an NDA. Together, we worked out the procedures necessary to ensure security for the President as well as access for the local media. We also lined up internal systems in the hospital – phones, food-service, typewriters (this was before computers or cell phones, so technology is no longer needed) to provide for the press room needs of the media.

This included creating an on-the-run press room, posting police in all stairwells to keep enterprising reporters from trying to breach internal security, and providing local media with photo IDs that the County sheriff's security team would honor, allowing locals equal access to the press room.

Due to the confidential nature of this potential crisis, rehearsals were not possible. However, with our help, all of the parties involved (separately) rehearsed their roles. The sheriff deployed his forces during a hospital practice (non-specific) emergency drill, the hospital engineer had his staff set up the press room in the auditorium several times until he had the timing right, the civil defense director worked with the sheriff to practice traffic control, and, with my help, the media briefed its teams on ways of responding to a generic high-profile individual being admitted to a local hospital.

The Takeaways:

- Involve all key decision-makers right from the start.
- If confidentiality is important, ask each to sign a non-disclosure form before participating in the planning.
- Provide an in-depth briefing so all planners have access to relevant information
- Take notes, and from that, evolve a plan that all planners sign off on.
- Create the tools (such as reporter IDs) needed to carry out the plan.
- Do whatever it takes to practice the emergency response plan in advance.

In a study published in PRNEWS in February of 2020, based on a survey conducted in October of 2019, fewer than 30 percent of respondents feared a pandemic or any other kind of environmental disaster.

You get the picture. In PR and its various branches, such as brand or image management, it's essential that you plan for every conceivable crisis and make preparations.

Sometimes, these efforts will push up against the wishes of a budget-conscious or "it can't happen here" executive. He or she can be expected to try and interfere with a vital public relations function. Things can get ugly, especially when you're fighting for tight budget dollars. The larger the organization, the more likely that mid- or upper-level executives will fall into a "go-along-to-get-along" mindset, which creates a serious barrier for organization-wide crisis planning. If possible, try to win over likely objectors before launching your effort.

Waiting to Plan is A Mistake

A NASDAQ-sponsored survey from 2016 showed that 48 percent of the firms polled had any kind of crisis plans in place. Even fewer actually practiced various crisis scenarios regularly – or at all. More recently, a PRNEWS survey found that 62 percent of firms have a crisis plan – yet fewer than half of them believe their plan is up-to-date, and less than 42 percent have ever tested the plan. An out-of-date plan – or one that exists but has never been tested or practiced – might create more problems than no plan at all.

A classic example of a plan that may have done more harm than good can be found in the **Virginia Tech** shooting in 2007. Certainly, in the aftermath of Columbine a decade before, any school should have a disaster plan to accommodate such a risk; Virginia Tech did, too. But it was old, outdated and in many ways, just wrong. As a result, 32 people were shot to death and another 17 were wounded, while six others were injured while jumping out of windows to escape the shooter.

A simple, in-place and well-practiced crisis plan could have saved many of these victims. However, instead of putting out the word in a timely fashion, the administration hunkered down. According to the state's Virginia Tech Review Panel, by the time the administration went public about its active shooter status to its students, faculty and employees – at 9:23 a.m., roughly two hours after the shooting had begun – most of the fatalities and injuries had already been inflicted.

While I wish this was an isolated example, it's not. Fortunately, there are several ways of overcoming the built-in entropy that often mitigates against effective crisis planning.

- Create a detailed risk-assessment of crises that could have a PR impact. All of them do.
- Create a detailed PR plan to address the top potential crises.
- Deal directly with other departments – especially those managed by cooperative executives – and include them in your "strictly PR crisis response plan."
- Share the benefits of this kind of planning with other department managers, which will encourage them (by example) to get onboard.

A useful alternative is to independently conduct the risk assessment and PR planning, then go to the planning-resistant executives and demonstrate the benefits of such a plan. Then try to win them over.

Fortunately, creating risk assessments and crisis response plans are not expensive. Besides, should a crisis actually arise, most organizations ignore budget limitations as a trade-off for protecting the brand. Begin this by setting up a Risk Assessment Threat Chart, which needs to be nothing more than an Excel grid that identifies risks and allows you to calculate probabilities.

For example, as its first PR Director, I created a risk assessment and response plan for Lexington County Hospital. I first began with environmental risks. South Carolina is both a tornado zone, as well as in a hurricane zone. In the late 1880s, Charleston was nearly leveled by an earthquake; the hospital was located downstream from the world's largest earthen dam.

Knowing how we'd respond, I was able to successfully "stare down" two such crises: a hurricane that sat on top of our hospital for eight hours, creating indoor flooding, and an unprecedented 24-inch snowstorm; a "500-year snowfall" that cut off all access, except for four-wheel drive vehicles, to the hospital.

Effective organizational disaster planning is important, and – for organizations that don't now have such plans – PR can justifiably take the lead in making plans, regardless of the type of disaster involved. Plan ahead, practice, be prepared. ■

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Rapid Response to Tragedy: Anticipate Needs and Put People First

By Christopher R. Turnbull

Every hospital in America plans for the next mass casualty incident and, at the same time, hopes it won't be theirs. When the phone rang at 6:46 a.m. on August 26, 2015, it was our turn.

A colleague reported shots fired, and multiple victims were down during a live television broadcast. WDBJ7 reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward were unresponsive.

Within minutes, **Carilion Clinic** readied a Life-Guard helicopter in the hopes that our skilled doctors and nurses might be able to save their lives.

Parker and Ward couldn't be saved, but the third victim of the attack, local chamber of commerce executive director Vicki Gardner, was en route to our region's only Level 1 Trauma Center at **Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital**. With that, Carilion's crisis communications team activated its plan.

While the number of victims in this incident didn't officially reach the threshold of a mass casualty incident (four or more victims), our response was informed by the experiences of our peers who had unfortunately faced them, and will hopefully help those who face these tragedies in the future.

Here are our insights and lessons.

Build a Team

Small-scale events can be handled by one or two people. Even though in some ways this event was nothing more than a tragic murder, it became an international story rapidly because it was broadcast live and involved the media itself.

Having an established crisis communications team with roles, responsibilities and plans made scaling up to meet the need easier. It's not enough to know the *roles* you need in a crisis; you need to know the *people* – strengths, weaknesses, adaptability under pressure, level of resiliency and teamwork. That's why our team practices and why we have team members who are cross-trained to function in multiple roles.

Within a few hours, the team quickly communicated emergency measures to protect our staff, offered condolences, reminded staff about patient privacy, helped prepare the victim's family for the attention they would receive and began to think about how to address other anticipated community needs.

By noon, the team had handled dozens of communications to our boards, leadership, staff, the media and the public. One or two people could not do it all; it was a team effort.

Planning is Essential

Our goal was to put order to chaos that morning and in the days that followed, and our crisis communications plan was our roadmap. The plan offered a framework that allowed us to manage by objectives. Practicing with the plan taught us how to adapt and remain agile.

There is always a time during a fast-evolving crisis when teams are merely reacting to what's in front of them. Our plan enabled us to quickly move from *reacting* to *responding* with intention. Our objectives were simple and straightforward:

1. Facilitate an efficient flow of timely, accurate and credible information between all parties involved.
2. Protect the victim's family by anticipating their needs and the needs of the media.
3. Help our community cope and heal after such a devastating loss.

Anticipate and Address Stakeholder Needs

We were able to get ahead of the crisis by anticipating the needs of the patient, the media, our employees and our community. A news conference was necessary to quickly communicate with the dozens of media outlets descending upon our community.

Using our plan, we activated our protocol for a news conference on site, but quickly changed course when we learned that the municipality was establishing one. We joined its Joint Information Center and spoke at the event. We did not need to be the focus of the story, but our voice was still essential.

We expected the media to doggedly pursue anyone who knew the victim to get a comment. Instead of fighting that battle, we talked to the family to see if they would offer 90 minutes of time to be interviewed by the media. We would continue to provide daily updates to reporters on the victim's condition, but the trade-off for the media was no interviews for the three days following the interviews. By relieving the immediate pressure, we were able to buy the family three days of peace to spend with their loved one.

It was quickly apparent that our community was traumatized by the events they witnessed on television. Parents were struggling to talk to their children about what happened. Our in-house content team, which included a popular, Emmy-award-winning TV anchor, quickly produced a video featuring our pediatric and psychiatric experts to help parents navigate those conversations.

Put People First

Professionalism and emotional intelligence in a crisis are not mutually exclusive. Our response was geared to the people impacted: the victim and her family, the media, the public and Carilion's employees, including the members of the crisis communications team.

The crisis communications team modeled extreme professionalism while navigating their own emotions and dealing with personal tragedy; Adam and Alison were colleagues and friends, and Vicki was a Carilion community hospital board member and a friend as well.

In the week following the shooting, our psychiatry and behavioral medicine department offered their time so that the communicators could debrief about the incident. Now debriefing is permanently a part of our plan.

None of what we do in crisis communications is rocket science. With your adrenaline pumping in a fast-moving situation, it pays to have a competent, well-trained team focused on the people impacted and the overall needs of your stakeholders. ■

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Survive Any Crisis by Identifying Roles, Stakeholders and More

By Jock Breitwieser

One thing is certain: Sooner or later, a crisis will occur. How will you respond? With a plan, of course.

Planning for the Plan

You need a plan, but no crisis communications plan is a silver bullet. Every situation is unique, and no template is meant to solve all your problems. Rather than a panacea for all scenarios, the crisis communications plan is a starting point and reference tool. Consider it a toolbox with implements for crisis scenarios that are either the most likely or most threatening for your organization. The crisis plan serves as a guide for how to respond. It gives you and your crisis team the necessary structure to document, manage and survive a crisis.

No two crises are the same, although they may have similarities. There cannot be a single template approach to manage the range of crises.

Is a Crisis Headed Your Way?

Before you can manage a crisis, you need to know how to recognize one. To acknowledge and then successfully address a problem, you need two crucial elements: monitoring and definitions of what constitutes a crisis.

The best way to mitigate an issue is to see it coming as early as possible. Monitoring achieves just that. It:

- Increases predictability.
- Aids in preventing crises before they happen.
- Accelerates decision making.

When setting up a monitoring team, team members need to review issues and intelligence they gather from a variety of sources in the daily monitoring of critical outlets and sources. They need to qualify the level of risk that these issues represent.

Use the example of an airplane: an issue is when the plane is delayed, and an incident is when the plane experiences turbulence or a mechanical defect. But you're dealing with a crisis when the plane is about to crash.

Know a Crisis When You See One

Every organization experiences any number of situations that are uncomfortable. But not every troubling situation is a crisis. To manage crises successfully, you need to be able to understand the differences between incidents, issues and crises. Depending on how you categorize a situation, you'll need to adjust your actions.

Issue:

Usually, the subject of a debate. The media may spread it and so occasionally it peaks as it gathers attention. It can become an incident or a crisis. An unusual trend in customer complaints should also be defined as an issue.

Incident:

An unexpected event. A deviation from internal or external standards generally triggers an incident. If mismanaged or left unattended, it has the potential to mushroom into a crisis.

Crisis:

A crisis is an unexpected event that can threaten the health and safety of consumers, customers, and employees, as well as the image and financial value of a brand and company.

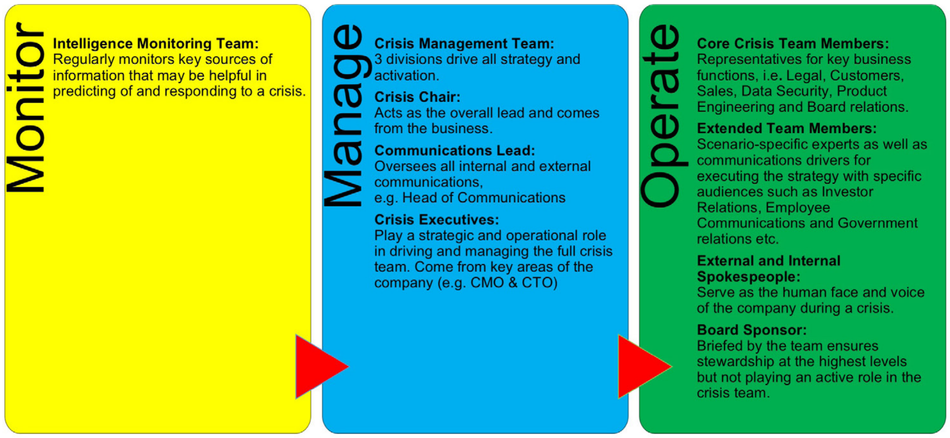
Beyond being able to categorize the situation, your team members need to know the signs that indicate an issue, incident or crisis. Because it is impossible to cover all possible scenarios for a crisis, it makes sense for you to define the two or three most likely scenarios that can cause a crisis and are likely to cover 80 percent of all cases you will encounter. Also, you should write down one or two crisis scenarios that, while not likely to happen a lot, have the potential to destroy or severely damage your organization to the degree of being unable to operate or continue business as usual. Following this pattern, you have created guardrails that should help staff recognize and address the most likely and most impactful crisis scenarios.

Here are some sample scenarios for a crisis:

- **SCENARIO 1:** A data security breach resulting in the theft of employee or customer information. The media is likely to or has reported already this incident. In addition, stock analysts and/or members of the security research community are

7 Steps for Structured Media Monitoring

1. Institute an intelligence monitoring team consisting of members who will monitor daily key stakeholder sources of information that may be helpful in predicting a crisis. This team is headed by an Intelligence Team Captain, who ensures that monitoring sources meet frequency and coverage requirements.
2. Develop daily monitoring by team members during times when a potential issue may arise, or when an issue is emerging.
3. Develop a weekly data capture and risk assessment report to ensure due diligence against all information and acts as an archive over time.
4. Create risk assessment criteria and scoring to provide clear guidance on how to rate the risk level of the data.
5. Create a central platform where weekly crisis reports will reside and where the full Intelligence Monitoring Team has access, e.g Intranet or internal data/information management system.
6. Utilize an instant red flag alert procedure, which is used when an individual team member uncovers information outside the weekly capture.
7. Develop red flag monitoring protocols to enable the crisis team to receive regular constant updates that will guide decision-making should a crisis be imminent, or during a crisis.



A structured team drives successful execution. Credit: Jock Breitwieser

likely to discuss or write about it. The immediate threat is to employee data, customer business or the customers' customers/employees.

- **SCENARIO 2:** A mass error in the production of your organization's product becomes a crisis when multiple companies are involved. With an immediate threat to your customers' businesses or their customers/employees, the issue has the potential to drag/evolve versus to be solved quickly, and the error has been or is likely to be reported by the media, analysts, and other external stakeholders.

Executive Buy-In

For crisis communications to be taken seriously, executive buy-in is essential. Demonstrating the business value of having a crisis plan in place will help secure support from senior executives and C-level executives. Give executives examples of what has happened to similar organizations when they have faced a crisis. Offer examples of companies that have suffered significant financial losses from a badly handled crisis.

Don't just ask what if questions. Instead, provide answers, outline possible crisis scenarios, and give examples of what can happen if your organization does not prepare for a crisis.

Don't come empty-handed to a meeting with an executive. Carefully plan and prepare to have strategy, tactics, implementation and required resources/budget for your session.

Influencers and Stakeholders

To succeed with crisis management, you must build strong relationships with internal and external stakeholders and influencers.

Internally, stakeholders will be an integral part of your team and paramount to success. Identify people who will form your crisis team. They will help you get up and running when times get tough and allow you to cover multiple crisis areas at once.

This internal team should consist of permanent members, such as the chairman/business lead, the communications lead and the crisis executive. In addition, members of the core team could include representatives from the legal department, product engineering, field/customer communications, a board liaison and a data security expert from IT.

This setup ensures that you have people on your team who know the product and can assess whether your crisis will be contained or whether it will expand. You will also have people who are intimately familiar with your

Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Team Leaders

Chair and Business Lead

- ☐ Activates core team and informs extended teams
- ☐ Final responsibility for all decisions and communications
- ☐ Guards progress of activities and decides who participates in meetings
- ☐ Empowers and supports Crisis Management Team and Crisis Executive/Coordinator
- ☐ Responsible for liaising or delegating for board communication
- ☐ Has the mandate to take whatever action to let the Crisis Team function properly
- ☐ Decides on involving external experts
- ☐ Evaluates the management of the crisis and provides recommendations for possible adjustments of the crisis manual
- ☐ Decides when the Crisis Management Team will be disbanded

Crisis Executive

- ☐ Responsible for centralizing and reviewing complaints/alerts and advising Chair
- ☐ Responsible for risk analysis and giving clear overview of the situation
- ☐ Responsible for updating log sheets
- ☐ Responsible for coordinating operational aspects of crisis management
- ☐ Acts as the focal point for all information
- ☐ Briefs Crisis Management Team members individually when formal meetings are not required

Communications Lead

- ☐ Responsible for coordinating all internal and external communications
- ☐ Responsible for media handling and media monitoring
- ☐ Leads the communications team
- ☐ Responsible for instructions for the spokesperson of the company
- ☐ Delegates contacts with government and external bodies on a policy-making level
- ☐ Ensures that this Crisis Manual is current

The other team members bring their expertise and business function responsibility to the crisis. They are given a specific remit at the start of a crisis and tasked to gather information, and/or assess options and make recommendations.

customer base and who know how many people will be affected by a product or service issue and can help assess the potential severity of the crisis.

For external stakeholders, compile a list of audiences with whom you need to communicate to reduce the external/image impact of an emergency. This list should include customers, investors, partners, vendors, regulators, employees and shareholders.

It will be crucial for you to have these groups and their respective members set in advance, on paper. Having a master list in someone's head will not work. Similarly, you're not going to have enough time during a crisis to sit down and create an Excel document to tell you who you need to contact.

When it comes to communicating with these groups, social media and email are acceptable. That said, if you want to maintain and build the quality of your relationships with external stakeholders, nothing is better than personal and direct communication. Again, in advance, create a prioritized list of contacts because it likely will be impossible to call all external stakeholders personally.

For those you cannot reach directly, an automated phone system can be a great alternative. If it's possible to go down the list with your team and have everyone make personal phone calls, though, that's the best. Which external stakeholders need to be contacted first depends on

External Stakeholders to Keep on Your Radar

- ☐ Board members
- ☐ Candidates
- ☐ Counterparties/lenders
- ☐ Customers/clients
- ☐ Employees
- ☐ Government organizations
- ☐ Investors
- ☐ Partner organizations
- ☐ Regulators
- ☐ Shareholders
- ☐ Subsidiary brands
- ☐ The media
- ☐ The general public
- ☐ Trustees
- ☐ Vendors
- ☐ Volunteers

which group the crisis will hit hardest.

Consider Your Style

One key aspect of crisis communications is properly assessing the nature of the crisis. COVID-19 has taught us a valuable lesson in that regard. Formerly, organizations explained a shortcoming in a service or product. Now, with coronavirus, they have to develop communication in the face of a crisis that enveloped them. Moreover, it is a crisis that impacted just about all of their employees, customers and partners.

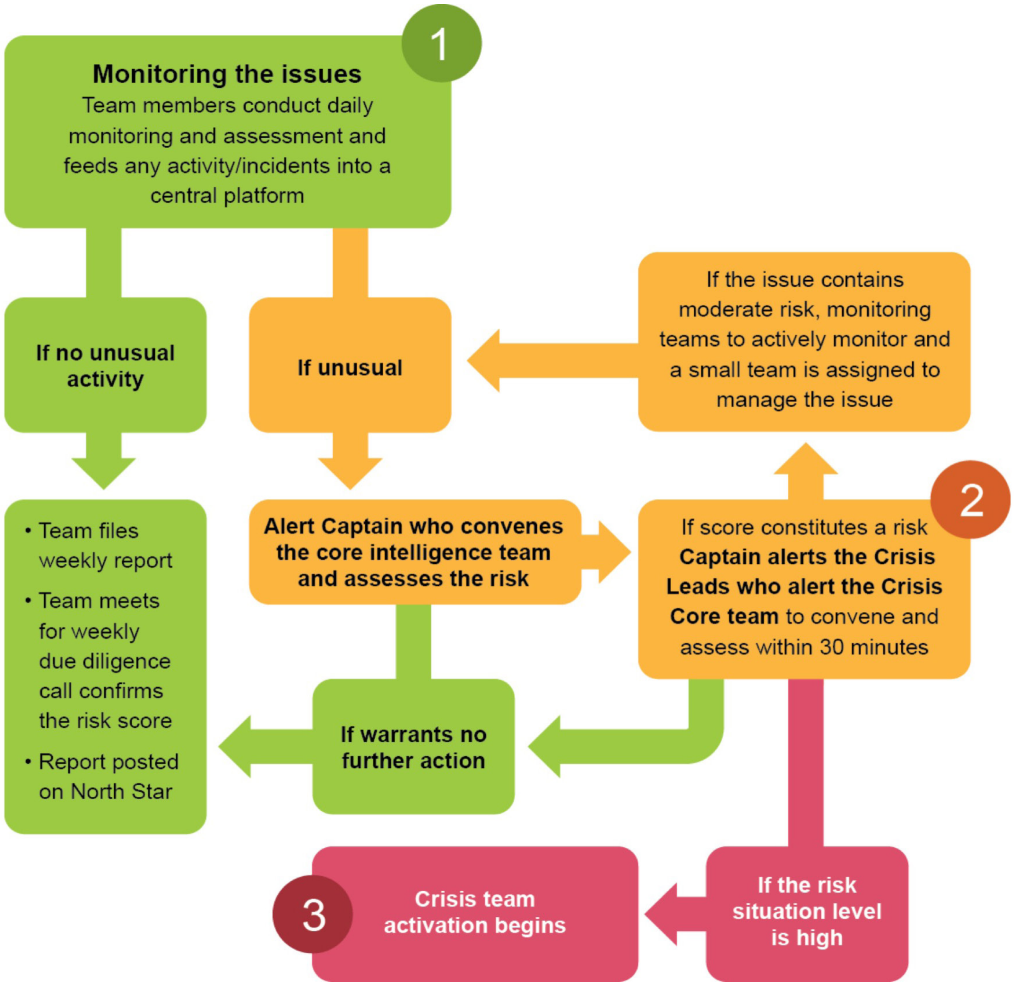
The critical issue around news and announcements in the COVID-19 scenario is that PR pros must consider if and how communication will help an organization's employees, customers and stakeholders. Defining what your audiences need is good communications and good business. If it is not relevant to your core audiences, now is not the time to speak. You will not achieve any business advantage. If, however, now is the time to communicate, do so clearly and quickly.

Beyond that, the question is how elements of crisis communication will help companies navigate their business amid today's challenges. For example, a B2C organization that conducts business with consumers has to develop a communications strategy that demonstrates it understands what consumers are experiencing. A B2B company that sells directly to other businesses, or that has a channel strategy, needs to roll out a crisis communications plan that directly addresses the business challenges of these audiences.

Another aspect is how to communicate at this moment. Timing announcements around events and in-person lead generation initiatives obviously won't work. Organizations have to adjust and communicate with their customers quickly. The messages have to be around what an organization's audiences can expect in terms of news, support, communications and access. While there's a lot of uncertainty in a continually shifting news environment, it's an important time to engage. It's also an important time to ramp up owned, shared and partner social channels. And especially in the case of COVID-19, it means a massive shift of all engagement toward digital experiences, owing to cancelations of physical events and lack of direct face-to-face opportunities.

When it comes to messaging around a crisis, it's essential to demonstrate that you're not a corporate robot. Be approachable, show empathy and speak the language of your audience. Show that you understand what your audience is going through, demonstrate that you know what its members need most urgently and don't make it about yourself.

Instead, make it about the people that you're looking to address and show you can walk in their shoes. Do they need food? How can you support community events, charities and food banks in a meaningful way? If you have a lot of small- and medium-sized busi-



Clear definitions for when action is required. Credit: Jock Breitwieser

ness as customers, how can you help them get through these tough times? Can you quickly institute payment deferral programs? Or provide them with financial counsel that helps them secure loans?

As with all crises, having a rough plan and outline helps you get started quickly. Activating it is a quick and relatively smooth process that allows you to be on the ball fast. But most important, making fast go-to-market adjustments is vital. In addition, communicating clearly to employees, partners and customers is assisted because you have a plan to follow.

Be Prepared with Statements

You will not have any time to spare when a crisis hits. Depending on the communications channels that your stakeholders (not you!) prefer, tailor appropriate statements in advance. For example, have brief statements ready to use on various social platforms, another for a short email and a third for a press release.

Finally, don't forget that during a crisis you will have to be ready to answer not only to the media but also to customers. In addition to the Q&A document for your media spokesperson, prepare a statement that you can provide to your call center so it can respond to questions your customers and partners need you to answer.

Beyond that, many companies prepare a website with placeholder statements that are

Examples of Prepared Statements

SOCIAL STATEMENT

XXX experiences an issue with YYY. Resolution by TIME/DATE. 800 888 8888 or XXX@COMPANY.COM for 24-hour immediate, live assistance.

Additionally, you could prepare another statement for your **Facebook** or **LinkedIn** channels.

BRIEF STATEMENT

XXX is currently conducting a thorough investigation to identify and resolve the issue. We're sorry for any inconvenience this has caused, and we're committed to helping any customers with urgent needs. XXX offers the following protective/reparative measures: XYZ.

XXX employees can call +1 800 888 8888 for 24-hour immediate, live assistance, or email XXX@COMPANY.COM

Another prepared statement could be a press release skeleton with exchangeable placeholders for crisis modules that you pre-draft and which you'll only need to modify according to the situation.

LONG STATEMENT

XXX self-discovered [situation and scope of the crisis]. We have immediately taken steps to rectify the situation [other actions]. We also have [other measures to ensure this does not happen again].

Affected customers are limited to those who provided [what information] using [what technology] to [to what] from [date range]. There is no indication that this issue had any impact on customers (who) [define the scope of the damage and which customers are not affected].

We're committed to helping any customers with urgent needs. XXX employees can call +1 800 888 8888 for 24-hour immediate, live assistance, or email XXX@COMPANY.COM.

On behalf of XXX, we regret any inconvenience this may have caused you.

Sincerely,

NAME, TITLE

adjusted before the site goes live during a crisis. This is a great asset to have and it's well worth working with your web team to prepare it.

Wash, Rinse and Repeat

You must gather your crisis response team at least twice yearly to go through the pre-defined crisis scenarios. Under normal circumstances, this might be a 45-minute meeting where your crisis management team convenes. Review scenarios, test whether all steps remain accurate and check that names and contact information on internal and external contact lists are up-to-date.

If your internal procedures change and you add products or services, you may have to deal with different crisis scenarios and, therefore, new ramifications and procedures. When this happens, you need to compile new master documents to outline required steps. Those will then need to be circulated for comment to the entire crisis team. As a result, your dry-run scan can easily take twice as long. ■

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SPAR: Make Your Crisis Communication Team Ready to Respond in 4 Steps

By Dianne Anderson

Having a Crisis Communications Plan (CCP) is critical. Keeping the plan's steps top-of-mind for rapid recall when you need it is difficult. Unless the plan is practiced or used frequently, it lives in a file until all hell breaks loose. Then you find yourself scrambling to review it while media are parked outside urgently texting, emailing and calling for your response.

Simplifying the steps and assigning an acronym to your CCP can make your plan memorable and user-friendly. Borrow a motto from the **U.S. Coast Guard**: SPAR, Semper Paratus, Always Ready. For crisis, SPAR stands for Scan, Plan, Act and React, four clear steps needed to disseminate accurate information about an emergency situation in a timely manner.

The PR team needs to be practiced at attacking misinformation and defending the organization's reputation, especially in the midst of a crisis.

Here's how SPAR can help you more effectively implement a CCP.

Step 1: Scan – Gather Facts

When an emergency or crisis occurs, the first thing to do is gather your communications team, and then the facts. This information will help prepare your team to answer classic media questions of who, what, where, when, why and how.

Confirm as many details as possible to help clarify the nature and severity of the incident. Note what you know and what you don't. Then pull out your comprehensive CCP so you have it as you create your response.

Step 2: Plan – Assign Responsibilities

Determine who will do what.

A comprehensive CCP includes a predetermined list of possible roles for the PR team. It outlines responsibilities and duties for each position in detail. The plan is flexible, adaptable and scalable to fit various types of emergencies.

In a full crisis situation, a communication contingent could be assigned specific roles such as: Lead Public Information Officer; Media PIO; Social Media Monitor; and Director of Internal and/or External Communications. You may want to designate a scribe to document the swirl of incoming and outgoing messages.

In a smaller emergency, one or two staffers could take on several of these roles.

After roles are assigned, develop key messages about the response. This information can be used to draft news releases, prepare talking points, create quotes or answer questions from media.

Your emergency CCP should include a tool kit to make the response faster while maintaining accuracy. It is beneficial to create pre-approved messages in text and email form that can be quickly adapted and released.

Similarly, the CCP should also include readily accessible templates for news releases, news advisories, a checklist for staging a news conference and a holding statement that acknowledges something has happened and promises more information will be released as soon as possible.

Step 3: Act – Respond with Accurate, Updated Information

It is time to act. The CCP should list the emergency notification systems and protocols required or available to notify constituents, the media and the general public.

Depending on the nature and size of the emergency, a variety of messaging may be required, including responding to media and social media inquiries, setting up a call center to handle questions from the public, changing electronic billboards to visually alert the public and/or establishing a stand-alone website to provide updates or additional resources.

Decisions must be made as to whether news briefings can provide enough information for the media and general public, or if a news conference should be held to offer more in-depth answers and reassurance. An articulate, credible and empathetic spokesperson should be identified and prepped to represent your organization at a news conference or in high profile media interviews. All of this messaging should be released in a timely manner to head off inaccurate or misleading information that can spread rapidly when official statements are unavailable.

Step 4: React – Monitor the Conversation and Interact

In the age of social media, it is critical to monitor the social reaction to your emergency response and to react. Along with reading and watching local media coverage, the PR team also must monitor **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Instagram**, other social media, emails and even phone calls to see if your messaging is being received accurately and if it is adequate.

The team should respond to questions and concerns, correct misinformation and provide updates on all social media platforms, as well as to reporters and stakeholders. Creating a designated website for current facts and updating it frequently helps streamline the process and control the flow of information.

Another part of reacting is reviewing your response during and after the crisis. Was it effective? Could you have created better messages? Is cleanup needed to clarify an inaccurate report? Was there a hiccup or a logjam that could have been avoided?

Most CCPs are extensive and detailed, containing mission statements, objectives, guidelines, contacts, templates, maps, how-to refreshers and other resources that might be needed in a crisis. This is very important information that your team should review and update periodically. But if you strip down your CCP to its basics, the four-step SPAR process—Scan, Plan, Act and React —must be at the heart of it. ■

Dianne Anderson is the former director of media relations & communication at The University of New Mexico.

Why Simple, Approved Messaging Is Critical During a Crisis

By Kevin Stickney

There's a direct relationship between the threat of a major crisis and the organization it impacts. Generally, the more prominent a brand, the more resistant to the potential negative effects of a crisis.

There is perhaps no more prominent brand than the U.S. government and its guarantee for the safety and well-being of the American people. The COVID-19 crisis is a clear danger to the enduring reputation of this brand. Competent, although often disconnected, mayors and governors have waged multiple battles against the virus. The same can be said for what is widely considered an incompetent, hollowed-out federal administration.

Unlike crises that deflate corporate earnings and customer trust, COVID-19 is a threat to personal and public health. Nevertheless, the basic rules of strategic crisis management apply. Corporations have set examples for decades.

A strong corporate brand identity usually articulates clear core value propositions while making a silent promise to consumers about its ethics and integrity. When a crisis hits, message rollout and quality can suffer. This happens to many companies, even those with sophisticated PR teams, trained managers and deep pockets. (And plenty of lawyers.)

A crisis tends to reset the clock on a brand, essentially granting a short window for a situational brand image. The immediate and convincing response made (or not made) to a crisis creates such an image. Whether you are a large energy firm responding to an environmental disaster or a small clothing retailer with a product glitch, you have the same chance to convince the ever-hungry media—and your consumers—that the brand is sincere and secure.

Situational brand moments, however, are temporary and require a lot of follow-up. The safest approach is to have a comprehensive crisis management plan. This should include simple statements prepared well in advance that convey necessary information to the public and help to stop brand equity loss.

A Race Against the Clock

There are many aspects to the fast and effective management of a crisis. These include responsiveness, transparency, honesty and non-verbal communication.

However, no aspect is more important than messaging. It doesn't matter if you're an institution, corporation or not-for-profit—or whether the crisis is malpractice, malfeasance or personal injury. If you don't have a clear set of core messages relevant to the event unfolding, you will suffer the opening death knell to what every crisis threatens: reputation.

As we noted, the ideal situation is one in which a carefully prepared and practiced plan exists. Too often, these blueprints remain in the planning and budgeting phase or on a bookshelf somewhere when the chaos ensues.

During crises, public attention is plentiful but time is in short supply. In an era of instant gratification and minute-long news cycles, misinformation ricochets indefinitely across the internet in the time it takes to craft a couple of sentences as a response. In this age of communication, one thing is clear: Messaging for a crisis cannot be reactive.

If you don't have a clear set of relevant core messages, you will suffer the opening death knell to what every crisis threatens: reputation.

It can't be written on the spot. It must not be crafted as a response to anticipated questions asked of an issue that already has been answered wrongly and circulated on **Facebook** for hours. A prepared response cannot be effectively introduced when images of the burning building premiered two hours earlier on **YouTube**.

The Mindset of Messaging

There is a certain mindset needed for developing messaging in a crisis.

This mindset follows these truths:

- Media is entitled to your organization's availability, transparency and honesty.
- You and your organization are the experts about your business.
- You control the message through preparation and anticipation. The message that effectively addresses the crisis does not necessarily answer the media's questions.
- Your message should acknowledge those elements of the event for which you take responsibility and describe the steps that you and your colleagues will take next.
- Your message should confirm your accountability, show compassion and integrity and establish your company's commitment to improve.

Checklist: How to Face a Confrontational Media

- ☐ Always express sympathy, compassion and urgency for matters of safety, environmental threat, destruction of property or public concern.
- ☐ Take charge. You're the location and subject matter expert on site.
- ☐ Manage the interview setting to control media visuals.
- ☐ Take your time to formulate answers. Don't be afraid of silence.
- ☐ Practice. Before a crisis hits and during, preparation is key. Rehearse drills, media interviews and messaging.
- ☐ Don't hesitate to say, "We can you get you additional information on that topic," particularly if you don't know the answer. Promise responses by a specific time, and deliver on your promise.
- ☐ Don't struggle to answer tough questions. Provide your planned message. Do this by bridging from negative to positive and specific to general.

Adapt Core Values to Form Messages

Since time is in short supply when a crisis hits—and unless a crisis management plan with approved messaging exists—there are limited options for developing the platform.

However, what does exist are a company's core values. These values provide the underpinning of a solid message system and may be adapted readily to circumstances. They may include commitments to transparency, good governance, employee safety, business ethics, personal integrity, environmental compliance and so on.

The benefit is that these values generally already are approved internally and legally vetted. They are clear expressions of the elements of culture and governance that every company should exhibit.

Words Matter. Where Do We Find the Right Ones?

In the chaos and confusion of a crisis event, it's often difficult to create appropriate and effective messaging—especially if there isn't a crisis management plan to provide a guide with ready responses.

In these cases, it's best to instinctively follow the work already put into your company's core values and beliefs. For example:

A nuclear power facility suddenly experiences what it fears is a radioactive leak. Alarms are issued and first responders notified. Employees complain of physical symptoms, and neighborhoods, residents and nearby schools are alerted and vocal. The media—from local to social to international—start to ask questions and demand responses.

You have no prepared responses or protocols for communications. Below is a list of your company's core values. Following are how they might lend to immediate and relevant core messages in a specific crisis:

- ☐ The safety of our employees and our neighbors is our highest priority.
- ☐ We strive every day to protect public and environmental health.
- ☐ Our company is committed to transparent and accountable operations.

Some possible basic messages:

1a. "We experienced an incident today and are working with first responders to quickly ensure the safety of our people and neighbors."

[Accountable. Safety as the top priority.]

2a. "We remain committed to protect the public and environmental health of our neighbors. We will quickly move to investigate and disclose to you any impacts of today's accident and take necessary measures to make sure they do not recur."

[Responsible. Transparent. Active.]

3a. "Once we ensure employee and public safety, secure the situation and better understand what happened, we will be available to discuss with you what we have learned, what we have done and what next steps will be taken."

[Safety-focused. Cooperative. Transparent.]

For example, in the event of a sudden fire at a company facility, you're quickly able to express key concerns for employee safety, even without a quickly convened meeting of PR pros and management. The core messages make your case, and the supporting statements validate those core messages. Supporting statements always should return back to your top core message. Often, these suggest next steps as well.

Here's one we've heard repeatedly during the early weeks of COVID-19: "ABC Corporation is first and foremost concerned for the safety of its employees."

In normal times you follow with: Once we confirm their safety, we'll work to investigate the cause of the (fill in the incident) and take steps to prevent it from recurring.

If a disgruntled employee makes claims against a senior manager: "ABC Corporation is committed to providing a safe workplace and to observing the rights of all employees to equal treatment."

We will thoroughly investigate this issue.

Or if there are sudden and major environmental violations at a plant:

"ABC Corporation is dedicated to full environmental compliance at its plants and the protection of human and natural resources."

Once we uncover the specifics of the claims being made today, we'll announce steps to provide permanent solutions.

The Importance of Pivoting

This is especially poignant when considering how the COVID-19 crisis has been managed, at least up to now, in May 2020.

Local authorities focused their messaging on citizen activities, healthcare worker protections and first responders. State and regional officials reported medical trends and advised hard-hit businesses.

The federal government, or at least the executive branch, unfortunately, tuned much of its messaging to accusations and finger pointing. This trickled down, staining the country's global brand and hampering local efforts to coordinate fighting the disease.

When responding to public or internal audiences during a crisis, use the clear, simple core values already established. These form the basis of a quickly prepared system that enables you to relay your message and "bridge" to a more positive, more accepted position. This is especially important when you haven't had time to work with internal teams on a detailed response plan.

For example, when asked about financial irregularities, bridge to a more secure topic, such as operational transparency and ethics: "What is most important is that this company takes full responsibility for this matter and will quickly investigate this situation."

When someone claims that a company deliberately polluted the environment, bridge to a safer ground: "Let me be clear about our position. ABC Corporation is strictly regulated and has a steadfast commitment to being a responsible environmental steward."

Other bridging phrases include: "Your readers will be more interested in learning…", "That's not our primary concern here…", or "Let me repeat what has been said earlier…".

In the end, absent a well-developed crisis management plan and well-trained spokespeople, protecting your company's brand reputation is paramount. To do this, adapt your values on matters such as safety, compliance, business ethics, transparency and accountability. Most important, remember to avoid the temptation to just answer questions. You have a brand to defend and a reputation to uphold. ■

Kevin Stickney is senior advisor at Matter Communications kstickney@matternow.com

Speed + Strategy Create Crisis Communications Success

By Scott Rainone

Congratulations, your organization is well-protected because you crafted, tested and updated a great crisis communications plan. Now, do you know where it is? Good. When was the last time you evaluated it? Depending on how long ago you crafted your plan, it's probably time.

The emergence of social and digital channels, followed by the near total engulfing of most consumers' lives by them, means that the shelf life of your perfectly crafted crisis communications plan can be hours.

Tools, tactics and threats emerge fast. You could go to bed feeling great about your plan and wake up to find a government official has raked your organization over the coals. Perhaps a former employee is publishing internal documents to a wiki.

Even though some say that crisis management and communications are all about speed, PR pros know that a solid strategy is paramount to ensure you do the right things for the right reasons at the right time.

Speed and Strategy Evaluation

There is a need for a rapid, professional response that is efficient, empathetic, accountable and transparent. However, most crisis communications plans include phases focusing on prevention, preparation, response and recovery. Usually, they are based on experience gathered from previous events.

Constant evaluation of your plan's strategy is a key factor in making sure your team is successful. Basing today's plans on lessons from yesterday is a good start; however, the speed at which communications is evolving means yesterday is a lifetime ago. Just like regular testing of your plan, strategy evaluation is a key part of the readiness and improvement process. It will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of your approach. Crises evolve over time. Your plan must do the same.

Some areas of your plan to check and fine-tune include:

- **How Your Crisis Plan Fits**

The crisis communications plan should be integrated into your organization's emergency preparedness and management plan, as this typically outlines the infrastructure and procedures to respond to major emergencies.

While every crisis does not rise to the level of an organizational disaster, the crisis communication plan must be tailored to the company's strategies and goals.

Determine with a critical eye how your plan incorporates and supports your larger emergency and disaster plans. Is your plan implicitly clear on who decides if something is an emergency or a controversy?

Your plan should focus on outlining roles, duties and procedures that guide information sharing in times that threaten lives, reputations and financial wellbeing. As communicators, we know the doctrines of successful crisis response: Own it, do everything possible to solve the problem, address questions and concerns and take steps to make sure it does not recur.

■ **Crisis Team Composition**

When assembling your core crisis communications team, you likely have included indispensable individuals: your organization's leader, senior executives and possibly representatives from legal, HR and other key areas.

As the communications lead, you understand the purpose and goals of your strategy. Assess whether each member of the team also knows these. Are your team members aware of individual roles and responsibilities that outline critical functions? Or do they know to report when someone calls to tell them a crisis has occurred?

Examine how your team interacts. Is there an opportunity for team members to cross-train on different functions, in case the crisis requires more deployment in one specific area? Your plan and directions should provide a detailed understanding of who is responsible for gathering information and making decisions, as well as what protocols ensure your team has the latest information.

Ensure that every professional involved in a communications stream for your organization is also part of your team, avoiding the unfortunate possibility that a social media channel is heralding a financial success at the same time the media is reporting on a threat to public safety.

Determine whether all members of the core team have the appropriate resources to communicate in a crisis. You might want to train all members to deal with the public and news media, even if that is not their usual role. (What happens if the crisis sidelines leadership or your designated spokesperson?)

Starting the Crisis Plan Evaluation Process

The saying that you should never attempt to eat the whole elephant in one bite resonates for routine evaluation of your crisis communications plan. Attempting to appraise every aspect of your plan is intimidating and overwhelming. Start the evaluation process in stages. Determine which components are most critical. Routine evaluation provides an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of the plan and helps you allocate resources efficiently.

Some ways to find your starting point:

- ☐ Analyze if your plan is flexible enough to address challenges such as changes to crisis command location and availability of personnel and technology.
- ☐ Determine your specific audiences, not just the public, and ones that an incident might impact.
- ☐ Test potential messages with audience members to determine if they resonate in the ways you intended.
- ☐ Explore whether your messages are best suited for the communication channels you have planned to use.
- ☐ Determine whether stakeholders are informed about a topic important to your organization that may arise and, if they are not, develop ways you might be able to inform them.
- ☐ Determine whether the contributors on your crisis team have the training and resources needed to succeed.
- ☐ Use interviews, focus groups and surveys to incorporate feedback from target audiences and others into the planning and evaluation processes.

Assessing Messaging and Channels

When drafting a plan, PR pros identify the most likely potential events that could occur. Then they create approaches and templates to address them.

A successful plan includes ways to conduct additional threat analysis at regular intervals. This can ensure approaches remain relevant or determine whether new threats need to be addressed. In addition, templates created to provide quick, effective key messages and facts need to be consistently evaluated to include the most up-to-date information. An old or ill-worded response can hurt your organization and create questions about management's ability to address concerns.

One poorly handled incident can be fatal, even for venerable brands and organizations.

In addition to potential incidents, almost every crisis communications plan has a list of relevant target audiences. Check to ensure these are specific and timely, with current contact information, including how these key contacts want to be reached. A voicemail left for a key executive at the office during a Saturday incident does not prepare him or her when attending a public event that evening.

Further, determine who else needs to be part of your communications universe. Are local government officials, advocates or known critics part of your protocol? They almost certainly will be part of the media's reporting on an issue.

In today's diffused world of communication channels, do the networks you use make the most sense for the people you are attempting to reach?

Every day, more organizations are under threat from actual and perceived crises. Evaluating your crisis communications plan and approach routinely allows you to not only respond intelligently, but also make investments in people, tools and technologies that ensure strategic alignment and successful operations. The alternative is to do nothing, because you know what they say when you assume everything is OK. ■

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Rapid-Response Tactics for When Your Brand Gets Negative News Coverage

By Seth Arenstein

One of the pleasures of writing about communications and PR is that the field is vast and open to a variety of topics and sources. Reporting about brands in the food space put us in contact with the **U.S. Dept. of Agriculture** and a slew of excellent food-safety publications. It was a mixed blessing. You discover quickly that recalls and safety issues occur nearly every day. You're uplifted to know that we have better technology to regulate food prep and packaging than previously.

On the other hand, reading editorials in industry publications about the lack of government spending for food safety tends to weigh on one's mind. Trips to the grocery store become less pleasant. Mix that with the angst of leaving home during coronavirus and distancing restrictions, and a grocery run becomes slightly more pleasant than root canal.

The majority of recalls and safety-issue actions fail to gain national media attention, of course. It's likely the same with recalls and issues in most sectors—it's the major events that receive coverage.

Communicators, though, are unable to relax. What seem to be small or middling incidents can grow like bacteria, thanks to social media. And, of course, huge food-related events, like the **Chipotle** E. coli incidents, or large recalls of food products, always are possible. For all the issues with meat-processing plant closures—as of this writing, there were 6,300 reported positive cases of coronavirus associated with meatpacking facilities, including at least 30 deaths, according to **Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting**—coronavirus is not a food-borne illness.

So, when negative news, such as a recall or a possible E. coli outbreak, hits the headlines, how should brand communicators handle it? And since most readers work outside the food sector, let's broaden the discussion: How should communicators react when their brand gets negative news coverage? We'll use food as a jumping-off point. The tactics and strategies covered should apply to most sectors.

For Gene Grabowski, the veteran communicator who handled two large food recalls, **CRF Frozen Foods** and **Dole** Package Salads, there are several tactics specific to brands in regulated industries. Still, much that he counsels is applicable across the board.

Speed Kills…a Negative Story

A partner at **kglobal**, Grabowski says speed is paramount on several levels. First, it's essential for a brand to get out in front of negative news, such as a recall. "You can't wait for the government to be the first voice heard," he says. With regulated sectors, a brand often needs to include certain elements in its first release to meet statutory regulations.

After the first release, a brand should put out a second one, telling its story and adding context. It used to be a second release was harmful, but not anymore, Grabowski says. "If you don't frame your story, others will."

Stephen Payne, VP, corporate communications, **Feld Entertainment**, says, “I’m a firm believer in rapid response, even if the communications are not in response to a crisis. By rapidly addressing issues you help prevent something small from mushrooming and being more difficult to manage.”

On another level, the message has to be speedy, too. “If you can’t say it fast, you’ll lose,” Grabowski says. “Nobody’s reading anything that’s not short…nobody’s even reading long blog posts.”

He points to the popularity of **Twitter** with brands and politicians. “They’re not talking to reporters, they’re tweeting …even regulators are using social.”

A veteran of food industry PR, Hinda Mitchell, president, **Inspire PR Group**, urges brands to have “a dark page, or hidden website page, ready to take live to share recall-specific information.”

Broadening that to other industries, she says, “There just simply is no substitute for preparation. Any company can and should identify the highest risks, most likely crisis scenarios and then work a plan to address them.” She adds, “Figuring out how to post in 280 characters is not something you want to be doing while in crisis mode. Craft template responses now.”

Social Makes Brands Like Politicians

The immediacy and ubiquity of the digital world has forced brand communicators to strategize as if they were managing a political campaign, Grabowski says. “Due to social media, [a brand] can’t allow a statement to go unchallenged…the culture today, particularly millennials, often assumes the first thing they hear is the truth…and if it’s not corrected quickly, it certainly is the truth.”

Lights, Camera…

After you’ve issued your statement, or your second statement in the case of a regulated industry, it’s time to “think about your video,” Grabowski says. The video should be done and online within the first 72 hours of negative news hitting.

You have options. It can be an apology video or an expert’s retort to the negative news. Perhaps your CEO will appear.

In any case, it needn’t be a polished, smooth corporate video. In fact, those are not as credible. Grabowski prefers “a simple, unscripted video…I like to brief the subjects, but let them work from 4-5 talking points.”

Another tip: shoot with two cameras, as it will make editing easier.

Ideal vs. Foolish Transparency

Certainly be “as transparent as possible,” Grabowski says. “Rip off the Band-Aid and tell the story…plenty of companies talk about transparency and few deliver.” Still, Grabowski cautions, “Don’t be foolish” about transparency. Set limits.

Payne agrees. “In the case of a systematic campaign against [your brand] by outside groups, transparency can be used against you. Understand the situation and realize the players before deciding how open to be.” ■

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How to Use a Content Plan During a Crisis

By Taral Patel

As communicators we know one word that can shake up an organization: crisis. You come across headlines about companies dealing with a crisis almost every day. But have you pondered how you would deal with such a situation if you had to face it?

Survey after survey indicate slightly more than half of firms have a solid crisis plan; fewer practice crisis scenarios regularly.

In this digitized world, a well-worded press release is no longer enough to pacify your audience. You need to have a well-planned content management strategy that will help you salvage your brand's name. Here are some content tips that may help when crisis strikes:

Your Website to the Rescue

Communication is key to crisis management and it should start with your website. The website is a source of owned media that helps you communicate directly with stakeholders and clear the clouds of doubt. You might also consider having a crisis-only dark web site that can be deployed quickly.

When crisis strikes, modify homepage content to address the issue directly. Tell your audience how the brand is working to address this issue and announce results achieved thus far. People understand mistakes occur. What matters more is how you rebound.

Brand Mentions

When handling a crisis, it is important to keep a check on brand mentions, especially the negative ones.

While this seems obvious, you'd be surprised at how often this critical step is missed during the heat of a crisis. There's a lot to be done and this crucial action of social listening sometimes fails to be addressed.

Thanks to technological developments, you can employ a number of tools to conduct social listening. Tools such as **Awario**, **Social Mention**, **Mention**, **Hootsuite** and others will help you track brand mentions on social media platforms, as well as on other websites, forums and news sites.

Google Alerts is another useful tool that can help monitor reputation on various online channels. It keeps you updated about the positive and negative things being said about your brand.

By using these tools, you will know which channels to focus on, based on the number of negative mentions. Create appropriate content that can be distributed across channels. Study brand mentions thoroughly to understand the seriousness of the situation before crafting your messages. This includes tracking user behavior, reactions, commonalities in comments, the age group triggering the crisis and the location that is sending the most comments. With this information, you will be in a better position to handle the crisis.

Brand Story and Success Stats

Many people believe the human connection is the heart and soul of a business. This human aspect becomes even more important when reconnecting with audiences during, and just after, a crisis. Loyal customers often are brand advocates and will help you emerge from the crisis.

Storytelling can help build relationships and create positive sentiment around your brand. A brand story is all about telling the truth and doing it well. Some factors to keep in mind when building a brand story:

- Make sure the story is true and has a human touch.
- Keep it simple.
- Make sure the story connects with your intended audience.
- Align the story with the situation and speak about what you are doing to mend the problems.
- Instill a sense of trust with the audience.

Brand stories are never about your company; they are about customers and the value they receive when engaged with your brand. For an excellent example of storytelling, read about the **Toms Shoes** brand and how it provides shoes to needy children.

In an era when every brand is fighting to get a foothold in its respective industry, the most decisive factor can be whether or not people like your brand. A strong brand story can help you get audiences to develop an affinity toward your brand. An obvious piece of advice: don't wait for a crisis to begin storytelling and gaining brand advocates.

SEO Can Be Your Savior

If you think SEO is dead, think again. When a crisis strikes, people often turn to search engines to find news updates.

Running a keyword analysis will help you track content that comes up for the most-searched keywords. Type into Google a current crisis, such as "**Amazon** employees" or "**Tyson** coronavirus" and see what comes up in the Top Stories area of Google.

In non-coronavirus times, a PR agency with connections to top journalists and editors can help brands earn positive coverage. This can be expensive, of course.

Businesses with small budgets need to track negative results and create an aggressive SEO strategy to circulate fresh content to push down negative stories.

Auto-Generated Messages

As we know, social channels allow brands to communicate directly with audiences and get out messages instantly. Communicate as frequently as you think appropriate, but avoid using auto-generated messages.

Auto-replies can be great time-savers, but things can go wrong.

Conclusion

Mistakes happen regardless of how vigilant a brand is about its activities. With a strong content management plan, brands can take control of the negativity and preserve their reputation. Care for your customers and take them into confidence to clear the haze of doubt. A proper plan can save your brand and ensure enhanced trust with existing and potential customers. ■

Taral Patel is a PR executive at PRmention. @connect2taral.

How to Build a Flameproof Crisis Team That Can Handle Any Eventuality

By PRNEWS Editors

In today's rapid-fire world of communications, one tweet or **Facebook** post can tear down a brand's reputation.

One of the major facets of being prepared for a crisis is having a staff that's ready to respond and rebuild at a moment's notice.

Ken Peterson, senior communications strategist at **Monterey Bay Aquarium**, and Randy Brasche, VP of marketing at **Folloze**, shared five elements of their crisis team-building strategies with **PRNEWS**.

Establish a Baseline

Give upper management data-based updates. Brasche stressed the importance of establishing a baseline of positive and negative mentions so that brands can note exactly when a situation moved into crisis. Once this baseline is established, team members can use data to show senior management exactly how bad a situation is by using data: measuring mentions, shares, tweets and re-tweets.

Pre-Assign Individuals to Communicate

…with media, stakeholders and the public—no matter where they are. This messaging might occur on the brand's official social media channels, an online newsroom or on individual team members' social accounts. "Tasks are pre-assigned to specific team members best positioned to reach out to their key stakeholders," Peterson said. Points of contact are prepared to work remotely in a case where responding on-site isn't possible.

Create a Crisis Command Center

Brasche mentioned a centralized mission control to consolidate and visualize clients' crisis reporting and processes from a data standpoint. Meanwhile, Peterson's team conducts full-day drills at a physical command center, set up specifically for crises. Teams work six to eight hours at a time. Representatives from PR, social media, marketing, sales, events and membership teams are called on to ensure "all of the right people are in the same room to reach a solution as quickly as possible," Peterson said. Drills include brainstorming sessions, team leader presentations and mock press conferences, with Peterson's team occasionally even bringing in journalists to take part.

Invest in Planning, Training and Drills

"We've earmarked a budget of $40,000 to take us through drills and training to prepare for crisis moments," Peterson said. While this may seem like a large amount, Peterson noted that it was well worth the spend to ensure his staff is ready to respond in any crisis.

Get Executive Buy-In

Brasche advocated for a data-based solution, with PR pros presenting upper management with data points representing the tone of the current conversation around a crisis. Peterson advised communicators to passionately make the case to upper management that a crisis could literally wipe out their organization. "Point to other organizations that have responded [adequately and inadequately] to crises," he added. ■

Detect, Direct, Deflect: Prepare Your Brand for the Possibility of a Fake News Attack

By Kristina Libby

The term fake news is everywhere, and with it the increasing concern by corporate executives that their brand may someday become a target. **PepsiCo** experienced a fake news cycle that dropped its stock price by 3.5% on the day it broke and a 5.5% decline overall that month.

Pepsi isn't alone. Fake or false news has touched **Facebook**, **New Balance** and even the Pope. And more is coming. With the increase in deep fake technology and malicious forms of cyber-propaganda, it's becoming more difficult to discern real news from fake.

Brands must have a plan to combat a fake news attack. It should be at least four-fold, encompassing digital media, PR, influencer marketing and social media—employees in each discipline should be ready to engage at a moment's notice. The faster a brand can combat fake news, the better the results will be for mitigating its impact.

Detect: Find the News Before the Rest

The first step in a brand plan is to find the fake news before your competitors or others can spin it. This means you need to have an always-on monitoring approach for mentions of your brand. This approach should include software that is constantly monitoring for brand mentions. A simple tool is **Google** Alerts, but other tools include **IFTTT** (for advanced monitoring) or **TalkWalker**.

Additionally, utilize an influencer network that is working on your behalf constantly. You'll want to retain influencer talent that monitors media outlets, blogs and social media channels for your brand name. When they find something that seems inflammatory or otherwise harmful to your brand, they should have a process to flag it to a team who monitors for this type of attack.

Finally, it's critical that your team engage in social media page monitoring that is 24/7 and flags to a relevant manager when a piece of false, unsubstantiated or otherwise unknown piece of news content arises.

Direct: Respond as Quickly as Possible

Once someone has flagged a piece of content, a brand will want to substantiate the claim. To substantiate, review the link. Determine if it has been picked up on more websites, shared or otherwise seems to be gaining traction. At this point, the social media, digital marketing and PR teams should meet to discuss the potential response pattern. Once the decision to respond has been made, a brand should:

- Post responses across all relevant social networks and owned channels, sharing that the information is false.
- Reach out to local and national media to refute the claims.
- Engage with influencers to share that the information is false, thank those who flagged it and prepare a statement or request for influencers who wish to help combat the news.

Deflect: Grow Your Voices

Once a brand has responded to the fake news, it must amplify the response in a counterattack. This means pulling all possible levers to share the truth. At this point, you don't need to mention or reference the fake news, but you need to share information that would make the fake news look even more fake. To do this:

- Position digital advertising spend to promote your social media post.
- Consider the use of advertisements on social and web properties to offset the news cycle.
- Activate your army of social media influencers. If a brand has used fake news and trolls to spread news, you similarly can use your army of social media influencers to combat that news. However, these must be influencers you have spent time with, have confidence in and developed loyalty with. They should be the same influencers you employ to monitor conversations about your brand. These influencers then help you suck the air out of the fire of fake news—they post your positive news spin, call out those who shared the story, engage in a dialogue and point interested people to your official statement.

Using the above approach of detect, direct and deflect will position brands well in the event of a fake news attack. The most important thing to remember is to share the truth in a way that reduces the ability for the fake news to breathe. Your messaging must be simple, straightforward and easy to share.

Note: Fake news is deliberately fabricated information composed with the intent of changing public opinion about a target. False news started with a kernel of truth and, as happens in the children's game of Telephone, became twisted after numerous retellings across media platforms. It is less malicious than fake news, but no less impactful. ■

Kristina Libby is a professor at the University of Florida and co-founder of SoCu.

Digital Crisis Plans That Reposition a Brand for Success

By Darius Fisher

Coronavirus swept the globe with such swift repercussions there was little time to draw up a plan if you did not somehow already have a pandemic response drafted. You cannot pretend things are normal; you have to adjust to the way life has shifted for the global population. Doing nothing will cost you everything.

In early May 2020, as this first wave of crisis settles in, we see that behaviors of people everywhere have changed, some drastically. That could very well lead to a series of new crises for brands, along with the added concern of a second wave of coronavirus returning seasonally. Now is the time to plan for what's next, whether it is an economic downturn, viral public criticism or another round of a global health crisis.

Pre-Crisis: Proactively Prepare

The simplest and most cost-effective way to survive a crisis is preparation. Do you have:

- Active web properties that you update on a regular basis?
- A large online following?
- Positive press?
- A statement prepared should disaster strike your business?

Should no be the answer to any of these questions, you are in a vulnerable position. The components of crisis preparedness work together, building upon each other. Each one is critical to success.

Regularly update social media profiles and communicate with your digital community. Not only does this enable you to engage with customers and build upon your relationships, but being active on these platforms strengthens the social media links in **Google** search rankings. Building and strengthening positive web properties help strengthen page one of Google results, preventing negative news from sticking to the front page.

Similarly, if it has been a while, or you have never pursued positive press coverage, start now. Hire a firm or designate someone in-house to secure media opportunities. If you do not have anything newsworthy, generating thought leadership and digital profiles for company executives are valuable steps to take as well.

Earned media and thought leadership create credibility and trust—and, just like social media profiles—provide positive content for Google to rank on your first page of search results.

If you employ earned media and increased engagement on your social channels, you will have a good relationship and trust with your customers should calamity strike.

Finally, preparation of a dark site should be a part of every crisis plan. A dark site is a website built and launched if and when a crisis occurs. The website gives communicators a vehicle to tell the brand narrative and educate stakeholders on the facts.

During Crisis: Act

When a crisis hits, it is important to remain calm and avoid a knee-jerk reaction. Acting quickly, without thinking, could make matters worse. Gather your team to assess the damage and discuss next steps.

Whether the crisis is an internal issue or a global disaster, such as the spread of COVID-19, the company's leadership needs to map out business' goals and deliver messaging to staff. The message should be calm and strong and outline the company's focus clearly. Leadership should confront the issue at hand directly, own it and address any initial mistakes made in handling it. Then move ahead with how the company will continue to operate.

Set a new standard for daily operations that involves more frequent communication across management and its direct reports. It's hard to realize how distracting a crisis is until your team is in the middle of one. It's even more difficult to regain focus to be able to maintain productivity. Increasing internal updates to highlight metrics and performance that leadership is seeking will increase the team's respect for what it should prioritize, especially if the team is spread out and remote, as is the case for most of us now.

Do not bypass the need to fix whatever was broken that may or may not have led to the crisis. This could be mean cutting failed projects and reducing expenses, issuing a voluntary recall, suspending or letting go of employees or updating policies.

The Public Statement

In addition to internal messaging, make sure your public statement addresses fully the issue while clearly laying out steps you are taking to remedy the situation. In many cases, it should also contain an apology. Post your statement on all social accounts and share with traditional media outlets. If you have a dark site prepared, now is the time to launch it to get out your message.

It is important to never waver from your statement. Ensure that everyone has copies of the statement in case the media or customers contact them.

Depending on the size of your company, it may be necessary to hire additional customer service representatives to help with the influx of calls, comments and emails.

Behavior Change

The most important and final step is to change behavior. It would be wrong to simply continue business as usual while facing a major crisis.

For example, in the wake of coronavirus, you must consider how it is touching your employees, stakeholders and audience.

In addition, during non-pandemic times, you need to be able to thoughtfully move forward from any mistakes your business made that led to the crisis. Yes, you fired the employee who exhibited bad judgment and made mistakes, issued the voluntary recall or revised policies. But what series of events led to the crisis? Did you brush off earlier complaints about said employee, or put a new product on the shelf too quickly to ensure that it was properly labeled?

Whether or not the crisis was your fault, it is important to reflect upon what you can do to ensure that this does not recur.

Your customers might forgive, but they will never forget. A second crisis could put you out of business.

Post-Crisis: Rebuild Your Brand

While it is possible for a crisis to blow over, that is rarely the case. Even if you took the right steps before and during your crisis, the online fallout can last forever if you do not take an active approach to repair the damage.

If you haven't already, hire a PR firm or someone in-house to help you communicate to the masses how you are making strides to be a better company. They can also help secure thought leadership opportunities that will help restore lost credibility. In most cases,

Case Study: Neon Lipstick Co.

Crisis: FDA Letter questioning an ingredient in popular product after a series of other controversies

Neon Lipstick Co. (NLC) is a popular independent cosmetics brand. Following a history of controversy that it was working to move beyond, Neon received an FDA letter about an unapproved ingredient in its most popular product. A large group of mainstream and industry media outlets picked up the story.

First, NLC investigated the allegation and realized that it was a misprint on its packaging, and that the unapproved ingredient was not present. NLC sent its product to an independent lab for testing to confirm the finding. In addition, NLC released a statement that included an apology and explained the packaging misprint. It also mentioned that the product already was on its way to an independent lab for confirmation.

Since NLC has such a loyal online following, the brand released a statement via social media. It also hired additional customer service employees to answer phone calls, email and respond to **Facebook** and **Instagram** comments regarding the FDA letter. In addition, the brand created a facts and fiction webpage to address the FDA letter as well as past controversies the FDA letter re-surfaced. Despite the barrage of damaging press and a storm of social media backlash, the company managed to survive and remains controversy-free more than one year later.

Case Study: Dr. Plastic Surgeon

Crisis: Four negative links on the front page of Google results following news surrounding the surgeon's divorce

Dr. Plastic Surgeon is a highly sought-after professional. After a divorce made headlines, his search results focused on the divorce rather than his work as a skilled surgeon. The doctor sought an online reputation firm that helped him secure positive press coverage, positioning him as an industry thought-leader. The doctor didn't have established social channels. The firm built him a website that highlighted his achievements in plastic surgery. All of these properties were then optimized for Google search results. After about six months there was no trace of the divorce on the doctor's first page of Google search results.

Google views new earned media and thought leadership contributions as more relevant than older negative properties that focus on your crisis.

It is also helpful to establish and actively maintain a social media presence across relevant platforms. Similar to positive media coverage, the benefit is twofold. Social channels allow you to reconnect with customers. They also serve as positive assets online that will help replace the negative coverage from the crisis.

Finally, if all else fails, seek help from an experienced online reputation management team that can consult on next steps. They can help you suppress negative links and replace them with those that represent you more accurately. While your reaction to a crisis is important, being proactive and planning for a crisis is crucial. If you build a strong foundation, your brand will be unshakable, even in the worst of circumstances. ■

Darius Fisher is CEO and co-founder of Status Labs.

Reputations at Risk: Steps to Take When 'Recall Fatigue' Sets In

By Mike Good

As a communications professional (and consumer) you have likely experienced a product recall. These days, product recalls occur with such exhaustive regularity that they are becoming lost on weary consumers, creating unacceptable safety and public relations risks.

This recall fatigue—when consumers are so inundated with recall notifications that they tune them out—is becoming a serious issue that can severely damage a company's reputation. Ignored or missed recalls not only affect individual consumers, they can threaten the health and safety of the public and the environment. The success of recalls often falls on the shoulders of PR and marketing pros tasked with getting out the word.

While there are several steps you can integrate into a communications plan to address the problem, a more aggressive and coordinated effort between government, manufacturers and recall experts to improve recall effectiveness is critical.

It's the government's job to educate, gather data and get the word out through internet and newswire channels, communicate what's at stake with a recalled product and rally the public to do the right thing.

So, how can you step up your PR and crisis communications game when faced with a recall? As you may know, manufacturers are responsible for swift notification, recall and restitution to consumers for their affected products. Speed matters. Consumer safety relies on how quickly and easily a manufacturer can execute so that it doesn't snowball into a much larger health and safety issue, let alone potential brand damage.

Steps to Take

It is important to closely follow regulatory guidelines—and even exceed them—to avoid the recall fatigue trap and the brand damage it can cause.

1. **Directly and swiftly contact consumers** to ensure they can take the necessary actions to return or destroy the product, schedule a repair or get a replacement or refund. It is critical to describe the risk effectively in the recall announcement with messages that will motivate consumers to return or dispose of the product. Recall experts who communicate with consumers know special messaging techniques that will spur consumers to act.
2. **Ensure multiple follow-up notifications** and phone calls to consumers to satisfy regulatory compliance rules while also maximizing the return/disposal rates of products. Follow-ups are particularly important for products that are out of season because of consumers' out-of-sight-out-of-mind proclivities.
3. **Utilize customer loyalty cards** to track affected consumers, providing real-time purchase history and contact information. Manufacturers should also consider using a warranty registration

Top Warning Signs of Recall Fatigue

- ☐ You're not receiving remedy requests, even with a higher-priced item. Inexpensive items are often thrown away, even though a refund, repair, replacement or coupon is available. Pricier products, such as furniture or electronics, are not so easily discarded.
- ☐ You've been diligent about notification, but aren't receiving many consumer questions. You've issued press releases, notified retailers and even announced the recall on social media. Typically, that means phones are ringing off the hook—often requiring a scalable outside contact center to manage the overflow. If you're hearing radio silence, it may be because consumers aren't aware of your recall.
- ☐ Response rates are low—but the risk is high. It is unsurprising that a relatively low-risk recall would fail to gain attention. However, more hazardous defects should theoretically cause consumers to take notice.
- ☐ If your company or client has the misfortune of experiencing a major recall at a time when no other issues are making headlines, it's likely your product recall will get more than its share of attention. On the other hand, if another recall is sucking up all the oxygen, yours may get lost in the shuffle. While no company wants to be inundated with negative headlines, if minimal coverage leads to low response rates, there can be negative consequences.

database. Most importantly, they need to keep all databases up to date, because gaps in purchase information lead to poor participation rates. Bottom-line advice: over-communicate. Simply issuing a press release or posting one-time store notifications won't cut it.

4. **Make it easy for consumers to respond**. Even headline-making recalls won't necessarily trigger reactions if consumers feel it's too much trouble. Clients facing a recall should establish a dedicated recall hotline and website as well as an email address for consumer questions and responses if call volumes are too high or communication in multiple languages is required.
5. **Use a service that can perform repairs** and provide remedies in the field to improve response rates by making it more convenient for customers. For instance, medical device and pharmaceutical manufacturers may request a reply form from healthcare providers and pharmacies. These forms should be as simple as possible to encourage timely responses.
6. **Offer a remedy for a recall** that goes above and beyond consumers' expectations. Consumers want reimbursements for a recalled product. Some manufacturers may choose to offer a credit or coupon instead. If it is a high-priced item, they may opt for a partial reimbursement. While it is understandable that some executives may want to minimize the costs associated with a recall, they also need to consider the repercussions. Lost customer loyalty, legal fees and regulatory fines are costlier in the long run. And a single consumer scorned can do exponential reputational damage on social media. It is generally wiser to offer a remedy that surpasses the industry standard.
7. **Be prepared**. If a recall catches your company or your client unprepared, odds are they will trip up somewhere and miss critical steps. They should make a plan, update it regularly and hold mock recalls to uncover the gaps.

All these steps point to the need for experience and expertise. While your company or client may be tempted to go it alone to contain costs, recall specialists can work closely with communications professionals to save lives and brand equity, making their ROI invaluable in a crisis. Not only do they know how to address the flagging concerns of consumers to improve recall efficacy, they also handle the logistical burdens of the recall, public communications and meeting regulatory requirements. They offer speed, guidance and reduced risk exposure, not to mention stress relief for the manufacturer.

The good news is that recall fatigue is fixable. By applying the right mix of education, recall expertise and speed of execution, consumer behavior can be positively affected to greatly improve participation rates and minimize harm to people and the environment. Done right, this strategy can help contain brand damage and may even retain consumers' trust and loyalty. ■

Michael Good is VP at FinishMaster, Inc.

Navigating Crisis Communications During Unprecedented Times

By Power Digital Marketing Team

Never before has the word *unprecedented* been used as many times as it has this year. COVID-19 has influenced how businesses communicate with stakeholders. It has become clear that brands will have to carefully navigate messaging during this pandemic. Unprecedented times call for unprecedented strategic roadmaps.

Ideally, your business should have a proactive crisis communications plan, but the reality is that many businesses rely on a reactive approach.

Developing a crisis communications roadmap should be the first objective before sharing messaging with relevant parties. This deliverable will ensure that your internal team is on the same page and act as a go-to resource until the pandemic has resolved.

Internal Escalation Protocols

Before communicating with those outside your business, it is crucial that internal members understand the new crisis protocols. This will allow you to present a unified image on social media and other platforms.

Sending messaging internally, to team members and stakeholders, is key to ensuring that future external communication is clear and undisputed. When inbound inquiries arrive, the entire team will be equipped with knowledge of the actions your business is taking. The team will know which key speakers are designated to deliver crisis messaging.

Customers and the Media

Customers must always be at the forefront of a brand's strategic plan. Creating an approved statement that addresses what customers need to know to continue to trust you as a brand is highly important. Ensure, though, that you don't overload customers with unnecessary information.

Likewise, building a three- to four-paragraph statement for the media is recommended. This approved communication should be referenced according to media contacts' needs and include the who, what, where, why, when and how of your organization's approach to keeping the public informed. For maximum coverage and ease of access, this media statement should also live on your brand's website.

Forecasting Potential Q+A

Identifying the type of queries the media and public may approach you with, and constructing responses in advance, will help your brand be perceived as informed and prepared.

Set up **Google** alerts for brand mentions to help you with predicting potential inquiries. In addition, your team should formulate potential questions.

However, in the case that it becomes crucial to make a statement regarding COVID-19, or other unprecedented crisis, and you don't have the time to construct a full crisis roadmap, you have the option of making a minimally viable product (MVP).

An MVP is a statement that can be shared with external parties and addresses:

- Who is the targeted audience of this statement?
- Can anything from this statement be taken out of context and/or wrongfully interpreted?
- Will this help put the audience's mind at ease, and does it address its concerns?
- Is this statement aligned with the brand's image and values?
- Does this help to position your organization to come out of this crisis stronger?

Pivoting Multichannel Strategies

During any crisis, it is important to review current or future campaigns, as they could be perceived as insensitive. Determining what actions are required to postpone or cancel a campaign, such as organizing and distributing a press release about the change, is another top task on the agenda.

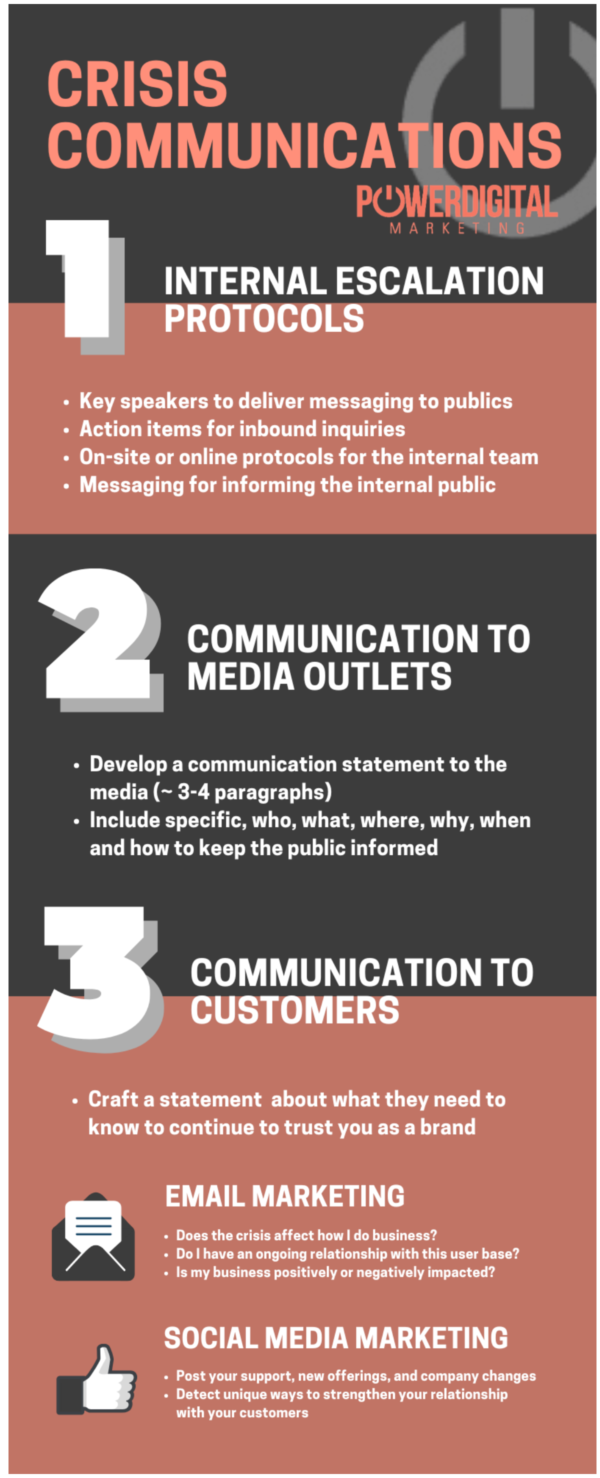
In the same vein, most campaigns are integrated closely with other channels, such as email or social media marketing. When you pivot your PR campaigns to support crisis communications, make sure that your action items also address other channels for a fully cohesive plan.

Navigating Email Communication

Email has become one of the most utilized avenues for businesses to communicate updates to customers. Instead of reflexively sending updates, consider the following in addition to your PR roadmap:

Three Points to Consider

1. Has COVID-19 changed how you do business with your customers? If you're an online retailer, for example, you might not need to send an email message related to the virus. In this case there is no need to add to the flood of coronavirus emails in inboxes.



2. Appraise your relationship with users. If you haven't sent an email to your subscriber list in more than three months, reaching out now could backfire, despite your good intentions.
3. Evaluate the impact that COVID-19

has had on your brand. If your business has improved, market this sensitively, without coming across as exploiting the pandemic. For example, you might want to offer discounts on essential products and craft uplifting messaging.

Social Media Communication

Posting your stance and support, new service offerings and company changes on social media is another good tactic.

Based on your brand reputation, try to detect unique ways to strengthen your relationship with customers on social platforms. Comic relief, educational and value-based content, asks for help, live at-home content or open forums for conversations are valid avenues to connect with audiences.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to morph, the ultimate key to staying on top of changes is proactivity. The best way to predict messaging is to ensure that complacency does not arrest the development of your crisis communications roadmap. Consider what your brand can do to reassure stakeholders to emerge stronger in the future. ■

The Power Digital Marketing Team is a San Diego-based agency that works with such companies as Casper, Dropbox and Uber.

Crisis Communications Post-COVID-19: The Landscape Changed; the Principles Did Not

By: Becca Cooper and Benjamin Thiele-Long

The COVID-19 pandemic will, no doubt, be used as a case study in every webinar, lecture and article about crisis communications for the foreseeable future. Already, many believe the pandemic has rewritten the crisis playbook. We don't necessarily agree.

What it has done is change the landscape of how organizations communicate with the public. Pre-coronavirus, trust was critical. Now trust will be at the core of communications. Organizations that act in the best interests of their employees, stakeholders, and society will strengthen their bond with consumers for the long term.

The pandemic, though, has not changed the fundamental principles of issues and crisis management. Listening to conversations, through traditional and social media channels, always is the best place to begin crafting an effective response.

Transparency, empathy and understanding have been fundamental tenants of communicating during a crisis. And maintaining a robust issues and crisis management strategy and playbook will still stand any organization in good stead for the future, regardless of the crisis it faces.

Plan, Honestly

There is a fundamental tenant of crisis communications that will stand the test of time: a crisis is unplanned, but how you react, communicate and recover should not be.

Every business, no matter the size, should conduct regular health checks of its issues and crisis- communications capabilities. This means asking hard questions and being honest about your organization's strengths and weaknesses, as well as knowing if you have the right processes in place.

Every business needs to ask:

- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- Have we developed proactive and responsive messaging?
- Are our spokespeople media-trained?
- Are we prepared to conduct retrospective reviews of our crisis communications function?
- Do we have a plan for executive communications? Who's managing and writing?
- Have we evaluated and adjusted our internal communications function?

Continually Maintain a Crisis Playbook

Every organization should maintain a crisis playbook, which should be periodically reviewed and updated. How it is structured is up to you. Every crisis is different, so your playbook offers guidelines, not train tracks. But at a basic level, every playbook should contain the following:

- Up-to-date contacts and a clear chain of command.
- Channel strategy for internal and external communications
- Key considerations for business lines and geographical areas
- Known allies, detractors and other stake-

holders
- Draft messages and potential Q&As

It's also vital that everyone in your communications team knows the strategy and where the playbook is kept. Having the information locked away with a senior executive is useless when a crisis breaks. The CMO is not going to take a call from the tricky journalist at 4:30 on a Friday. Inform and empower your teams.

Have Your Online Ears Open

Often, crises rear their heads online—and the conversation quickly goes social. Your brand needs to have its ears open via social listening and be ready to take the conversation offline quickly. Invest in solid social listening and tracking technology that can alert you (even predictively). Have the right team in place to respond when things hit the fan.

But if that's a long shot, you might need to back up and first think about your overall digital readiness. How digital is your brand? Consider not just your infrastructure, but also your value proposition and overall culture. Is your team agile and quick to create content? How thorough and helpful is your online customer experience? Make sure you have the right technology and team in place, even if it means simple social listening alerts or regular monitoring of social channels.

Leverage Digital to Respond

An immediate response to a crisis can quickly be handled on your brand's website or social channels. It is critical that it the response is coordinated.

When thinking about what to publish during a crisis, it's correct to be cautious, think carefully about any outbound communications, and ensure there is adequate manpower to manage the response.

Oftentimes, brands delegate crisis response on social to the CEO or key executives. They can make statements via a long-form LinkedIn or Medium post. This puts a human face on the response.

For core channels, it's imperative to:

- Monitor how your audiences' conversations are changing, in real-time.
- Leverage channels to connect with your audiences authentically. Have a response matrix for all team-members, and try to get negative conversations offline via direct communication.
- Reprioritize campaign budgets quickly (you don't want paid ads going out with toneless messaging!).
- Empower executives to engage online, and consider channels away from owned brand channels.

Ultimately, good crisis and issues management aim to distill order from disorder. By planning well, listening carefully and communicating honestly, it's possible to achieve calm. While some things about the way businesses communicate with audiences will change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, these fundamental tenets will help you navigate any future issue. ■

Becca Cooper is head of digital at Cognito.
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Responding to Incidents That Aren't Yet, But Might Become, Crises

By Seth Arenstein

It's generally accepted that brands are highly vulnerable to crises. We've all heard the maxim, "It's not a question of if your brand will experience a crisis, but when." The good news is that, as Torod Neptune said during a **PRNEWS** event when he was a VP of corporate communications at **Verizon** (he's now VP and CCO at **Lenovo**), communicators often know where most crises will occur. They can, more or less, predict where a brand's vulnerabilities are since they work across the enterprise.

But how about when it doesn't take an experienced communicator to know that a brand might be vulnerable? What should brand communicators do in those situations?

Two incidents illustrate this point:

Incident One

David Allen Cripe, a South Carolina teen, ingested a fatal amount of caffeine within a two-hour period in late April. Cripe collapsed in a classroom at his school and was pronounced dead of "a caffeine-induced cardiac event causing a probable arrhythmia," Richland County Coroner Gary Watts said during a news conference, CNN reported. The caffeine was contained in a **Diet Mountain Dew**, a **McDonald's** café latte and an energy drink. The story hit national and global headlines after the coroner's report was released.

If you were a communicator at Mountain Dew (whose parent is **PepsiCo**), McDonald's or numerous energy drink brands, what would you be doing now?

Incident Two

The wife of then-**New England Patriots**' quarterback Tom Brady, supermodel Gisele Bundchen, indicated to "CBS This Morning" during an interview several months after the end of the football season that her husband, arguably the sport's marquee player at the time, suffered a concussion or concussions during the 2016-2017 football season.

"As you know, [football is] not the most, like, let's say 'unaggressive' sport. He had a concussion last year," Bundchen said, according to nfl.com. "We don't talk about it, but he does have concussions. I don't really think it's a healthy thing for your body to go through that kind of aggression all the time…"

There were no official reports of Brady having a concussion that season. Of course, there might be a reason for that. Brady's team at the time, the Patriots, and especially its coach, Bell Belichick, are known for preferring root canal work without anesthesia to speaking with the media. PR just isn't their thing. Still, the **National Football League** requires reports about injured players to be made public. Betting on football just wouldn't seem fair without them.

Concussions are a major issue for the NFL. The league settled a six-year-old class-action suit former players and their families brought several years ago related to concussion syndrome. Some 20,000 players might be eligible to obtain awards from the settlement.

Players who are suspected of having suffered concussions are supposed to be removed from games or practices under NFL rules, known as the NFL Game Day Concussion Protocol.

Moreover, some groups are calling for professional football to be outlawed due to the incidence of concussions. Traumatic brain injuries may increase the likelihood of a person developing Alzheimer's Disease.

The Brady story has spurred speculation that he might have been faking his health to avoid missing games due to a concussion. If Brady did in fact suffer a concussion, did the NFL know about it? How about his team?

Bundchen's comments went national the moment her words were sounded on the CBS show. Sports network **ESPN** interrupted its national radio feed of "Mike and Mike" just before 10 am ET to report the story.

The Reactions

Several communicators we spoke with had similar counsel when asked about the Brady situation: Listen and monitor the conversation before reacting. Brands should have in their crisis management plans a method to assess whether something is an incident, a problem or has risen to the level of a full-blown crisis, several of those interviewed said.

So how long should brands monitor a situation before they release a statement or an apology or react by doing nothing and allowing the story to die?

Crisis is a delicate dance. It's a mistake, one communicator told us, to wait too long to respond: **United Airlines** took 19 hours before its response to the video of security dragging Dr. David Dao off one of its aircraft. An obvious mistake since at that point the stakes had been raised.

The **Houston Astros** players waited a few months before they responded to findings of a report from **Major League Baseball** (MLB) that they cheated during several seasons. And then, their February 2020 response was a non-apology apology. Almost as bad, the baseball commissioner tried to downplay the cheating in remarks he made about the incident. Fans and sports writers pilloried the team and MLB.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence waited several days before he admitted he should not have been mask-less during a visit to the **Mayo Clinic** in late April 2020. It took several days before brands like **PotBelly**, the **Los Angeles Lakers** and **Ruth's Chris Steak House** apologized for taking government loans meant to sustain small businesses against the coronavirus. A **PRNEWS** poll about the PPP debacle, conducted in late April 2020 had PR professionals split down the middle on the question of who would take the most significant reputation hit, the large brands or the federal government.

On the other hand, it's foolish to rush in with a knee-jerk reaction or an insincere apology that contains a lot of qualifications and corporate-speak.

In the end, the NFL acted quickly. Just hours after Ms. Bundchen spoke, the NFL responded. "We have reviewed all reports relating to Tom Brady from the unaffiliated neurotrauma consultants and certified athletic trainer spotters who worked at Patriots' home and away 2016 season games as well as club injury reports that were sent to the league office," the NFL said in a statement.

"There are no records that indicate that Mr. Brady suffered a head injury or concussion, or exhibited or complained of concussion symptoms. Today we have been in contact with the NFLPA and will work together to gather more information from the club's medical staff and Mr. Brady. The health and safety of our players is our foremost priority and we want to ensure that all our players have and continue to receive the best care possible."

Did the NFL do the right thing by releasing a statement? Perhaps.

As Robert Hastings, EVP, CCO, **Bell**, said prior to the NFL's statement being released, "The hard part with crisis response is that there's a little bit of science to it, but it's much more of an art. I hate to say it, but there are times you just have to take a breath and go, 'Feels like [we should] jump in and fight it [and other times it] feels like, [we should say] let's see where it's going.' It's a hard call to make sometimes." ■

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2

Internal Communications

Building Resiliency Through Employee Crisis Communications Strategies

By: Deborah Hileman

The scale and breadth of the COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything we've experienced. But established leadership communications principles apply to *any* kind of protracted issue that fundamentally changes an organization.

Every crisis has a lifecycle, and communications need to evolve as the situation does. In large-scale events such as the pandemic, people experience uncertainty, stress and anxiety about many things.

In the early stages of a long-term crisis, employees are focused on themselves, their families and what is happening around them. They are not ready to think about the future when the present has created such significant challenges to everyday life, health and safety.

In the early stages of a crisis, there is an increased human need for transparency, guidance and the ability to make sense of what's happening. Yet early in the crisis is when leaders are trying to make decisions with a dearth of facts, complicating already-difficult choices and making it harder to communicate complex issues.

When employees are seeking reassurances, leaders may have few to give. At this point, leaders should stop and take a breath. Employee information needs will evolve, and leaders' messages should, too.

Build Trust with a Daily Communique

Regular, frequent communications become an important connection that builds trust and community when people can't be together.

Establish a regular communication schedule and stick to it. In the early stages, a daily communique, released at a pre-set time, helps manage employee expectations.

Messages should be clear, short and simple, recognizing that people have a more limited attention span in the early days of a crisis.

Communications should always focus on candor over charisma, and leaders need to be honest about the challenges facing the organization. Now is not the time to sugar-coat the situation. Transparency will build loyalty and trust, even when the news is bad. At the same time, it is important to accentuate the positives and reinforce the mission and vision of the organization.

Incorporate Regular Check-ins

Employee engagement can be difficult when everyone is working from home. At the moment, leaders should keep in mind that the work-at-home environment is different for each person. Not everyone has a well-equipped home office. Some employees are caring for homebound children or helping elderly relatives (or both). Leaders can build engagement through the simple act of checking in with people, individually, to see how they are coping. Understand that their reality may be quite different from your own.

Consider scheduling unstructured time at the beginning of video meetings to check in with people.

Some video platforms have instant polling features that make it easy to take the pulse of the group. Try some simple activities to lighten the mood and increase engagement, such as quick games, a remote scavenger hunt, trivia contest or other team-building events. These kinds of activities help maintain a sense of corporate culture, combat social isolation and generate connections across employee groups.

As the crisis evolves, it is time to start thinking about how to normalize the new normal. Chances are your organization's cultural and operational norms will change, and it will be important for employees to understand these new expectations. Leaders should be conscious of these evolving, unwritten rules and address them. New norms and expectations should be communicated clearly. If certain behaviors are OK now, but not permanently, address them now and let everyone know. Model the expected behavior; lead by example.

Repeat Your Messages

It should go without saying, but this bears repeating: messages need to be repeated, several times, before they are internalized.

There is a reason that brands run advertisements multiple times during your favorite television show. The same is true of leadership messaging to employees. People need to hear a message nine to 21 times to maximize perception. If you want employees to think and act differently, you must communicate frequently and consistently.

Those repeated messages do not always have to come from the CEO. In fact, a best practice suggests that employees should hear consistent messaging from multiple sources, especially their direct supervisors. Provide managers with talking points and set clear expectations on how they are to be used.

Perfection is the Enemy of the Good

Strive for consistency and progress, *not* perfection. You can forgive yourself if messages are not perfect. Employees will forgive mistakes if they believe their leaders are doing the best they can. But they won't forgive a lack of honesty or transparency. They deserve both, even when the message is not positive.

COVID-19 has, and will continue to, change corporate culture and communications. As businesses start to open up and some employees return to the office, prepare to ramp up communications. People will expect the same level of engagement and transparency that you've provided during the worst of the crisis. Lay the groundwork now to standardize new communications habits to maintain engagement and retain employees.

Economically, things won't be easy for quite a while for many companies. As such, transparency and honest leadership will continue to be a must over the coming months. Build resilience by acknowledging what's been lost and thanking everyone for their contributions and perseverance.

Counterbalance the negative with positive messages about the things your organization is doing to help others and how your people are adapting to new ways of working.

Cultural Rebuild

At this stage of the crisis, it will be important to rebuild a common culture and sense of belonging based on shared norms, beliefs and values. Effective leaders will help employees to make sense of the changes that all are being shared. Invoking common values and culture will help rebuild performance and provide touchstones for healing. Leaders can accomplish this by setting two or three simple goals around which people can rally, and then modeling the behaviors needed to meet those set goals.

Behind every crisis are opportunities for change and improvement. Making the most of opportunity in the face of this pandemic, or any long-term crisis, is neither easy nor quick. Organizations whose leaders engage in these kinds of best practices will emerge stronger and more resilient, with more committed workforces, and a blueprint for the future. ■

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The Must-Haves for Your Executive Crisis Communication Procedures

By Liz Liberman

When a crisis hits, the volume of news can be overwhelming. The fire-hose of content is on full blast, streaming directly at executives from every angle: peers, investors, board members and more.

If you are tasked with distilling this information for leadership, the project can seem daunting. While most communications departments are experts at putting information into the world, many may struggle to invert the process during a crisis. The quality of news varies considerably, so leadership teams need to know they can trust your communication as the gold standard.

The most critical step in managing the information flow up to leadership happens before a crisis hits. Organizations need to build infrastructure for executive crisis communication in advance. As many learned during the coronavirus pandemic, if you wait until the volume of information is as gargantuan as the news, you'll scramble to react.

It's crucial to establish your crisis communication processes in advance.

Identifying Standard Operating Procedures

To be prepared for any crisis, you and your team must develop standard operating procedures and revisit them quarterly, or at least semi-annually.

- **The POC**: Determine in advance who runs point on monitoring the media on a day-to-day basis. Does the person in charge change in a crisis, or can you mobilize additional resources? Does the person change based on the type of crisis?

You don't want to find out during a chat at the (virtual) water cooler that you have a manager with a background in public health who isn't being utilized. Know where you have expertise and use that to your advantage.

If a financial crisis is on the horizon, know who on your team has the foundation to understand the jargon and the broader implications. Identify the knowledge gaps on your team and fill them ahead of time.

- **Frequency and Timing**: What time do your executives start their day? Do they span multiple time zones? A 7am ET update may suffice for a US-based firm, but if you have executives in London, how are they being serviced? Determine the frequency with which you produce an update.

No matter what, avoid falling into the trap of forwarding news as it arrives. Your C-suite likely does not have time to read full-text articles on an ad-hoc basis. Identify in your SOPs when you'll send updates and stick to that schedule, so your leadership knows when to expect them.

- **Distribution**: Determine in advance how widely your updates will be distributed. Remember, your job is not to inform your entire company about every piece of information related to the crisis. One solution might be to distribute to VPs and above, and allow them to pass on to their teams as needed. Save this distribution list as a listserv or group email contact. Reply-all won't cut it.

- **Format:** Know how tech-savvy your leadership team is. Will executives expect a printed copy of your updates on their desks, or do team members prefer something more mobile-friendly? Are they voracious readers, or do they want tight bullet points? You'll want to learn their preferences beforehand. As with frequency, these are decisions that require buy-in from your leadership team.

There's a fine line between presenting the reality of media coverage and shielding your executives from it.

When the Crisis Hits

- **Refine the Source List:** You should already know whether your executives are *Wall Street Journal* or *New York Times* junkies. Look for additional sources that consider the news through your particular industry lens.

You also already know the list of trade journals in your space, but keep in mind that those sources may be slower to report on breaking news. Which are the most up-to-date, reliable and evidence-based?

For example, if you have a warehouse in coronavirus-stricken Italy, consider looking at top Italian news directly or monitoring trusted sources for international news. Be careful with sources that have political leanings.

If you have a **Google** News alert set up for coronavirus, you might be suffering from information overload. Use your source list as a tool to shrink down the volume of coverage.

- **Data, Data, Data**: Save your CEO time by pulling data points out of articles and displaying them prominently. An article with a lot of data may have only one data point that's relevant to your organization. It is up to you to sift through the noise to put that figure in front of your leaders.

Bear in mind that statistics often get manipulated. The source of the data is just as important as the data itself, so be sure to use citations clearly. For coronavirus updates, prioritize data from the **CDC**, **Johns Hopkins**, **NIH** and other trusted institutions.

- **Eliminate Bias**: Remember the bit about a good POC? Someone with experience in the field will be better equipped to sort through fact from fiction, but even they may have biases. Put a second or third pair of eyes on everything.

If adding internal perspective, clearly label it as such. When a journalist paints a negative picture, attribute the sentiment to the journalist, not to the situation.

There's a fine line between presenting the reality of media coverage and shielding your executives from it. If the news is bad, you can't pretend it's good. You might be inclined to say, "Don't shoot the messenger," but that's not a winning strategy.

Instead, find an approach that won't inflame your leaders, but also don't leave them in the dark.

If you're not already briefing your leaders regularly on the coronavirus, it's time to rethink how you communicate with them. Following these steps will provide value for your executives and remind them of the many ways the communications department is a vital member of the crisis team.

If the above seems was overwhelming during the pandemic, it's okay to outsource. But, as soon as the pandemic settles down, get cracking on those SOPs so you're ready for whatever occurs next. ■

Liz Liberman is senior product development director at Cision.

5 Steps to Protect Brands From Employees' Controversial Politics

By Pia Singh

Employees expect their companies to stake out positions on numerous controversial social or economic causes. Today, many Americans are motivated to engage in political advocacy or other activism. Some employees hold more extreme views and may take part in activities that advocate violence, racism or other fundamentally unacceptable ideas.

Such individuals may be identified in connection with a public protest, or their workplace comments may snowball in the media. These situations can quickly create disruption among coworkers, and they can also become a brand-building or brand-degrading moment for the employer.

While some brands choose to stay above the political fray, standing by idly is not an option when an employee is involved in intentionally provocative communications at work or engages in off-duty acts that contradict company values.

> **"Even if you want to keep [work and politics] separate, your customers, your employees and the public may not."**

Reaction from coworkers, consumers, investors and the courts can be swift and harsh. Not making a company's position clear enough, or fast enough, in response to a situation or criticism can be a mistake.

The need for accelerated decisions and responses on sensitive topics has put new pressure on management teams. As one former CEO stated, "Even if you want to keep [work and politics] separate, your customers, your employees and the public may not."

As such, there are five steps that communicators and business leaders can take to ensure internal preparedness amid an unpredictable external environment.

- **Know the rules.** State and local laws governing employment vary widely. Keep in mind that laws might not always align with company policies. Conduct a review of all policies governing employee conduct now, before an issue arises.
- **Know your stakeholders.** Conducting a stakeholder analysis will help you understand all the parties that need to be involved, the best ways to reach them and the potential challenges of working with each.
- **Know the issue(s).** Nothing is black and white. Most large corporations have constituencies that draw from both sides of the political spectrum. As a result, leaders fear that taking a stand on an issue might alienate millions of customers – and employees. Carefully weigh with your leadership team the pros and cons of specific responses and determine the best course of action.
- **Know your team of advisors.** You're not alone. Your HR, legal, labor and reputation management teams are there to

help, and should have a seat at the table from the start. Host a joint session with key stakeholders and think through the scenarios you may face. Then, work side by side to develop responses and draw up formal policies.

- **Know your company.** Ask yourself questions to help determine when and how to speak with employees in response to news events. Does your brand have a history of making political statements? Or do you take a more moderate tone? Does an employee's off-duty activities run counter to your company's core beliefs? Can you afford to stay silent on this issue?

Once you've considered all of the variables and conducted a thorough internal assessment, develop a plan. This will put your company in a position to limit negative public attention and minimize business impact and reputation damage. ■

Pia Singh is a former vice president at FleishmanHillard.

Best Practices for Managing Internal Stakeholders in a Crisis

By Michelle Jamieson

A human or naturally caused crisis can have a significant negative impact on an organization's bottom line and reputation if not properly planned for and managed. Depending on the nature of the crisis, not only can there be immediate impacts, but the lack of a well-thought-out crisis response plan can exacerbate the loss of reputation and income if the wrong message is sent either by the organization itself or through the media.

While a business may have a crisis management plan, the media can still negatively impact it if the wrong message is transmitted.

It is generally accepted that the best way to minimize the potential negative impact of a crisis is to have a crisis management plan in place of which all key stakeholders are aware.

The task of establishing stakeholder responsibilities is not the sole concern of those in communication roles but a collective responsibility of senior stakeholders.

Each type of crisis may require a different set of actions. The key to communication in a crisis is ensuring that each stakeholder group understands its role in the larger context of the plan.

The task of establishing stakeholder responsibilities is not the sole concern of those in communication roles but a collective responsibility of senior stakeholders.

The larger communication context of an organization responding to a crisis involves many stakeholders who need to understand their roles and responsibilities in the crisis management process.

Messaging Platforms and Stakeholder Groups

Part of establishing stakeholders' responsibilities is the need to establish the messaging platforms that allow the best communication. Each stakeholder group has different messaging requirements and there are many channels for communication. Different channels work best for different stakeholder groups.

Some of the platforms can be created in advance, such as generic dark sites, webpages or websites that are unpublished but are already designed and populated with the necessary content to go online in case of a crisis, needing only a small amount of updating based on the type of crisis. Part of the preparation of these messages may be scripts based on a variety of common crises.

It is important to understand the effectiveness of each channel for various purposes in a crisis. Certain stakeholder groups may find the most effective channel is social media given its capacity for two-way communication. Employees need a variety of forms of communication to ensure that messages successfully reach them.

Spokesperson Skills and Communications Requirements

An organization usually only gets one chance to properly address any crisis and to be properly represented to stakeholders, especially the media. A spokesperson should be identified who has certain skills to effectively navigate the communications process during a crisis.

The ability to effectively and comfortably communicate is a skill that not every executive has. The most appropriate spokespersons utilize his or her public speaking skills as part of his or her job. The appropriate spokesperson must have the necessary language skills, a personality that allows him or her to connect with stakeholders and an ability to gain trust. Ideally this person should be well-recognized and internally trusted.

There must be systems in place to allow the spokesperson to communicate with employees. Is there a phone chain established? The ability to reach all employees is essential. They must have up-to-date information and immediately be able to become part of the crisis response effort.

This article does not address the entirety of the crisis communications management plan development and implementation process, but rather deals with internal crisis communication as a means of identifying the challenges of, working with, a set of stakeholders within the larger process.

Advanced planning and developing responsive management and communication processes can minimize the impact on the organization, its reputation, customers, partners and employees.

The Overall Crisis Management Plan

A crisis management plan is a living document that requires regular testing, evaluation and review.

It is not always possible to stop a crisis from happening; however, it is possible to be prepared to mitigate the confusion and prevent additional problems stemming from the response to the situation. This type of preparedness should be part of the daily conversation within your team.

One key goal of the crisis management plan is to move from reacting to the incident to managing a strategy to overcome it. The plan needs to allay the concerns of each stakeholder group and position the business such that it can emerge successfully from the crisis.

Stakeholder Management

The list of stakeholders can be extensive. Part of the planning process is identifying and prioritizing the stakeholders who participate in the crisis communication plan, which allows for the best understanding of who does what, and why, for whom.

With the stakeholders identified, a prioritization exercise can be undertaken to define and clarify each group's expectations—what they are looking for and what they can expect, as well as obligations and prioritization.

Each stakeholder group, internal and external, requires different information to carry out their roles. The way in which these stakeholders are dealt with can positively or negatively impact the perceptions of the business.

It is essential to establish a chain of command for decision makers. A crisis communications plan requires a small team of senior executives and employees to be identified with the skills and level of authority to take charge of the response effort.

The decision-maker in a crisis is responsible for the approval of outgoing messages, the designation of tasks, having budgetary authority and communicating with key internal stakeholders. Few can afford to have specific resources allocated to crisis communications, and therefore an in-house or outside PR, social media and marketing team would be enlisted for the purpose of message development and distribution.

There are a number of stakeholder groups that require different messages through a variety of platforms from digital media to traditional communication outreach.

At least one spokesperson needs to be identified. These individuals need to understand the legal and other appropriate policies that protect the business.

The term "spokesperson" may seem to be a component of an external crisis communications plan, but this person would operate in both capacities.

Internal stakeholders should know to contact the spokesperson to get specific messages or information, while the spokesperson is responsible for communicating with external stakeholders. The purpose of a spokesperson is primarily to be the one person who speaks for the company, allowing for consistency in the messaging, based on information preauthorized for distribution.

Internal crisis communication starts with a well-defined crisis communications plan, distributed to key stakeholders, addressed on a regular basis, frequently updated and tested through mock crisis response sessions. ■

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COVID-19: 7 Lessons for Executives in the Midst of a Global Crisis

By Mark Pasetsky

With the COVID-19 pandemic, events were on hold, sales meetings were stalled and employees were scattered across living rooms and home offices. Every business, every client and every consumer was impacted by COVID-19. Lives, attitudes and perspectives were transformed overnight.

Executives needed help navigating communications through this global health crisis. Public relations is always the most cost-effective tool to keep brands in the conversation and to communicate both externally and internally—with key audiences and motivate employees.

Here are some tips we gave our clients that are not only useful for the COVID-19 pandemic, but should be in every executive's toolbox for any crisis:

1. View everything through the pandemic (or other crisis) lens.

Brands must reassess all of their content, marketing, products and projects through the lens of the crisis. Brands must ask themselves: Could this be perceived as insensitive? Does this message still make sense? Do I need to put this project on hold?

In the example of COVID-19, reporters and editors were in the midst of managing the effects of the crisis. In these cases, expect everything from email responses to publishing timelines to take longer than usual.

2. Get PR involved as soon as possible to avoid additional problems.

Like traditional crisis management, the sooner PR is involved the better. Don't risk creating a secondary crisis because of an avoidable PR misstep.

Many gyms, for example, failed to close in time, and not only risked the health of their members but also drew criticism from the news and across social media. Brands can avoid this kind of predicament by sharing plans, communications and ideas with their PR teams so the communications professionals can incorporate insights from the onset.

3. Create a content review counsel.

You could hardly turn on the news without hearing about a new task force or coalition forming in response to the pandemic. This crisis touched nearly every area of business, with implications for PR, marketing, HR, legal and sales. Brands should identify, ideally in advance, the key stakeholders within their organizations and create a review counsel that can vet messaging and content and flag any potential problems.

4. Communicate often and consistently.

Taking another page from politics, brands should try to adopt the approach that Governor Andrew Cuomo took to communications: communicate often. As leaders like Cuomo understand, we're all in this together.

Clients must have a plan to communicate across all stakeholders. Brands should also be as transparent as possible, as well as consistent, with communications; this will help ensure everyone is on the same page.

5. Assume all internal communication will become external.

Brands must be extraordinarily cautious with internal communications right now. Assume that anything distributed internally may eventually become public through leaks, news coverage or legal investigations.

For example, internal memos to employees at **Mediterranean Shipping Company**, the largest privately-owned cruise line, were leaked to the press. The internal communications team found its way into embarrassing headlines, revealing that the company asked employees to waive their legal rights to future compensation and suspended pay to staff stranded on cruise ships waiting to return to their home countries.

6. Use creative PR as a motivational tool.

This crisis upended business models in every industry. Perhaps you were about to launch a new marketing campaign, announce a big hire or kick off a re-brand. Don't be discouraged if it feels like those plans were disrupted for now.

Brands should think outside the box and come up with some creative ways to keep business moving, get their voices out there and motivate employees.

Brands should also encourage employees to help develop virtual events, write bylined articles or be interviewed by the press, as well as to branch out into new social media activities. Now is the time to try something new – it could lead to a big payoff.

7. Start planning for opening day

This crisis will eventually end. People will go back to work, customers will resume shopping and businesses will return to normal operations. Start planning for opening day now. Consider how brand messages will need to change. How will products be reintroduced? Brands should work with their PR teams and start mapping out their new vision for the future.

The bottom line

Most traditional business operations have been interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak, but PR professionals still have many tools in their toolbox to help brands and employees continue to move forward. Now is the time to lean into PR.

Combine traditional crisis management with flexible, innovative thinking to help your clients emerge from a crisis a preserved brand image and a stronger bond with employees and customers. ■

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Keeping Staff Informed, Motivated and Coming to Work During a Crisis

By Julie L. Sheedy

Constant, consistent employee communication is essential in any crisis, but how do you reach those on the frontlines of healthcare, during a global pandemic, who aren't in front of computers or on **Zoom** meetings, but are working around the clock to provide care? Get creative.

As signs of Covid-19 started to hit the U.S., workplaces were turned upside down. While most employees were directed to work from home, healthcare workers were deemed essential. For **Loretto**, a large post-acute healthcare system in Central New York, we knew communication would be critical in stabilizing our organization during this difficult time.

The questions were vast.

- What process changes are we implementing internally?
- How do we reassure staff they are safe?
- How do we make sure staff continue to come to work?
- How do we keep staff motivated and feeling appreciated?

This was no easy task, as more than 2,500 employees were spread across 19 sites in two counties, and the majority were not sitting in front of a computer regularly or able to join large group meetings.

Our senior leadership team sprang into action early, working through all the steps we needed to take to ensure the safety and security of our residents and employees. Our multi-pronged approach ensured employees were kept up-to-date as the situation devel-

Staff appreciation is critical, particularly in a crisis. Employees indicated, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, that simply saying "thank you" was essential.

oped. We focused on many of the key principles of employee communications, while recognizing the limitations of our workforce.

Get into a Cadence Quickly

Immediately, we established a weekly call with our managers to give them guidance, talking points and appropriate answers to questions with which they were being flooded. The call was recorded so those working off-shifts also had the information, and a Manager Resource Center was established on our Intranet with helpful materials, Q&As, copies of new policy documents and a simple way to submit questions and concerns that we needed to address.

Senior leadership produced a video to let staff know just how much they were appreciated.

Take Advantage of Social Reach

Employees on the frontlines aren't on computers but needed to be connected to us. We established an Employee-Only **Facebook** group as we saw this as an excellent channel to reach staff after shifts, on breaks and on their way to work. Those in healthcare may need to relax social media or cell phone use policies, but we found people abided by our usage rules and were actively, and positively, engaged in our posts, which ranged from resources for their families, important updates on our progress, videos from our CEO and employee recognition.

Our public social media also gave the outside world a glimpse at what was happening "inside" given we were closed to all visitors. We developed creative posts of our residents continuing to thrive despite not visiting with their loved ones in person, and staff were motivated by the positive response from family and the community to the good work they were doing.

Let Staff Express Themselves

As fatigue set in for our workers, one of our Directors of Nursing starting challenging the floors to TikTok competitions. Dressed in their full PPE, many floors developed dances and videos were shared on our employee Facebook group with rave reviews.

Reinforce Key Messages across Multiple Channels

Remember the patterns of your multi-generational workforce. Millennials, who are "connected" 24/7, were a great audience for Facebook – but many "boomer" employees weren't on social channels. We sent key messages in weekly email blasts, posted on our TV monitors in all facilities and posted hard copies of electronic communications in elevators and by time clocks.

Group texting was another tool we put in place for the day "in the future" when we might need to communicate during a crisis.

During Covid, it became a lifeline. 65% of our staff don't have a work phone line, but everyone has a cell phone. We used text messages our first week to send surveys to employees for emergency needs like childcare. Within 10 minutes, 150 employees responded that they would need help if schools were closed. In another survey, 250 employees responded that they were down to a two-day supply of food for their families. This enabled us to secure donations of emergency food

Loretto utilized social media to give the outside world a glimpse at what was happening "inside" since facilities were closed to visitors. These posts highlighted residents.

bags. Texting was also a great vehicle to get video announcements from our CEO out to all shifts, and it became a complement to our appreciation efforts.

'Thank You' Goes a Long Way

Everyone talks about staff appreciation, but what we learned from our employees in a survey conducted a few months prior to the emergence of this crisis was the importance of simply saying "thank you."

During this crisis, we made sure we said "thank you" regularly. We served meals, we posted signs on our in-house TV and we even produced a fun video with our senior leaders letting their hair down a little and saying thank you in a fun way. We invited local celebrities to submit thank you videos, which were posted to our Facebook group.

Surprisingly, the effort that resonated the most with staff was a simple, weekly text message to their phones:

"Thank you for going the extra mile today! We couldn't do it without you," or *"Your hard work isn't going unnoticed. Thank you for all you do for Loretto!"*

While we are still in the midst of this Covid-19 crisis, our consistent approach has resulted in stability in our workforce with limited call-offs; even proactive responses from staff indicated they feel well-informed and supported during this difficult time. ■

Julie Sheedy is the Chief Marketing officer for Loretto, a non-profit post-acute health system in Syracuse, NY. jsheedy@lorettosystem.org.

Mistaking M&A Mountains for Molehills: Communicating Through Complexity

By Mandy Arnold

Many mergers and acquisitions are planned—for months—behind closed doors in boardrooms and within C-suites, long before the communications team is brought into the fold. It's understandable why this may happen: to minimize disruption, support pretense, as a result of overconfidence or even for fear of leaks.

So what is the first step to gaining a seat at the table for early conversations pertaining to important deals? Trust.

Communications professionals must demonstrate the value of being included early on by displaying clear understanding of confidentiality and building trust in every interaction. Loose-lipped, ill-prepared or irrelevant public relations folks are labeled as task masters, untrusted advisors or unprofessional, and will be dismissed.

Listen to the tone of the opportunity, and guide your executive team by showing an understanding of how successful management and attention to communications details are tied intrinsically to sales and revenue. Ears perk up when you can connect the communications plan to the money trail.

Of course, in a dynamic business environment, change means growth and innovation. Communications professionals must understand complex business dealings, the nature of market indicators and how orchestrating communications contributes to greater outcomes for the bottom line. Successful business communications require the balance to navigate the minutiae of internal communications and to switch gears to juggle a flood of media inquiries and second-by-second social media plays. In all of this, you must know the right message for the appropriate audience.

Understanding and anticipating human behavior can help mitigate complicated change, including culture clash or slow adoption. These skills can help to avoid a crisis situation, and keep companies' communications from falling short—or failing altogether.

Understand Your Audiences

Mitigating risk requires understanding each audience at every phase of communications. Starting with the voice of your audience—whether it's employees, executives, donors, stockholders or clients—is key to developing appropriate messaging.

As you develop an approach for each phase of an announcement, plan for a clear assessment of each segment of your audience. Many executives lack interest in investing the time or energy to address each specific audience and its needs through the change. To begin developing your list, think through some of the audiences listed in the sidebar.

From there, assess each audience's voice in order to understand how to prepare.

Some questions to consider:

- What is the client's relationship with the current executive team?
- Will this address a past weakness?
- Are executives and staff clear on the dis-

tinction between what a merger and an acquisition means?

- What are the communications touchpoints that should be considered?
- How could a leak prior to the public announcement affect morale and sales?
- Who should be treated like a VIP in the communications process?
- Who can help you mitigate risk through third-party messaging?

Control the Message

Maintaining control is critical. A centralized document should break down each audience's concerns and opportunities, as well as message you want to affirm.

By investing the time into a messaging platform and understanding how you'll communicate with all audiences, your team is better able to effectively integrate your key messages. Paying attention to everyone's concerns and questions helps to build a stronger team and increase brand trust in the process.

Build Internal Buy-in

Any good business advisor will tell you that culture and operational processes are two layers that can kill a deal. The same goes for how your public relations and communications strategy is crafted.

It starts with an effort that reinforces trust and respect from the beginning by prioritizing communications with internal influencers. Bringing these individuals on board early ensures they understand how controlling the message can achieve greater financial gains through stability and posturing of information. It's not long before decision-makers around the table see how controlling the message and reinforcing certain rhetoric can empower the communications team and help to avoid a crisis in the process.

Of course, this extends to external audiences as well. Prioritizing who and when you communicate with will allow you to build and maximize the potential in a relationship and mitigate risk through proactive messaging.

Seize the Opportunity

Managing the minutiae of merger and acquisition messaging and communications is like managing an investment fund. If you steadily invest and remain consistent in messaging and approach, you can reap greater brand equity dividends. Essentially, you've earned chips to cash in during planned risk-taking or in a crisis situation when a message is not as well-controlled.

When an organization knows change is coming, especially in today's hyper-communicative multimedia world, how it manages the message affirms its power position. Misuse of an opportunity to reinforce your company's commitment can greatly affect morale, pride, trust and acceptance of the benefits to be gained in the changes ahead.

Some communications professionals take a "rip off the Band-Aid" approach to delivering news of a merger and acquisition. If you do this, you've missed the opportunity.

Misuse of an opportunity to reinforce your company's commitment can greatly affect morale, pride, trust and acceptance of the benefits to be gained in the changes ahead.

Communication is power. How you wield your weapon can influence even more power. It's easy to see these lessons on paper and wonder how they might apply to your particular organization.

Earlier I referenced mitigating risk through proactive messaging. We managed a merger that was expected to result in an office relocation, at a time when the community was struggling with recruiting and retaining businesses and jobs. We reached out in advance to local government officials, including economic agencies and the local chamber, to work with them on a consistent message.

We also proactively delivered a clear message that, although one of the offices would be consolidated to a new location, no jobs would leave the region. In fact, the company projected an increase in jobs over the next five years. Eliminating the opportunity for people to fill a void of information with assumptions or falsehoods was key to building positive momentum through the change ahead.

I also focused heavily on audiences and building internal buy-in. Of course, some M&As are not large enough to capture the attention of media—but that doesn't mean you should underestimate attention to planning.

We recently oversaw communication of a smaller acquisition. We had the opportunity to maximize how the acquired team merged successfully into the new company. We facilitated conversations with employees on the front lines in advance of the news going public, working to help them understand critical messages and to answer anticipated questions.

As part of the process, we also recommended a familiarizing tour of their new home with the acquiring firm. Employees were invited to meet the team and see where their desks would be located. Employees were able to rid themselves of disruptive anxiety, and instead focus on how to leverage the change to grow sales.

M&A communications are different in every instance, just as every crisis communication offers a unique challenge. Having a proactive plan in place helps to address both expected and unexpected challenges and allows you to communicate through all levels of the complexity. ■

Mandy Arnold is CEO at Gavin.

M&A Audiences to Target in Your Message

Audiences vary by organization and industry, but typical M&A audience segments include:

- ☐ Executives
- ☐ Senior or middle management
- ☐ Employees
- ☐ Clients
- ☐ Vendors
- ☐ Referral sources
- ☐ Strategic partners
- ☐ External influencers, such as legislators and community leaders
- ☐ Stakeholders and stockholders
- ☐ Donors and contributors
- ☐ Potential clients
- ☐ Past clients
- ☐ General public

Helping PR Pros and Agencies Cope With Mental Health Well-Being During a Crisis

By Nicole Schuman

Coronavirus not only affected the work of PR practitioners (and others), but also their home and family life, financial future and overall health.

It's easy to see why some, if not all, comms pros suffered from stress or anxiety induced by the virus. Longer hours and larger workloads while handling childcare or spending days in isolation can have tremendous negative effects on mental health and well-being.

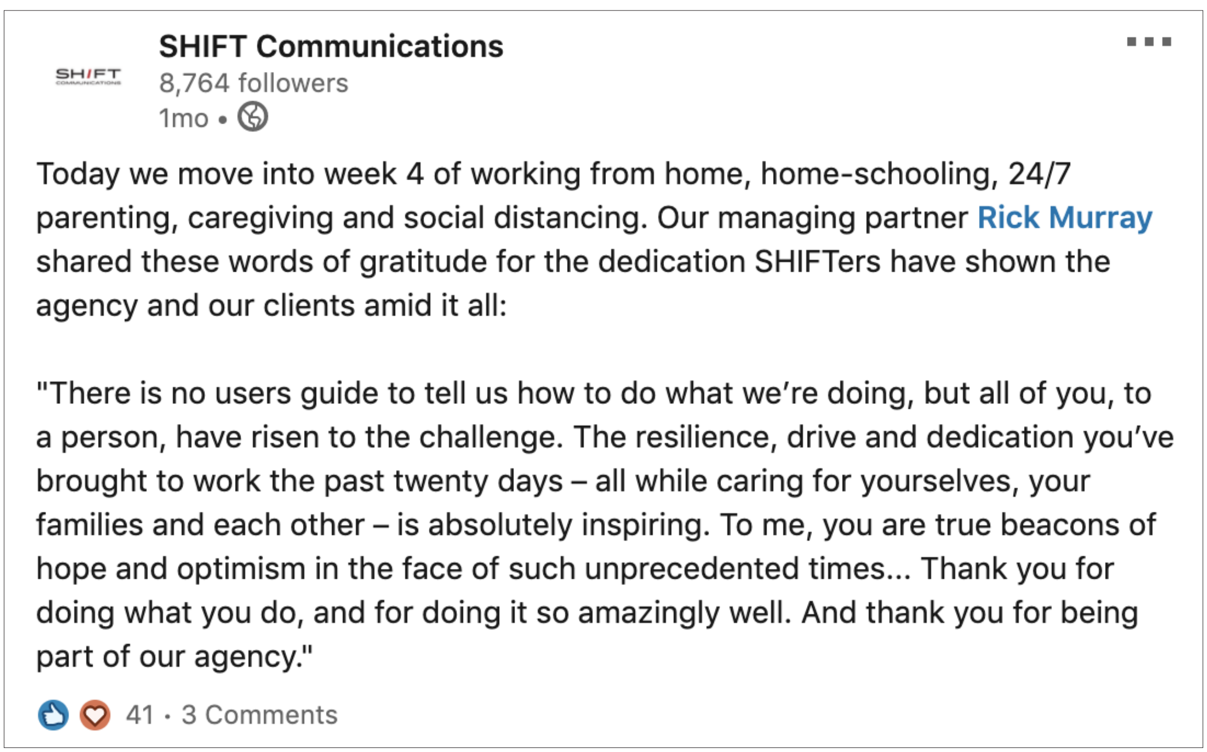
Communication With Employees

At the beginning of the fourth week of working from home for many **SHIFT Communications** employees, managing partner Rick Murray shared some inspiring words with his staff (below).

How an employer communicates with staff during the COVID-19 crisis could have a serious impact on an employee's comfort and interest level. Many agencies and PR departments are taking a look at what they can do to support employees who may be struggling during this time.

"This pandemic has identified gaps in our employee well-being strategies," said Dr. Wayne Jonas, executive director of **Samueli Foundation Integrative Health Programs**, which specializes in chronic illness, and the former director of **NIH's Office of Alternative Medicine**.

"I don't believe enough employers had stopped to think about the mental well-being of their staff. Are they encouraging mindfulness strategies and meditation to reduce stress overall?" said Dr. Jonas. "Are they encouraging


SHIFT Communications
8,764 followers
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Today we move into week 4 of working from home, home-schooling, 24/7 parenting, caregiving and social distancing. Our managing partner Rick Murray shared these words of gratitude for the dedication SHIFTers have shown the agency and our clients amid it all:

"There is no users guide to tell us how to do what we're doing, but all of you, to a person, have risen to the challenge. The resilience, drive and dedication you've brought to work the past twenty days – all while caring for yourselves, your families and each other – is absolutely inspiring. To me, you are true beacons of hope and optimism in the face of such unprecedented times... Thank you for doing what you do, and for doing it so amazingly well. And thank you for being part of our agency."

41 · 3 Comments

employees to take breaks or are they expected to answer messages within minutes? Do employees feel like they can ask for help and be vulnerable during this time, or do they feel they need to be multitasking superheroes?"

Kim Sample, **PR Council** president, organized a thrice-weekly call with human resources agency leaders to talk about their strategies regarding caring for the mental health of employees.

"Young people are living alone and would like to be back with family, but might not be able to travel. Parents of school-aged kids are working while homeschooling; folks are caring for elderly family members. [It] adds this new layer of stress, along with everything virus-related," Sample said.

On Sample's calls, she discussed everything from how to encourage staff to take advantage of PTO days in creative ways, to helping employees understand the Families First Act.

"Companies are looking at what [employees] need right now," Sample said.

At **FleishmanHillard**, staff were encouraged to take the crisis step-by-step rather than becoming overwhelmed by the big picture.

"We are encouraging people to take it one day at a time and make the best decisions you can for today…Giving people permission to take it one day at a time seems to go a long way."

"We are working from a mindset that life is not defined by what happens to you, but rather by how you react to what happens," said Emily Frager, senior partner, member of FleishmanHillard's leadership Cabinet and general manager of the firm's Los Angeles and Orange County operations. "We are encouraging people to take it one day at a time and make the best decisions you can for today… for clients and themselves. Just giving people permission to take it one day at a time seems to go a long way."

At **BerlinRosen**, staff became facilitators of well-being initiatives. Activities included "Core O'Clock" (daily video exercises), guided meditation sessions facilitated by employees, a March Madness-style pet photo contest and story time led by employees' kids.

"Mental health and employee well-being are a top priority for us, especially as we've shifted to remote work," said BerlinRosen COO David Levine. "We've provided options for staff to receive remote therapy sessions with a mental health provider and are also coordinating remote group sessions for those interested. We've encouraged staff to take breaks during the day, take PTO for mental health, share best practices to adapt to working from home and keep doing all we can to maintain a sense of normalcy during these extraordinary times."

At **Red Havas**, managers shared their own needs with staff to promote transparency, as well as showcasing the benefits of stepping away from what can be daunting work.

"We encourage our team to take wellness breaks through the day, working around client and family commitments," said Linda Descano, executive vice president. "Many of us on the leadership team are taking these breaks ourselves—and being transparent about them—to reinforce the importance of finding balance and stepping away."

Winding Down

Communicators can be so focused on meeting client and organizational needs that they can forget the importance of taking a breath and unplugging when the day is over.

Gene Grabowski, partner at Washington, D.C.-based firm **kglobal**, said he's found sticking to a schedule to be effective in terms of productivity.

"For the first two weeks of the lockdown, I was disoriented and easily distracted from my work at home," he said. Now he ends his work day at 5 p.m. and takes a 30-minute walk, followed by cocktails and dinner with his wife in their dining room.

For others, maintaining a traditional work-from-home schedule has been a challenge, but movement and breaks during the day have helped.

"It's hard to step away [from work], especially during times of crisis," said Emily Ciraolo, assistant director, corporate communications at **National Fuel**. "I've committed to walking the dogs every day and cooking my meals as it forces me to stand up and move around for a bit, even if I'm listening to a webinar as I do it."

And of course reaching out to coworkers, family and friends remains paramount as social distancing and isolation continue to take their toll.

Jennifer Fisher, chief well-being officer at **Deloitte LLP**, acknowledged that it's also okay to reach out to these connections on "down" days.

"I think it's really important to say when we aren't doing OK—I have certainly had these moments—and when I do, I reach out to family or friends to talk it through," Fisher said. "Although right now the pandemic may feel endless, we need to remind ourselves and each other that it won't be. The need for social distancing and the disruption to life as we know it isn't permanent, and knowing that makes it easier to cope." ■

Identifying Stress

Dr. Wayne Jonas argues that pushing yourself through stress can lead to physical, emotional and mental burnout.

"The saying 'No pain, no gain' does not apply to stress," he says. "Your stress response can get stuck in the 'on' position, so you are always in a stressed and anxious state. It is likely that many communications professionals feel this stress but may not recognize the impact prolonged exposure to this 'crisis mode' is creating."

Dr. Jonas noted that signs of burnout can vary, but employees should keep an eye out for behavioral signs such as "poor sleep, apathy, feeling isolated and being overly reactive or tearful." He also said to look for emotional and cognitive signs such as "constant anxiety, fear, sadness and irritability or anger, as well as difficulty concentrating and over-analysis." Physical signs like "pain and fatigue" also play a role.

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Communicating During a Global Crisis: Start at Home

By Greg Abel

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, one of the most important things I've learned as a business owner is that in times of crisis, it's most important to take care of those closest to you first.
While I'm focusing on best practices for internal communications, it's equally as important to have a game plan for external communications, so I'll also share some practical guidance for marketing and PR activities when things are anything but normal.

As a quick aside, I also believe that one of the best things you can do for yourself and those close to you during a crisis is to practice self-care. All of us will undoubtedly get some things wrong and stub our toes occasionally. However, if you commit to a plan and reach out to others for help when you need it, you'll be in a much better position to look back on this time and think to yourself, "I did the best I could."

Establish Clear Points of Contact

In a period of uncertainty, your team should know who to go to for what. One effective strategy to implement immediately is identifying key issues and establishing points of contact for each of them.

Who is going to be your technology go-to person? Who is the liaison on health and wellness? Who is in charge of clarifying the remote work policy? Finally, make sure there is a catchall contact, a key person to ask when you don't know who to ask.

Communicate Frequently and Clearly

Uncertainty, caused by lack of information, can create substantial fear for employees. That's why it's important to communicate regularly so that employees do not feel like they are in the dark. It is a good idea for leaders to address key areas consistently. To do so, make a list of the key topics on your employees' minds, and then address them—whether in a virtual meeting, email or conference call.

Be as Transparent as Possible

A crisis is not the time to be evasive or to avoid tough questions. When in doubt, leaders should communicate what they know, what they don't know and what they're learning more about. Showing humility and transparency as a leader will also foster a culture of openness, which can only benefit your organization in the long run.

Practice and Model Self-Care

Leaders should advocate and practice healthy routines with an emphasis on the importance of exercise, getting outside and paying attention to mental health.

Encourage employees to take care of themselves with activities like regular walks, meditation or spending time away from the news and social media.

After addressing internal communications, it's time to think about external audiences. You want your customers and partners to hear from you, but remember: what seems important in your world might not be important in theirs.

Before sending out communications during a crisis, consider the context.

Ask yourself what your audience might be focused on right now. How would it feel if you received the message you're about to send? With these thoughts in mind, consider the following.

Hit the Pause Button on Automated Emails and Social Posts

If you have scheduled content that was set up before the crisis, shut it down. Or, at the very least, review the content for tone and appropriateness given the situation.

Focus on Quality over Quantity

No one wants to be bombarded right now. Picture the recipient. Is this information something they'll actually want to open, something they need to know?

Think About the Most Useful Information You Can Provide

I'm not saying, 'don't do business.' Companies still need to buy software, and people still want to cook nice meals or find ways to connect. Many brands have something relevant to share during a crisis, but be sure to do so in context with the situation at hand.

During a crisis, brands can align with nonprofits or community groups to do some good in the world. Make these engagements the focus of your social media content.

Be as Human as Possible

Everyone is struggling their way through this. Share stories of how your employees are coping and bonding, what they're doing to stay productive and sane at home, or how they're juggling the needs of their children and jobs.

Share News Internally First

If there is a major company announcement to share, make sure your internal teams hear it first before they see it on social media or in an external email.

Don't Ignore the Crisis

Some might think it's best to let the situation ride out as if they are not affected, but it's best to be transparent and proactive instead of coming off as tone-deaf or clueless.

Remember, there is no one perfect answer or "right way" to communicate during a crisis. When in doubt, lean on your values and make sure you start with those who are closest and most important to you. ■

Greg Abel is the founder and CEO of Baltimore-based Abel Communications.

Communicating Layoffs During The COVID-19 Pandemic

By Erika Bradbury

The COVID-19 crisis resulted in companies, large and small, furloughing or laying off a significant portion of workers. In addition, some companies, attempting to stymie the flow of unemployment, reduced employee salaries and decreased or eliminated freelance budgets.

Some local businesses, including daycare centers, restaurants, salons, and scores of others, cut most, if not all, their staff.

The standard PR advice to communicate difficult news applied during the pandemic. "Be as honest and transparent as possible," said Leslie Wingo, CEO of multicultural agency **Sanders Wingo**.

Bearing Bad News

Many companies found themselves in uncharted territory during the pandemic. For example, iconic bookstore "The Strand" had never had to deal with layoffs previously. To communicate the news, "Lean into your values, both in decision-making and communications," said Carreen Winters, chair, reputation management and chief strategy officer, **MWWPR**. "The values that helped you become a successful business...will serve you well now."

- **Timing**: Schedule your internal and external announcements carefully. Make sure HR informs first those losing their jobs/being furloughed/having salaries reduced. It's best to do that personally and privately. Emailing can seem impersonal.

After that, PR should inform the organization. Be aware that in the digital era, news about layoffs or job cuts can make its way online quickly.

Regardless, press should be informed only after announcements are made internally.

Emotional Content

- **Tone**: Remember compassion. It's never easy to deliver difficult news, but it's harder to be on the receiving end. While your message doesn't need to be apologetic, consider the emotional impact on employees, especially given today's extremely difficult situation.

"No one is to blame for the business challenges with COVID-19," said Gil Bashe, managing partner, global health at **Finn Partners**. "Kindness and thoughtfulness of what's next for these people is part of being human… Leadership often starts with the thought, 'What if this were me?'"

- **Details**: While the pandemic seems to make it obvious why cuts are necessary, it is important to lay out your reasoning. Providing context on other things the business is doing to reduce costs is one option in this instance.

"Use your values," Winters said, "to give people insight into how you made the difficult decisions."

Similarly, it helps to include benefits, such as continuing healthcare coverage, in communicating job cuts.

- **The Future**: In addition, include information about light at the end of the tunnel, if possible. "This is the time to define the benchmarks that would prompt positive action: rehiring, reinstatement of reduced benefits, returns to full pay. Let people know now how you will return to more normal business, even if you can't say when," Winters said.

But be realistic, especially in this highly fluid situation. "Sometimes candor is more important than making the bite sting less," Bashe said. "With COVID-19 and the financial distress of the markets and economy, it's hard to say when things will return to 'normal,'" he says. Bashe added, "When you set timelines, you better deliver. Otherwise, you're serving as a source of 'truth' falls to the bottom of the information pond like a rock."

Layoff, Furlough or Pay Cut?

The nuances around whether an employee is furloughed, laid off or taking a pay cut may not matter to a particular staffer. However, "communications needs to work in lock-step with human resources to address employee needs and work within the law," Bashe said.

Furloughs in the UK, for example, mean something different than they do in the US. As such, it is critical to lay out details for employees of what reductions entail. Discuss benefits and other details.

After The News

Following the cuts, focus on remaining employees. It's critical to communicate with the survivors. Again, it is preferable to do this one-on-one. Ensure remaining employees know that their former colleagues will be treated well. In addition, inform them how the reduced headcount will impact their day-to-day responsibilities.

"For the rest of the organization, who will be grieving the exit of good colleagues and good friends, knowing what the company will be doing to help those individuals, and if there is a scenario where they may return, can be incredibly valuable," Winters said. ■

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3

Executive and Spokesperson Training

Attending to Your CEO's Achilles' Heel(s): A Guide By Type

By Andrew Gilman

The question that PR counsel should be asking about their leadership is: When I know my boss has traits that are less than desirable and that could harm the enterprise, how can I get his/her attention and prevent the crisis?

Here's a strictly PR perspective on the types, a few who have the particular flaw and how to counsel. For all categories, the critical issue is having a seat at the table. If you don't have credibility in the C-suite, you won't be able to find and fix the flaw until it's too late.

The Iconoclast

This type of leader is an entrepreneur who is successful while also breaking conventions. Consider two Marks: **Facebook**'s Zuckerberg and Cuban of the Dallas Mavericks.

- **Achilles' heel**: Bending or breaking a few rules. Facebook's privacy issues and Cuban's criticism of the **NBA**
- **The Fix**: A rapid response PR team that can snap into action when the CEO misfires. Find a board member or consultant who can rein in the CEO without diminishing his flair and enthusiasm

The Father Figure

- Think chicken and burgers— **Purdue**'s Frank Purdue and **Wendy**'s Dave Thomas. And, of course, Warren Buffett from **Berkshire Hathaway**.
- **Achilles' heel**: It's either the fear factor or Founder's Syndrome. Transitioning to new management from successful, trusted founders and father figures causes unease among stakeholders.
- **The Fix**: Work with the board to develop a step-by-step transition plan well before the CEO decides to leave. PR needs to make this plan public, and make sure the departing CEO gets behind the successor via speeches and media appearances

The Risk Taker

Leaders whose personal life poses a risk to the organization or company. Unfortunately, many CEOs and politicians fit this category. Two examples: **HP**'s former CEO, Mark Hurd, and **SpaceX** CEO Elon Musk.

- **Achilles' heel**: Duh. Ask why the leader's brains are in their heel or in other body parts. The flaw is that they never think they will get caught.
- **The Fix**: Boards should conduct better due diligence and background checks before offering a job. Periodic ethics training doesn't hurt, either.

The Cult CEO

A leader who is so closely linked to the brand's DNA that it inspires virtual blind loyalty from employees and consumers. How about the late Steve Jobs or Martha Stewart.

- **Achilles' heel**: A personal issue that can cause calamity in the kingdom.
- **The Fix**: It's hard. Develop a crisis plan

that anticipates such big events and can de-couple or "unstick" the idealized CEO from the brand.

Plain Vanilla

A CEO who isn't flashy but just works hard, stays out of the limelight and makes a ton of money for the company and investors. Examples: former **Colgate-Palmolive** CEO Reuben Mark and the chairman/former CEO of **Nestlé**, Paul Bulcke.

- **Achilles' heel**: Until a crisis erupts, this type of CEO won't have his or her heel exposed publicly.
- **The Fix:** PR should run simulations and make sure that technology is in place that will quickly elevate the CEO's profile in the event of a crisis.

The Executioner

CEOs known for obsession with the bottom line, not the feel-good approach for employees and customers.

- **Achilles' heel:** This style will yield business success but can backfire in loss of reputation and employee morale.
- **The Fix:** Often includes damage control with specific stakeholders. Communicators need to focus on internal messaging to employees ,as well as commitment to the community.

A caveat: These are not all-or-nothing categories, so you must be prepared for some overlap—and expect the unexpected. ■

Andrew Gilman is president and CEO of CommCore Consulting Group, a crisis management and media training agency based in Washington, D.C.

Training the Untrainable: Tips for Prepping the C-suite

By Allison Kahn

You can text a national broadcast producer and get them interested in a story you're working on. You have that *New York Times* reporter on speed dial and they always answer your calls. You know the right way to pitch the right idea at the right time for the right outcome.

But what happens when the producer says, "Great! Who can you get to guest on our six o'clock hour?" Who can you cough up who is media-savvy and trained and ready to go?

While some of us are lucky to have eloquent linguists on our executive team, often a good CFO doesn't necessarily translate to a great spokesperson.

As a public relations professional, you're uniquely positioned to sit in a place of authority, even if you're outranked by plenty of others at your organization. Part of your job is making sure the top dogs are well-represented and liked publicly, and that means you're often the only one who's allowed to point out things like that food crumb on their faces, the hair out of place, the smirk that doesn't read well on television, the whiny tone in their voices when they answer tough questions.

While everyone else is sucking up to the big boss, you're the one who is allowed, even encouraged, to point out the negative, at least as it relates to their media appearances.

While this rare position of honesty and critique can help you build beautiful relationships with important people, there are plenty of reasons why it can also be incredibly tricky.

A lot of people don't like hearing the things that are wrong about them. Egos are no small thing, especially when you're dealing with people who are told all day how great they are. You need to navigate these waters carefully and skillfully in order to maintain good rapport and be effective in your job.

Don't Be Afraid

Start by thinking about how you'd like to be treated if the tables were turned. Say you were getting ready for your live broadcast television debut. Your words were going to reach millions of Americans. You want to be at the top of your game. You want to look sharp and sound amazing, and you want to wow everyone who watches. You want sales to spike 200% after your appearance.

Imagine you took to the airwaves confident and ready, and then you discovered you had a giant ketchup stain right smack in the middle of your white shirt. Or you rambled when you got nervous and got cut off by the anchor before you finished the most important part of your sentence.

You would appreciate if someone were there with a **Tide** stick and words of encouragement, wouldn't you? So too does the executive or spokesperson appreciate your presence. Don't be afraid to speak up and be the true keeper of your brand.

Stay in Your Lane

You may never be more of a subject matter expert than the subject matter expert. But you will always be the expert on the aspects of how that information gets relayed. You are the one who knows what a particular reporter's slant is, and how to fully vet a media opportunity. You are the one who knows what the reporter covered in the segment before, or the story prior to that, or what they tweeted about earlier that day.

Your spokesperson will appreciate that he or she can rely on you to be the backbone for your company. He may have the revenue stats down, but until you tell him, he probably didn't know the name of the anchor he's about to interview with, or remember to thank her and plug your brand name.

Your executive may be the vehicle, but you are the true driver. You are the one who ensures he or she comes across well and elevates your brand awareness. You are the one who makes sure the media outlet feels like you've created a symbiotic relationship with the possibility of future partnership.

Say It With a Smile

Perhaps the most important lesson comes in the wise words of American poet William Carlos Williams: "It is not what you say that matters but the manner in which you say it; there lies the secret of the ages."

Indeed, the best way to convey information that might be deemed as negative or critical to anyone, especially to someone who outranks you or who signs your paycheck, is to be mindful of the delivery.

In the same way you prep your exec to make sure his or her tone and facial expressions are accessible, friendly and honest when the camera is rolling, you should practice the same traits when you're working with an exec to improve his or her public presence.

3 Tips for Approaching an Executive with a Big Ego

1. **Be polite but not passive**: Don't pad your executive's ego by standing down from sharing criticism, especially if he or she asks for it. Always maintain your professionalism—particularly in moments when you're providing feedback not only to, but about, someone who outranks you—but don't be afraid to be direct. You are helping someone become a better leader and a brand earn a more positive presence.

2. **Be honest but not too honest**: Do worry about offending, but don't worry about telling the cold, hard truth. Make sure you weigh what you should be sharing with your executive against how helpful it will prove in future interviews. If, for instance, you missed that stain on the shirt, it might only make him feel bad to learn after the fact. Try instead to keep a better watch next time to point out things like this before the camera starts rolling.

3. **Balance criticism and praise**: Be sure to consider your delivery to ensure it's more constructive than harsh. Lead with a positive and then follow up with a negative. Remember, you don't have to prove your worth by pointing out every mistake, and you won't earn your keep if you only dole out praise, so strike a balance between the two and provide feedback that is helpful and to which your executive will be receptive.

Set up time to brief him or her in advance of a media interview, no matter how small or familiar. Practice tough questions and answers, and provide constructive feedback along the way. Then set up time to debrief following the media interview. Always carve out that time to relay back what went well and what could be improved for next time. Rather than saying, "You blinked too many times and it made you look dishonest," instead try, "Let's practice your eye contact for next time so we're making sure you appear the most authentic you."

Trust Your Gut

As a public relations professional, you have an ability to, well, relate to the public. You have a sense for how your executive or spokesperson reacts to criticism, guidance or other forces that you're faced with in your rapport with him or her. Trust your instinct about what you can and cannot say, and how you should say it.

You should feel out every situation to determine what the mood is (and the appetite for critique) and weigh that against the significance of the particular media opportunity. Maybe it's a quick radio interview for a tiny market where everyone already knows and loves your exec or brand, so there's not the impetus to get everything 110% right as there would be with, say, an important financial announcement or crisis communications moment on live, national television. Decide where and when it makes sense to offer more feedback or training, or consider heavier hand-holding, and proceed accordingly.

Each media interview is a learning opportunity for you both. If every interview were mistake-free, your job would be obsolete. Look to each one as a chance to improve, in your vetting and prepping of your executive, as well as in his or her performance.

Don't be afraid to share the takeaways and bake them into your next round. Above all, don't forget to enjoy the important role you have as the bridge between the brand and the public, and as a trusted advisor to your company's leaders. ■

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Why, and How, to Play Offense as a Company Spokesperson

By T.J. Winick

As a local and network news reporter, I conducted thousands of interviews in nearly two decades. Yet it was only after I made the leap into strategic and crisis communications that I fully appreciated the complex dynamic at play.

As a reporter, it never occurred to me how vital media training could be for leaders in a public-facing organization. Having now counseled dozens of clients on myriad delicate and high-profile issues, I'm convinced that no responsible spokesperson should speak to a journalist without:

- A clearly articulated and vetted set of messages, and
- Feeling comfortable and confident in delivering those messages.

Public perception is that the interviewer is playing offense while the interviewee is on defense. That should never be the mindset of the individual being interviewed, however. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger quipped to the media, "What questions do you have for my answers today?"

Kissinger had a job to do: deliver the administration's talking points and, regardless of what was asked, he was going to do it. Similarly, the spokesperson has a job and should think of himself as playing offense by proactively pushing out key talking points, whether or not it's in the context of answering a reporter's question.

Having a firm grasp of messages is one way to remain on point during an interview. Still, there are techniques reporters utilize to try and get the answers they seek.

Setting Expectations

By sharing some of the methods I used as a reporter, I hope you can avoid missteps and take advantage of key opportunities to ensure your next interview is successful.

- **Expect that a reporter will use small talk to try and get you to let down your guard.** Nothing is wrong with a little polite chitchat; don't lose sight of the task at hand. The reporter is not your friend, and, especially during a crisis, you must maintain your guard. Expect anything you say to be quoted, even if the video camera or voice recorder isn't rolling.
- **Expect that a reporter will ask the same question in many different ways.** Recognize that if reporters don't get what they want the first time, they will ask the same question again, phrasing it differently. It's not incumbent upon you, the interviewee, to answer differently. After answering a second time, "I believe I've answered that question already" is a polite way of letting the reporter know it's time to move on.
- **Expect that a reporter will begin a question with "Some might say…"** Realize that when this occurs, you have every right to ask who "they" are. Do not accept the premise of a question if you believe it's based on faulty information or data. You are allowed to ask questions

How Reporters Think

- Reporters believe they are entitled to information. Dodging a reporter's inquiry is rarely a smart move. Would you rather call them back, for instance, or have them show up unannounced on your doorstep? When you call back, ask what they want to talk about and the angle they are taking so you can decide the best way to respond. Even if it's only a brief written statement you provide and not an interview, it will likely satisfy the reporter's desire for a response. It's also better than coverage citing a "no comment" or "did not respond to requests for comment" from your side.

- Reporters have limited time to absorb and digest information. Keep this in mind and plan for how you will get your most important points across at the top of the interview in succinct and potent sound bites. Remember: the interview may not last long, so don't save your best for last.

- Reporters often need education on your subject matter. With the dissolution of the beat system, most reporters are "general assignment." Take a few minutes before the interview to provide background, especially if it involves a complex subject.

- Reporters may go with flawed information from others just to present the other side. It's unfortunate, but in many cases, unavoidable. Ask the reporter who they are talking to and provide context or specific examples of where the other side has either mistakenly or intentionally misled others. This will help establish you as the more reliable source in the reporter's mind and will influence how they write the story.

if it helps you better understand exactly what is being asked. It's not considered combative or rude.

- **Expect that a reporter will invade your personal space.** Don't be intimidated. Whether sitting or standing, whether the crew is using a stick microphone or a wireless lavalier mic clipped on your clothing, anticipate that you will be in close proximity with the reporter. This can be jarring for many doing a first interview if it's not what they had envisioned. Some particularly aggressive reporters will sit as close to you as they can in an effort to appear in a power position. These days, you might be in a remote location and not see the reporter who's interviewing you.
- **Expect the reporter to use silence against you.** The more you talk, the more you're likely to say something you regret. Don't feel like you need to fill the silence in between finishing your answer and the next question just to be polite. This often is where major missteps can occur. You want to maintain discipline and avoid going off on a tangent. Embrace the silence.
- **Expect a negative question and plan how you would answer.** This sounds obvious, but just because you might be prepared for the question doesn't mean you'll answer it effectively. For instance, never repeat a negative question in your answer. If asked, "Isn't it true that your organization is guilty of mismanagement?" do not answer, "It isn't true that our organization is guilty of mismanagement." Instead, the answer should be something like, "Our organization has been managed properly at all times."
- **Expect a question you shouldn't answer, yet never utter "no comment."** There always is something you can say.

When the public hears "no comment," there is typically an assumption of guilt. That's why media training and having your key messages down cold are crucial. Anticipate tough questions and consult with legal counsel, if necessary, to determine what answers are acceptable and won't expose your organization to liability (if the issue is particularly volatile).

- **Expect that a reporter will end an interview with, "Is there anything else?"** When it happens, seize the opportunity, even if it's restating your key messages. Many view this question as a throwaway, something the reporter does as a courtesy. But it can be a real opportunity to deliver or reiterate key messages—and it could be the sound bite or quote that ends up being used in the story.

Good reporters do their homework. Spokespeople should, too. You are the subject-matter experts, after all, and should have the advantage.

It's not enough to talk strategy with an inner circle of trusted advisors. Being media-trained by professional communicators is a key component of ensuring that your organization's reputation remains intact, no matter the issue. ■

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The 5 Cs: A Path to Delivering Reputation-Protecting Messages in Crisis

By Jeff Leshay

"Shots fired, shots fired!" Those are the kinds of words we all dread, as they signal danger and, for public relations professionals, the need to move quickly into crisis communications mode. The effectiveness of our communications, especially in the early, chaotic moments of a crisis, depends heavily on the degree to which we are prepared to manage the unexpected.

To be sure, many companies invest significant time and resources in planning for crisis communications, developing detailed, step-by-step protocols to safeguard their reputations. Some wisely go as far as to regularly simulate crises, pulling designated crisis management teams together for practice.

Yet all too often, companies neglect to think through the specific words and phrases that would be most appropriate in various types of crisis situations. The outset of a crisis is not the time to begin such debate. That time has come and gone, and failing to be prepared with the right tone and tenor puts the reputation of your organization at risk.

As a television news correspondent, I often covered companies and communities facing crisis situations, from dangerous chemical leaks and consumer product recalls to natural disasters. At the time, I didn't think much about the quality of an organization's response from a reputation management perspective. However, I knew when I had a compelling sound bite that positioned a company credibly and favorably—or one that appeared disingenuous, lacked empathy and accountability, or otherwise put the organization in a poor light. The difference usually lies in the spokesperson's choice of words, and given today's rapid amplification of messages through a multitude of media channels, words themselves are more important than ever.

During my 20-plus years as a crisis communications consultant and media trainer, I've paid much closer attention as companies have failed to effectively manage issues or crises that could have, and should have, been anticipated—often because poor choices of words and phrases were made.

The 5 Cs Provide Framework

We all know just how difficult it can be when a crisis hits to develop from scratch key messages or talking points that will serve to protect our reputation.

Enter the 5 Cs: Certainty, Compassion, Concern, Collaboration and Control. These words provide a simple architectural framework I've found helpful in preparing clients to communicate succinctly and effectively in those early hours of a crisis, when time is of the essence and your organization's reputation is on the line.

Even with few details to share, the 5 Cs help us immediately address what journalists, and the public, want to know: what you know; how and when you knew it; and what you're doing about the crisis.

Of course, the media and your stakeholders also want to know what caused the par-

Putting the 5 Cs Into Play: Drafting an Initial Response to a Shooting Incident

The following is an example of how the 5 Cs can be used to create a template that can be quickly tailored in the event of an on-site shooting incident.

Because the 5 Cs are subjective and sometimes overlap terms, you'll likely find multiple opportunities within this framework to reaffirm your company's sentiments and demonstrate responsibility and leadership.

Certainty

Today at [approximate time of day], an unidentified man with a gun entered [name or type of property/operations] and began firing. We can confirm there have been injuries, but we do not yet know the number of people wounded, nor the extent of those wounds. At least [number of people] have been transported to [name(s) of local hospital(s)], and with the help of [local law enforcement authorities], we have evacuated/secured/closed [name or type of property/operations].

Compassion

Our hearts/thoughts/prayers go out to those impacted by this tragedy, and we'll be bringing in [counselors/others] to help [employees/customers/partners/students/faculty/communities] deal with any difficulties stemming from what they have experienced today.

Concern

Nothing is more important to [us/name of organization] than the safety and well-being of our [employees/customers/partners/students/faculty/communities]. As soon as we learned of the incident, we notified [law enforcement and medical emergency officials] and enacted the crisis protocol we have in place to contain the situation.

Collaboration

We are working closely with [authorities/emergency officials/investigators] on the scene to determine what happened. We're providing them with access to any/all resources they may need in their investigation.

Control

We're thankful to [local law enforcement and medical emergency authorities], who have helped us [evacuate/secure/close] [name or type of property/operations] pending [the completion of the investigation/any further announcements]. We will continue to closely monitor the situation and take whatever steps necessary in the future to ensure the safety of our [employees/customers/partners/students/faculty/communities].

ticular situation, but in many cases you won't have that answer yet and should refrain from speculation.

Let's break down the 5 Cs, the order of which may be adjusted depending on the specific crisis.

1. Certainty. This means sticking succinctly—right off the bat—to those few details of the crisis you know to be absolutely true. Your credibility is at stake, and truth is critical to garnering the trust of your audiences.

2. Compassion. Once you've laid out the details you know to be accurate, it's time for compassion—a few words conveying empathy for those who may have been hurt or otherwise negatively impacted by the circumstances. It's important for internal and external audiences to know your organization has a heart. To that point, you may choose to reiterate your empathy for those impacted by the crisis at the end of any remarks.

You may show compassion by expressing regret that the crisis has occurred, but you must be particularly careful with the words you choose. "We're so sorry that this tragedy has hurt so many people," for example, conveys empathy in a powerful way, but stops short of taking responsibility for whatever went wrong. Your lawyers will be particularly sensitive to such nuances.

3. Concern. You must make clear how seriously your organization views the crisis, and that there's nothing more important than the safety, security and well-being of your employees, customers and partners.

Your concern may be further evidenced by pointing to training and other steps the company has taken in the past to prepare to effectively manage such situations.

A strong safety record may provide additional proof points.

4. Collaboration. Explain how you're cooperating fully with authorities to determine what caused the crisis and how best to nip it in the bud and make sure it doesn't happen again. It's all about demonstrating accountability and responsibility, even if your organization is not to blame for the crisis.

Audiences will be much more forgiving of any wrongdoing if you can demonstrate you're taking all of the actions they, or others, would take to identify any problems and make any corrections necessary.

5. Control. It's equally important to describe, in some detail, how you're doing all in your power to secure or safeguard the environment. In addition, the promising and scheduling of periodic updates will serve to enhance the perception of a responsible and transparent organization in control during the aftermath of a crisis—being sure, of course, to refresh your content as more is learned about the crisis itself and the public reaction to it.

Benjamin Franklin once wrote, "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." If applied to modern-day crisis communications, Franklin's advice means going beyond the development of process and protocol to the identification of the specific words and phrases that would safeguard a company's reputation in a diverse range of crisis scenarios.

And by the way, when you've chosen the right words, you've paved the way for sincere and trustworthy verbal delivery likely to do those words justice as you protect, and perhaps even enhance, your organization's reputation. The right actions will speak even more loudly than the words themselves. ■

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Words and Phrases to Avoid in Crisis Communication Messages

By Melony Shemberger

Words have a magical power. No matter the crisis, word choice can affect how well, or how poorly, a crisis is resolved. How an audience responds to a crisis communication message is affected by the words used in a message.

Crisis communications, primarily in the early stages, must be understood quickly. When constructing crisis communication messages, the PR team must make word choice a priority. There is no room for error. Otherwise, a crisis communication strategy could have negative consequences, particularly if an audience does not understand the intended message.

Jargon-filled, fluffed-up and ambiguous words are barriers between an organization and its audience that could damage a message during a crisis. Rather, everyday words spoken or written in a conversational tone in an honest climate is key in any crisis message.

Euphemisms are a kind of rhetoric designed to make a point subtle. They are "empty calorie" words and have the potential to make matters worse.

Euphemisms to Avoid

Some words laced with industry or job-specific jargon can create sterile tones. They also have the potential to mask reality and shield the truth from the intended audience. Such words and phrases stand in for more specific terms that might feel blunt, insensitive or offensive to some readers. Euphemisms are a kind of rhetoric designed to make a point subtle. Characteristically, they are "empty calorie" words and have the potential to make matters worse.

For instance, some communicators might report that someone "passed away." Rather than using the euphemism "passed away," a spokesperson should simply say that a particular person "died" or X number of people "died." This word choice can bring a greater sense of humanity to a crisis event.

Here's another example: If a crisis message refers to a business closing, do not report in a news announcement that the closure would result in a "workforce reduction" or "position cutbacks." "Downsizing" also is heartless. Such jargon does not express empathy and care. Be honest, and report that a specific number of employees "unfortunately will lose their jobs." This conveys a more sincere message to the audience.

Another euphemism is "revenue enhancements." Spokespeople for government and bureaucratic agencies use this phrase to cover up its true meaning of "tax hikes" or "tax increases." Again, it's wise to avoid euphemisms.

"No Comment"

Two words—"No comment"—arguably make up the worst phrase to a journalist. In fact, "No comment" can act as a euphemism, making a spokesperson appear to be covering up something. Plus, when a spokesperson responds to a reporter's question with "No comment," the phrase is an invitation to the journalist to dig for information, perhaps bringing a crisis to a new level.

Instead of saying "No comment," a spokesperson should tell reporters what can be said publicly—information that has been confirmed or known at the time. A statement such as "Because of litigation, I am not able to disclose the information at this time. However, here is what I can report…" allows for more open and transparent communication with journalists, and thus, the audience.

In addition to jargon, spokespeople must avoid slang and acronyms in crisis communication, no matter how well-versed the media and audience might be with these words. PR teams should work with spokespeople to avoid words that are false, pretentious, racist, sexist or otherwise discriminatory.

Avoid Generalizations

The adage "Never say never" carries much truth. Certain words have the ability to trap spokespeople whenever journalists are alert to them, with "never" being at the top of that list. Two other adverbs, "always" and "definitely," also could result in literal and time-consuming implications. Such words polarize key crisis messages and lead to sweeping generalizations that are subject to debate.

To a reporter, these words invite a search for information. If a spokesman tells a reporter, "Our school district has never had a student suffer injuries in a bus accident," a journalist might file an open records request to prove otherwise. Journalists will search for cracks in quotations that contain these words and often will find information contrary to a spokesperson's comments.

In addition to "never," negative words such as "no" and "none" should be avoided. Every negative message should be countered with positive messages to overcome the tendency to place greater weight and credibility on negative messages.

Rather than using adverbs like "never," always" or "definitely" that have the potential to back spokespeople into a corner, aim for softer words that are vague and conditional. These adverbs include "usually," "typically," "generally" and "often." Verbs such as "tend to," "may," "might" and "could" also are safe to use in crisis communications. To avoid confusion or misinterpretation in a crisis, try to be precise and specific.

The Fewer the Numbers, the Better

Statistics can help clarify or emphasize a point. However, if numbers and other statistical data are the bulk of the information shared in a crisis communication message, an audience might tune out. Consequently, the intended audience could miss an important point that a spokesperson made somewhere in all those numbers.

If statistics are desired, they should be used sparingly. PR teams might consider having graphics or visuals complement the words to illustrate the message more effectively.

Last Words

Effective spokespeople practice their roles, even before a crisis happens. The best way for spokespeople to avoid using jargon, euphemisms, polarizing words and other "empty calorie" language is to practice—on paper and on camera. In doing so, the PR team can analyze the messages, conduct focus group interviews to determine whether messages were received accurately and work with the spokesperson to improve message and delivery. ■

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How to Turn a Rogue Spokesperson Into Your Greatest Asset

By Casey Delperdang

For many PR pros, media interviews can be both the most and the least rewarding aspect of their job. They represent the finish line of an often months-long messaging, pitching, training and coordination marathon—the moment at which our tireless efforts may either pay off or be rendered useless.

The harshest reality about media interviews is that we have limited control over their direction. Yes, you can, and should, try to shape the message. Ultimately, though, your message is in the hands of the journalist, and perhaps his or her editor.

What you can control is your spokesperson or the executive being interviewed, right?

The Nightmare

We were working on a big announcement. Our spokesperson was ideal—a gregarious new hire with extensive media experience. The preparation began. We optimized core messages, crafted a compelling pitch, conducted strategic outreach and lined up interviews with top targets. In advance of the big day, we reviewed key details about each opportunity and journalist with the spokesperson, including likely questions he'd receive.

Ten minutes before our first interview, the journalist cancelled. Our spokesperson had called her directly for a lengthy, unstaffed chat. Shortly after, the second journalist called with similar news.

The third interview occurred, but our spokesperson's performance quickly dispelled our delusions that resolving the mess of the two cancellations would be easy. Within minutes of the third interview, our spokesperson committed a series of media sins, including making off-color jokes.

The Fix

We made our best attempt at damage control, reaching out to each journalist to confirm the direction of the story, tying the angles to key messages (in place of some of the spokesperson's less-acceptable remarks) and prepared for the worst.

A week later, the stories began to trickle in. We were pleasantly surprised; they weren't bad. In fact, they were positive, largely on-message and infused with that ethereal quality we hadn't given our spokesperson enough credit for: personality.

The work we'd done with journalists to shape the direction of the stories paid off, but the fact that they'd liked our spokesperson made those stories home runs. Journalists tend to distrust spokesbots who deliver highly scripted interviews. Offer up a candid interview, however, and they'll likely relax enough to focus on the story.

Although our example had a happy ending, it could have gone off the rails. The next time we worked with this spokesperson, we considered what could be done to help this executive color within the lines while fostering, not suppressing, what the journalists had perceived as a compelling personality.

Here are tips that rose to the top:

■ **Speak Plainly**

When dealing with executive spokespeople, many PR pros, out of an abundance of sensitivity, make the mistake of failing to provide critical feedback. In addition, they may be so indirect that their messages never land.

While it may feel risky, balancing positive and constructive feedback through best practices is critical for iterative improvement.

For example: "You did a spectacular job building a rapport with the journalist! That said, please remember that you must set boundaries when using the term 'off-the-record.' We noticed you used this phrase when talking about X. Tell the journalist exactly what you mean when you use the term, and see if he/she agrees to honor your conditions. Journalists have no obligation to keep anything you say private. In fact, some may be more inclined to report on something perceived as taboo."

■ **Pitch and Pray No More**

As PR pros, we know every campaign is unique. We craft media plans for specific campaigns, identify the correct media targets and tailor pitches to individual journalists. For some reason, however, we often fail to take time to provide custom media training—especially when the spokesperson is perceived as a pro.

When possible, provide a refresher on media relations best practices. Use examples relevant to your news/announcement. Instead of simply reminding a spokesperson how to skirt tough questions, run through a list of what those questions might be and practice responding with key messages.

Update the spokesperson about off-limit topics, walking through the potential negative outcomes if they're addressed.

■ **Even Pros Have Coaches**

Respect a spokesperson's experience, but remind him/her gently that even professional athletes and artists receive constant coaching. Why should it be different in business?

■ **Adjust Tactics**

We often stress that we need to engage customers where they live online. Why do we fail to do that with spokespeople we're training?

Familiarize yourself with the spokesperson's patterns and adjust communications accordingly. For example, if a company's standard method for alerting spokespeople of interview details is via an Outlook calendar invite, but your spokesperson checks email sporadically, you're setting yourself up for a no-show situation.

A worst-case scenario is the one noted: a spokesperson-initiated workaround where the spokesperson called the journalist. Avoid upending the company's standard communications practices, but discuss ways to supplement them to make sure the spokesperson receives messages.

■ **It's Not Personal**

If you know your spokespeople have personal relationships with particular journalists, remind them why all communications related to the announcement must go through you; multiple points of contact are the quickest path to miscommunication.

■ **Prep the Journalist**

When working with a colorful spokesperson, one of the best things you can do to ensure a smooth interview is to let journalists know tactfully what to expect. If your spokesperson tends to go on tangents that may frustrate a time-crunched journalist (or, worse, divulge unwanted aspects of the announcement), consider ways you can shape the interview to help keep it on target.

Give the journalist as much background about the spokesperson as possible, or suggest sub-topics that you know would be of interest to the journalist and align well with the spokesperson's prepared messages.

One of the most critical components of a PR pro's job is to be an effective liaison between the media and a brand. Throwing an unpredictable spokesperson into the mix can be challenging, but PR pros savvy enough to embrace the spokesperson's unique attributes, adjust training and coordinate an approach may find that person not only to be manageable, but also a valuable ally in telling a compelling story with great results. ■

Casey Delperdang is formerly a PR manager at MMI Agency in Houston.

The Art of the Apology

By John Roderick

The public apology is dead. Long live the indignant counterattack. Thanks to President Donald Trump, public figures and corporate chieftains who find themselves on the receiving end of media scrutiny may no longer need to recite painfully scripted statements with stoic spouses standing by their sides. They just need to fight back.

As former **PRNEWS** editorial director Steve Goldstein wrote, "Standard practice [says]…when an organization or individual commits an act that outrages a community…[it must] …confess its sins, create a forum that enables the community to express itself freely and show a commitment to improvement by engaging in an activity that can lead to personal or organizational change. At the heart of the crisis management response to an outraged community is the apology itself."

The president has turned standard practice on its head. His routine method of reacting to crises is to denounce his accuser or those who have registered criticisms. Regardless of which political party you support, you have to admit it's worked, at least until the coronavirus made its way to U.S. shores.

Many have noted the coronavirus doesn't play politics. It strikes supporters of both parties and, as of this writing, has taken the lives of nearly 80,000 Americans. Those statistics are defeating Trump's offensive, critics argue.

Consistent History

An early example of Trump's reengineering of the public communications playbook occurred in May 2016. Accused of shortchanging a veterans' group on a charitable donation, Trump called a press conference. He then used the opportunity to unleash a 40-minute attack on the press.

In one deft move, Trump took the kind of accusation that had the potential to damage his credibility and turned it into a referendum on liberal bias in the media.

In this particular case, Trump avoided traditional media-training tactics communicators have relied on, including conciliatory gestures, speeches and well-placed op-eds.

The Best Defense

Instead he turned to what is known as the Strategic Offensive Principle. "The best defense is a good offense" is how it's best known.

As such, Trump turned the tables, training his sights on the press corps, saying, "The political press is among the most dishonest I've ever met." A reporter from ABC News was a "sleaze," Trump said; a CNN reporter was guilty of "abject incompetence."

Similar tactics were used in the first months of the pandemic. The president routinely whacked "fake news" reporters for asking "nasty" questions about testing and the administration's perceived slow response to the virus.

Even Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Phil Rucker of the *Washington Post* got hammered when he questioned the president's wisdom of mentioning an interest in injecting disinfectant and UV light to fight coronavirus.

"I'm the president and you're fake news…I know [Rucker]; I see what he writes. He's a total faker," the president responded.

Night after night, instead of discussing the issues surrounding coronavirus testing, the president went on offense, insisting the U.S. is "doing great at testing…we've done more tests than any country in the world." As of press time in early May 2020, barely 2 percent of the country had been tested.

The president's most recent offensive weapon is a series of attacks on China, which is assumed to be where coronavirus originated.

Right, wrong, true, false—it matters little because Trump's mastery of the sound bite and his disinterest in the mores of traditional PR translate into authenticity with his base. Say what you will about his style; if you ask Trump supporters what they like about him, you're almost guaranteed to hear a variation of, 'He speaks his mind' and 'He's shaking things up in Washington.'

Rewriting the Rules of PR

Whether you call it the Trump Effect or the end of the age of nuance, the legacy of the 2016 election may be a rewriting of the rules of effective communications.

This trend is not limited to politics. A gradual evolution away from the strictures of traditional standards has been unfolding in all forms of public communications.

The issue for communicators: Can Trump's style work for others? In fact, it works, but only for some.

Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf and the phony accounts scandal is a timeless example. While Stumpf admitted culpability eventually, his initial response was to blame 5,300 low-level staff. He also refused to admit his bank had a cultural or systemic problem. That offensive failed to convince lawmakers in Washington, D.C., who grilled Stumpf during two hearings in late August and early September 2016. Stumpf resigned in October 2016.

On the other hand, in 2019 N**ew England Patriots**' majority owner Robert Kraft was rumored to have visited a massage parlor. Immediately, the team denied the story. Then videotape of the incident appeared. Several weeks after that, Kraft issued a non-apology apology. He said he was sorry for his team and family, though he never apologized or admitted fault. As of this writing, in mid 2020, Kraft still owns the team.

It's important to ask 3 questions before launching your crisis counterattack.

1. Is My Brand Edgy Enough?

When it comes to tone, what's right for a multinational like **GE** may be different from what works for a younger, edgier brand.

Former **Vice Media** CEO Shane Smith said the following upon hiring former **Bloomberg** editor Josh Tyrangiel to lead his news empire: "He's a murderer…Vice News [is] the fastest growing news platform in the world…[But] How do we take on CNN…and the BBC?… Josh is that guy…an [expletive] angry young man who wants to shove it in their asses."

At the time, Vice Media was edgy, but it also had a mainstream presence. Still, for Vice, the approach was pitch-perfect.

2. Are We Being Authentic?

Authenticity, not to be confused with the truth, is the ability to put complete conviction behind your statements. It's everything in the current communications environment.

This is a fundamental change, but in a world where it's commonplace for public figures to show their anger and vent, overly scripted public statements and carefully worded détentes can come across as insincere.

An example is the scrape between **JPMorgan Chase** boss Jamie Dimon and Cameron Fine, president/CEO of the **Independent**

Community Bankers Association. When asked during a CNBC interview about critical comments Fine had made, Dimon didn't say he respectfully disagreed or appreciated the sentiment. He called Fine "a jerk."

That made headlines for one day and then disappeared. Known as a no-nonsense executive who sometimes has little patience for debate, Dimon arguably emerged stronger in the end, his authenticity very much intact.

3. How Thick Is Our Skin?

Live by the angry barb, die by it. An unfortunate side effect of the trend toward unfiltered public communications is that these types of comments never occur in a vacuum. They are not knockout punches that render opponents neutralized. Rather, they are opening volleys in a salvo that often reverberates for days in the echo chamber of 24-hour news channels and social media.

Just as it was in third grade, if you call someone a name, you'd better expect retaliation. You, your spokespeople and your brand will need to have the resolve to ride out the ensuing drama. ■

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How to Respond When the Media Runs Away With Your Crisis

By Mike Rosen

It starts like this: It's Sunday. It's early, very early. Your phone rings, and then dings with a text, demanding attention. You grab the phone. The voice you hear is your CEO who simply, and loudly, says "We're f**ked."

There's an article, she says, and you quickly go online as your CEO progresses into a swear-o-matic. On the homepage is an article with a headline that accuses your organization of several major atrocities. The article is loosely based on actual events. They quote many authoritative sources, with one major exception: you.

In my experience, media takes an interest for one of two main motivators:

1. Because a real crisis has emerged, and they are sincerely interested in informing their audience about what happened and how it impacts them.

2. Because a reporter has a very clear personal agenda with very little interest in allowing facts to get in the way of what they believe will be a great story (or lead to their next award).

While the second is much less common, I have worked with both extremes, from both sides of the microphone. I worked in news and documentaries prior to transitioning to the agency side.

There are crises that can be anticipated and those that cannot. A crisis, anticipated or not, usually emerges when there is a perceived or real threat against public safety, financial security or reputation. Frequently, all three are connected.

Guiding Principles

Many communications practitioners in times of crisis live by the adage of "Tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth."

There is value to this. Most situations evolve in real time. Approach each knowing that actions must, and will, change based on new information or a changing environment.

In business, as in nature, our instincts immediately deliver four initial options in crisis:

1. **Fight** (change what is causing it)
2. **Freeze** (do nothing and hope)
3. **Fluctuate** (change how it impacts you)
4. **Flight** (run)

Don't let these instincts drive your decision making. The way to the head is through the heart. Facts are critical, but 85% of opinion will be influenced by the emotional response you evoke.

Lead decisively even through the maze of changing information and pressure from many stakeholders. Above all else, do not compromise your values, ethics or empathy.

Before taking any action, I ask myself three questions.

1. **What is the worst that can happen?**
2. **What is the likelihood that it will?**
3. **What is the severity if it does?**

The answer to each has helped to inform many of the decisions I need to make when time and/or information is limited.

What First?

Immediately deploy tracking tools to monitor traditional and social media. Use metrics such as sources, story placements, impressions, share of voice, tonality and engagement. This will allow you to track how much traction the story is getting using data points for evaluating potential impacts on you.

Deconstruct the article and catalogue each element as fact, fiction or misrepresentation, as well as those that might need more information gathering to understand. For each, make notes using data that supports your classification. This process will allow you to identify potential strategies and tactics.

Once you have the facts aligned with each of these elements, it is a good time to brief the lawyers. There are always significant legal implications to what is said and who says it.

Engage Your Stakeholders

It is now time to widen the circle and engage your stakeholders. It can be useful to cluster them, which is helpful in determining what timing and tactics you will use for each.

The inner circle should include anyone with veto power.

Board members, senior leadership and those who must deploy decisions and influence others will make up the composition of the second tier.

The next tier includes those individuals who have been directly impacted by the crisis.

Your fourth tier are those stakeholders who are critical to the success of the organization. These might include regulators, shareholders or large donors.

The next tier is comprised of influencers such as the media, and any staff person who comes in direct contact with customers. I include major vendors in this group.

Tier six are your customers, as well as your potential customers.

This is not intended to diminish the importance of any single group but rather to reflect an order in which individuals are informed

STAKEHOLDER CLUSTER

and the level of information that is shared. It is not uncommon for the sharing of information to be done almost concurrently.

Call to Action

Now, it is time to do something. You could:

- Do nothing.
- Issue a statement but not do interviews.
- Be available for interviews.
- Utilize trusted third-party advocates.

There are times when to do nothing is your best option, and it is an option I frequently recommend. "Do nothing" does not mean you don't advance any Plan B or Plan C strategies. It means that currently there is nothing you could say that would alter public opinion, and the options available to you for messaging, though they might be true and compelling, would not alter the current perception. Or, you believe the story will not escalate or have significant impact if you don't add fuel to the fire.

Issuing a statement and denying the requests for interviews is valuable when you want to ensure that you maintain as much control as possible in delivering a message while avoiding the reporter using the opportunity to take the discussion in an entirely different direction. However, there is a lot that is also sacrificed. The audience does not get to see or hear the sincerity of the statement from a person of authority and the perception can be that you are avoiding accepting responsibility by avoiding the reporter.

If you make yourself available for interviews, I want to empathize this again: The way to the head is through the heart. Facts are critical. However, there are some estimates that indicate 85 percent of opinion will be influenced by the emotional response you evoke. Each detail you select, where you do the interview, how well you craft your statements and how well prepared and trained that spokesperson is will determine how well you will be perceived.

Checklist for Reputation Management During Crisis

The impact of a crisis on your brand can be significantly influenced by how you handle it. In many cases, it can have an even greater impact than the crisis itself. Think the **Houston Astros, Ruth's Chris Steak House** or **Theranos**.

Many decisions are also naively made under the false comfort that there is a reliable, slow-paced and predictable news cycle, or that **Twitter, Facebook** and **Instagram** don't factor into the equation.

As with all corporate communication, to be effective in times of crisis, practitioners must be agnostic to medium and time. We must use the channels that our audiences prefer, at the times they prefer to use them. Those who follow these simple, common-sense steps have fared significantly better than those who have not.

- ☐ Explain in real time what is happening.
- ☐ Describe how you are monitoring the specific situation.
- ☐ Describe how you are acquiring information to determine how the crisis happened.
- ☐ Share when and how you will provide updates to stakeholders.
- ☐ Once you know, describe what did happen.
- ☐ Apologize for it happening (If you did it, own it).
- ☐ Explain what you are doing to correct what happened.
- ☐ Explain what you are doing to prevent it from happening again.
- ☐ Share the extra steps you are taking above and beyond to correct and prevent it.

Finally, utilizing trusted third-party advocates who can speak on your behalf provides many benefits, including providing you the opportunity to leverage their brand equity and providing an implied endorsement; "I trust these people, and if they trust those peo-

ple, then they must be OK." Trusted advocates can be effective in several ways, such as flexing their social muscle, writing and placing op-eds and participating in the implementation of solutions.

Develop Your Position

In crisis, as with any other communication, you need to develop your position, messaging and tone. Specifically, in a crisis, there are many strategies that can be taken:

- Deny that it was you.
- Deny you had any control over preventing it from happening.
- Clarify or re-frame what happened.
- Attack the attacker for having a malicious agenda.
- Minimize the event.
- Focus on your good intentions.
- Create context that provides broader perspective for the incident.
- Position yourself as a victim.
- Take corrective actions and apologize.

I am not a fan of many of these strategies. I believe organizations should never compromise their values, ethics or empathy.

When working with some executives, I have taken them aside, looked them in the eye and told them, "When you walk into a room, you need to be the person that we need you to be." Or more simply, "You need to be the person that your dog thinks you are." This is most true in a crisis.

It takes good information to make good decisions. During a crisis, it can be easy to become distracted.

Information and conditions change quickly. Many people will demand information. Many people will be in your face weighing in with strong opinions and even stronger emotions. Utilize the elements of your existing crisis plan that allow you to quickly surround yourself with others who can take on specific responsibilities, thereby allowing you to acquire information and the ability to focus on the use of actionable intelligence. Then, as information and conditions do change, course-correct in real time.

Most practitioners have adjusted to the not-so-new normal of anyone being able to generate content, and deliver it around the clock across multiple platforms and channels, in real time. What becomes more complex and troubling is the escalation of fake news and alternative facts, as well as compromised journalistic integrity.

I have always believed that the media provides three valuable services: to tell me what is going on, tell me how to deal with what is going on or help me escape from what is going on. The first two provide you with an opportunity to help turn your crisis into an opportunity. If you do not have a crisis communication plan in place, create one. It will provide you with the foundation you need so that, very early on a Sunday morning, when your phone rings, your first response to hearing, "We're f**ked," will be, "I've got this." ■

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4

Media Relations

Looking Inward: Why Crisis PR Faces a Crisis

By Eric Dezenhall

Specializing in crisis management wasn't always considered as normal as it is today. It was considered a bit offbeat 30 years ago. Were there enough crises on which to base a business? Wouldn't clients in crisis just use their existing corporate PR firms? And what was crisis management anyway?

Three decades later, the specialty finds itself in, well, crisis. Technology and the rise of the digital age have changed everything, to the point where many crises can cause mass chaos for an organization.

Yet crisis managers seem to be everywhere, equipped with clever-sounding clichés ("Get ahead of the story"), management advice ("Fire the CEO!") and the hyper-evangelization of social media.

The crisis management discipline faces three significant challenges.

Challenge #1: Philosophy

This is a diagnostic error. There is the belief that reputational and business crises are communication problems rather than fundamental conflicts between adverse parties. A corporate PR chief asked me not to use the phrase "adversaries" when meeting with his CEO to describe hostile parties coming after them. "We don't have adversaries," the PR chief said. "We have stakeholders." Oh.

I explained I would be of no value if I deliberately misdiagnosed the situation. The CEO and general counsel liked my assessment; the PR chief was less enthusiastic.

These different reactions speak to the diagnostic error occurring. Crises do not necessarily arise because companies are miscommunicating to stakeholders. Often companies are under siege from calculated attacks where today's tools of communication inherently benefit those with complaints that are emotionally resonant.

The crisis management field belongs less in the PR business than it does in an amalgam of management consulting and journalism. As crisis professionals, we have an obligation to see where things are headed as opposed to stubbornly suggesting a company can tweet its way out of a product recall.

If crisis communications is to thrive…we must provide advice based on achievable results and the limits of communications in damage control.

Challenge #2: Technology

Brands under attack cannot wholly control social media despite advisors habitually telling them they can. Clients are starting to take notice of this.

Three years ago, any 20-something employee invoking social media was hailed as a genius. Top executives, terrified of looking obsolete, cheered on the charade. Today, these same businesspeople are asking digital proselytizers exactly what they hope social media will accomplish.

Challenge #3: Ethics

This challenge is anchored in consultants giving advice based on what can be billed and is occasionally based on fantasy. The crisis discipline is a hotbed of obscene over-promising, which is why my dictum to colleagues is: "We never want to be the first-hired crisis management firm."

The first firm usually gets fired either because it promised results it couldn't deliver or because firing is today's favorite crisis management device.

I was once on a call with a menagerie of PR consultants. The client was a loathed company with a problem as terrible as any I've seen. One consultant, predictably and with great salesmanship, promised to get a major media outlet to "tell your side of the story." The media outlet, of course, rejected the pitch, but the firm still billed a fortune.

Is it ethical to continue to peddle advice that is good for billings and may make a client feel better, but in the end either doesn't work or makes matters worse?

I have seen clients sold on countless programs that make gratuitous use of the word "transparency," even though they haven't the remotest intention of being transparent nor would being so help achieve business goals.

If I am so skeptical about the crisis management discipline, why do I still do it? I take the cases where I think I can help.

The crisis discipline has taken many forms over 30 years. It now stands at a crossroads. The rise of the digital world continues to pervade all forms of communications and business, intensifying the speed at which information travels and the destructive form it takes.

If crisis communications is to thrive in this new environment we must provide advice based on achievable results and the limits of communications in damage control. We must wave goodbye to the abstract communications clichés that serve little purpose other than filling time sheets. ■

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Build Relationships with Media Before—Not During—a Crisis

By Carreen Winters

The classic school of crisis management is rooted in the concept of goodwill banks, with the idea that a company builds goodwill over time, a currency that helps withstand a crisis. While much has changed in the best practices of crisis management, particularly in light of the 24/7 news cycle and social media platforms as both conversation starters and media sources, the concept of building a goodwill bank still holds. That concept includes building relationships with members of the media before you find yourself in a defensive situation.

Fundamentally, building a goodwill bank begins with building relationships. And you need to build those relationships in advance, outside of a news cycle. Just like any personal relationship, if it's one sided—wherein one party is always asking for something, but never giving anything in return—that media relationship won't be a healthy one.

Here are five ways you can build goodwill with the media every day, and fill that goodwill bank.

1. Diversify Relationships Beyond the PR Team

We trust people, not companies. It's important for reporters who cover your industry to know multiple people in your organization, beyond just the PR team and the CEO. Think about people you might want to call upon in a crisis—a chief scientific officer in a pharmaceutical company; a head of operations in a manufacturing organization, etc. Train these leaders and expose them to working with the media before they are holding down the fort in the face of a crisis, and let reporters get to know all of your key leaders as people, not just talking heads.

2. Don't Put All Your Eggs in One Beat Reporter's Basket

Think about media broadly and expand your relationship set. It isn't always your industry beat reporter that will cover a breaking news event, especially because many of today's news outlets are structured so that reporters are covering multiple beats. Issues impacting your company could be covered by a workplace reporter, a legal journalist, a marketing editor or even a general assignment reporter.

Building a goodwill bank begins with building relationships...Just like any personal relationships, if it's one sided...that media relationship won't be a healthy one.

One of the best ways to move beyond transactional media relations ("Will you cover my news?" "Can I have an interview?") is to be a resource to reporters for stories that are not about your company. Invest the time to help educate a new reporter covering your industry on key issues, regulatory processes, and "who's who" in the industry. Be available to talk to them about stories that don't feature your company, either on the record (when appropriate) or on background.

3. Deliver and Own Your Bad News

Bad news happens. Own up to it, and whenever possible, deliver your own bad news as quickly as practicable. When you have a track record of doing so, it will translate into credibility when a really big issue breaks. And even if you can't offer an on-the-record spokesperson, don't dodge the media. Be aware of optics. If you know you have a big issue breaking tomorrow, don't have lunch with a key reporter today if you can't share any "heads up" information.

4. There Is No Such Thing as a B-list in Media Relationships

Today's cub reporter is tomorrow's editor. Your trade publications and hometown news outlets can set the tone for national media coverage. Frequently you will see small-town journalists getting national exposure (and a big boost in career trajectory) while covering a major news event. If you haven't treated them as important before a crisis hits, they will remember that during the crisis. ■

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Quality of Communication Trumps Quantity During a Crisis

By Karina Frayter

Engaging with the media during a crisis usually makes companies anxious. After all, at no time is an organization more vulnerable than when a crisis strikes.

The first instinct of corporate leaders is often to avoid the media and lay low. To give in to this instinct, however, is to give up the opportunity to define and influence public perception of how you are handling the situation, and let the media do it for you. **Facebook**'s 2018 **Cambridge Analytica** scandal — when CEO Mark Zuckerberg waited five days to address the misuse of user data, spurring a viral #WheresZuck hashtag — is a prime example of how such an approach can backfire.

In good times and in bad, media can be a powerful megaphone for your message, and it is an important gateway to your stakeholders and the public. How frequently and in what form to engage with the media is a different matter and depends on the nature of a crisis and will accompany's specific circumstances.

Base Action on Intention

Whether you are trying to manage a major issue within a company, or the ramifications of a public health crisis like COVID-19, your earned media tactics should be grounded in your overall crisis management strategy.

Also critical for determining when and how to reach out to the media is to know your stakeholders, understand their concerns, what type of information they need to know and when and how to deliver it to them. The ultimate goal of communicating during a crisis is to maintain the trust of your stakeholders and to protect your brand's reputation.

Boeing, for instance, is still dealing with the fallout from its mishandling of the 737 MAX crisis. In its initial stages, that crisis was marked by minimal engagement with the media and defensive messaging, which ignored the public's immediate concerns around safety and created a perception that the company was more interested in profits than people.

Be Proactive

While no two crises are alike, several essential principles of crisis media relations apply universally:

- Avoid a communication vacuum. If you don't fill it, journalists will.
- Provide regular updates on incremental progress. It demonstrates that action is being taken and that you are in control of the situation. This also may make your crisis less exciting for reporters to follow.
- Listen and respond. Active listening helps identify questions that matter for your stakeholders but may be under the radar for your internal team. In addition, if journalists report incorrect information, you will be able to promptly set the record straight, which is especially critical during a crisis.

Is this Information Newsworthy?

Avoiding a communication vacuum and providing regular updates doesn't mean flooding every reporter on your media list with information.

Before reaching out to the media with an update, consider if it's really newsworthy, relevant to the reporter and merits a story at this stage of the news cycle.

A company's social media platforms and corporate website are valuable channels for communicating incremental updates to stakeholders and getting your message visible. Social media, in particular, is an effective alternative to earned media when your audience desires a steady stream of updates, but you don't have enough for a full-fledged pitch that will lead to news coverage.

With crises that concern public health and safety, the threshold for newsworthiness and the need for sensitivity at all stages of the process are particularly high. It's best to err on the side of caution when deciding to pitch media rather than risk being perceived as opportunistic or tone-deaf, and possibly creating a lasting negative brand impression. Many reporters have been shaming pitches on social media that appear to exploit the pandemic.

Moreover, it's important to be strategic in selecting which reporters and outlets to approach. They need to be a good fit for the message you want to deliver and the audience you're seeking to reach. Take into account the tone of their past coverage of your company.

Balance Under-Communication with Over-Communication

If your company is at the center of negative attention, spokespeople should proactively contact journalists only to provide critical information for public knowledge or to request corrections for factually inaccurate reporting.

News cycles are usually short, so seek to strike a balance between providing enough information to not be perceived as evasive, but don't provide too much information that's going to work against you by keeping the story in the headlines longer than necessary.

For incoming press requests, it's best to be responsive to reporters and respect their deadlines. Even if you are still assessing the situation, simply saying that is better than staying silent.

Overall, the company's availability to the media during a crisis is a sign of corporate openness and honesty, which is essential for protecting brand reputation and maintaining public trust.

Crisis Can Be an Opportunity

Crisis situations, if handled correctly, often create opportunities to elevate visibility or even reset reputation by demonstrating corporate purpose and values.

For example, just before the COVID-19 crisis, the pharmaceutical industry was the most poorly regarded industry by the American public, who had grown frustrated with high drug prices and the opioid problem. By proactively talking to the media about its response to the coronavirus, the industry seems to have found an opportunity to rehabilitate its image. Since the pandemic, pharma CEOs have been appearing in the media regularly to talk about their efforts to expedite manufacturing of vaccines and treatments.

To find opportunities, it's important to be creative, stay on top of the news cycle and focus on stories that allow your company to join the conversation in the most authentic and caring way.

In Summary

No two crises are alike. The prescription for engaging with the media will differ based on circumstances. But a proactive approach and a "we care" attitude will help determine the right cadence. When managing crises, quality of communication trumps quantity. ■

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Pitching the Media During a Crisis

By Annie Pace Scranton

Coronavirus. It's a word few of us knew before late 20019, all of us know now and one that everyone wants to forget. The modern world has never before dealt with a crisis of this magnitude.

In public relations, we are used to helping clients deal with their own set of crises. Of course, these all pale in comparison to the pandemic, but the script has flipped insofar as our clients now are not the ones in crisis—the planet is.

When a client has a "typical" crisis, we tend to think of something derogatory coming to light in the press. The publicist's job is to go on the defensive and to create a narrative that counteracts the negative press. Ideally, a publicist can help prevent a crisis from ever occurring, though that's not always possible.

Now publicists are being asked: How are we going to navigate this global crisis?

Navigating the Nuances of Our New Normal

The answer is different for each client. For those in the travel, luxury or events space, it's going to be a much tougher slog. With little-to-zero revenue coming into those clients, they likely can't afford to continue in the same manner with their publicity plans. Likely the best suggestions from a publicist is to have the founder or CEO act as a thought leader and weigh in on the current state of the particular industry in the news. This helps to keep the brand first and foremost in the public's eye, but can also position the brand well for a comeback when this ends.

There are, also, many companies, brands and people who are uniquely qualified to speak to the media right now and offer up extremely important advice and content. For those, navigating this crisis becomes much more nuanced.

First and foremost, when pitching in a crisis, make sure to act human...Don't jump right in with your pitch.

Pitching the media can be many things. It can be fun. It can get your creative juices flowing. It can also be really frustrating!

Now add a global pandemic on top of it, and just like everything else, pitching the media has taken on a "new normal" mentality.

First and foremost, when pitching in a crisis, make sure to act human. Journalists and producers are people, too, and we're all going through the same thing. Start off an email addressing the state of the world and ask how the recipient is doing. Don't jump right in with your pitch.

Along those lines, it's so important to not come across as profiteering in any way from this crisis. This is a delicate balance between getting your message out to the media but doing so in a thoughtful way.

If you have content, ideas, products or

insights that will truly be helpful to the public, lead with that. Being sincere in wanting to help their audience by providing sound insights is OK; journalists need content now more than ever, so they will likely welcome a pitch. They may not reply to it, but you can follow up once in a polite way to make sure they saw your email.

Also, make sure you always, *always* look into the reporter you're pitching before you pitch him or her. It sounds so simple, but you'd be surprised how many in our industry don't take the time to do this. Make sure that you are certain that their coverage areas haven't changed, and that you've read recent articles or watched recent clips from their shows. You need to ensure that what you're pitching is on-brand with the content they have been producing.

Also, remember that the angle you're pitching today may drastically change next month, next week or even by tomorrow. Being nimble and creative is always a top trait among publicists, but during a crisis, it's ever more important to realize the need for flexibility. If you're too rigid and not able to pivot quickly, you could miss out on some great opportunities.

Lastly, wait for the right time to pursue your outreach. Someone once said to me "nobody cares," and they probably don't if you're pitching them solely about your business in the hopes of profiting from a media placement. Journalists do, however, care about tangible, verified information as it pertains to the crisis at hand and how we can move forward.

Give the journalists what they need. If you do, you'll have the best chance possible of getting that coverage you're seeking. ■

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Rewriting the Rules: How to Get Real (and Be Effective) in a Crisis

By Jennifer Hellman

In today's **Twitter**-influenced world, where business leaders and elected officials—even POTUS—seem more accessible than ever, overly rehearsed messages from talking heads are not received well by the public. It's time to banish boilerplate crisis response phrases like "we take this very seriously" and deliver messages during a crisis that are truly meaningful to key audiences.

Communicating in times of crisis is difficult. I've worked with many talented PR professionals who are rock stars at proactive communications and media relations, but find themselves at a loss when a crisis hits. That's because crisis communications require a shift in thinking. Unless a company experiences crises on a regular basis, chances are its public relations team hasn't been in crisis mode for a while—if ever.

Combine that lack of experience with a world that is constantly changing, and one that is currently dealing with COVID-19. Having a top executive reading formal, prepared remarks on camera will not cut it.

Today we see leaders regularly delivering messages in real time on social media. They communicate in their own words and let us see who they are as human beings. We have become accustomed to this authenticity, and we expect it.

Checklist: Attributes of Authentic Spokespeople

- ☐ Respectful
- ☐ Thoughtful
- ☐ Candid
- ☐ Focused
- ☐ Relatable
- ☐ Polite
- ☐ Honest
- ☐ Attentive
- ☐ Credible
- ☐ Prepared
- ☐ Not overly rehearsed
- ☐ Knowledgeable
- ☐ Flexible
- ☐ Passionate

Creating an Authentic Message

When we hear that a restaurant "takes food preparation very seriously" in response to an E. coli outbreak or that a financial institution "takes these allegations very seriously" in response to an employee allegedly stealing customer information, we want to scream, "Of course you do!"

Our basic expectation is that financial institutions safeguard our personal information and that restaurants undergo and pass regular food safety inspections. So, when an organization doesn't meet our basic expectations, its leaders must explain why.

This is where the legal team usually steps in. If time permits, a lawyer should review all messaging in response to a crisis, but it must happen quickly, and it is the role of the public relations professional to filter out the legalese. However, the public expects a response from brands faster than ever before, and as hours and days go by, people can become unsettled.

Guidelines of Authentic Messaging

Do:

- ☐ Put people first
- ☐ Express emotion and empathy
- ☐ Express regret and appreciation, if appropriate
- ☐ Share facts

Don't:

- ☐ Use buzzwords or jargon
- ☐ Use marketing messages or boiler-plate language
- ☐ Speculate or overpromise

Monitoring social media is a good tactic in this case, as well as having an interim immediate messaging strategy.

There is a tendency to not communicate publicly until we have all of the answers. There is also the constant—and real—fear of lawsuits. But we can say something without having every answer or getting the organization into legal trouble. If we don't get the message out first, someone else will, and it is much more difficult to correct than to create.

Maybe the restaurant owners in the aforementioned example don't know the source of the E. coli, but they can empathize with their customers who got sick. Instead of a message about taking food preparation very seriously, the restaurant could instead say, "We are very sorry that some of our patrons who recently ate food from our restaurant are sick. We are doing everything we can to identify the source and will not reopen until we do. Our business depends on our customers having a positive experience. If the cause of their symptoms originated here, we will do everything we can to earn back their trust."

This statement hasn't admitted fault, but it has acknowledged that the restaurant owners are aware of the potential problem, they are addressing it and they apologize that some of their customers—whom they care about—have become ill.

Another example that executives commonly fear is the death of an employee while at work. If a death happens, they should say more than, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the family." It is a nice sentiment, but we've heard it so many times that this statement alone feels impersonal.

What if they added some information about the person? They don't have to immediately disclose a name, but they can say that the employee who lost his/her life was a good person who was appreciated. Try instead: "Today was a devastating day. We lost one of our own who showed up to work every day for the past seven years, ready to help, with a signature grin that many of his colleagues will always remember. Our hearts are heavy, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family."

Set Your Spokesperson Up for Success

Even the most genuine person can seem formal and uncomfortable in front of a camera. Being a good spokesperson takes training and practice. That doesn't mean that spokespeople have been trained to act. Instead, they are trained on the often-awkward art of giving a media interview, so that when it happens, they focus less on the mechanics and more on the message—positioning themselves to come across as authentic.

One of the most rewarding parts of my job as a communications professional is helping an organization in crisis. This is when good judgment and sound advice are most critical and most valued. If done well, organizations are judged more for their response than on the crisis itself. If that response puts people first and is delivered in an authentic and timely way, the organization and its reputation may emerge stronger than ever. ■

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The Crisis Paradox: Advocate or Apologize?

By: Joshua J. Smith

There's an important question every organization should ask at the start of a crisis: What do we tell our customers, audience and stakeholders?

But at the heart of that quest lies a deeper question: How should we tell them?

Depending on who you ask, there are anywhere from three to six stages of a crisis. Some say pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. Others break down the middle stage into several additional steps.

Some crisis plans are cyclical, some are flat and others are never-ending. If you look back at crisis communication case studies over the years, you'll notice a consistency: Every communication plan demonstrates an organization trying to come out of a crisis with as little damage as possible.

The goal is always the same: getting to "post-crisis" as soon as possible. In some instances, businesses come out better off than when they went into a crisis (such as the famous **Tylenol** crisis in1982). Others do their best, ending up with an "A" for effort, but an "F" in public trust (such as the 2016 fiasco with battery issues in the Samsung Galaxy Note7). In some instances, businesses never fully recover, such as when **United Airlines** violently removed a passenger from one of its planes and CEO Oscar Munoz's statements both to the press and to employees actually made the situation worse.

The Paradox

No two crises are ever the same. However, the best indices of public opinion in a crisis is often the first statement, quote or release made by the organization. It's a defining and critical piece of evidence that defines the tone for the organization. It's also the official position that an organization takes with regard to its audience, and it's a critical first step in crisis mitigation.

Crisis communication often means breaking, or responding to, bad news. There are many ways to communicate bad news, and the tone and verbiage go a long way toward framing audience opinion. Here, organizations have to make a choice: Do they want to take a firm position of advocacy or apology? This presents a communication paradox.

PR scholars have researched crisis communication for decades. Theories and models have emerged to help practitioners articulate and map out these situations such as through the Contingency Theory of Accommodations and the Contingency Continuum. With these, an organization must choose a position on a scale of advocacy to accommodation. Similarly, when crafting statements, quotes and releases to the public in a time of crisis, organizations must form a stance.

The Advocate

Consider this hypothetical situation: a community gym closes to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In an email to members, the business says:

> *"In an effort to flatten the curve, and reduce the rate of contamination among our members, we are closing all gym locations until further notice. We believe this is*

the right thing to do, and that it is our social responsibility to put the health and safety of our community first. We hope you will continue to stay active at home, and we are providing a list of at-home workouts to keep you moving during our closure. We thank you for your understanding, and will see you again when we reopen."

Here, the organization is clearly taking a stance of advocacy, starting with a goal "to flatten the curve, and reduce the rate of contamination." The note goes on to say, "we believe this is the right thing to do" and "it's our social responsibility." While the gym thanks its members for their understanding, they never apologize for any inconvenience or short notice. This organization comes off as an authority, standing by its decisions.

The Apologist

Now, consider the same organization, but in this instance it is taking an apologetic stance:

"As suggested by health officials, to reduce the rate of contamination among our members, we have decided to close all gym locations until further notice. Your health and safety are our top priority and ingrained in our mission. We know the gym is a haven for many people who use working out as a healthy means of dealing with stress, preventing illness and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. We hope you will continue to stay active at home, and we are providing a list of at-home workouts to keep you moving during our closure. We apologize for any inconvenience or added stress this may cause. We hope to see you back again when we reopen."

Here we see the organization putting the onus on another entity, and an ambiguous one at that. The gym is not claiming responsibility; rather it frames the statement by putting the members' best interest in the second line: "Your health and safety are our top priority and ingrained in our mission." Most notably, the note ends with an apology: "We apologize for any inconvenience or added stress this may cause," clearly taking an apologetic stance.

Let's go back and look at the examples cited at the beginning. In the example of the statement from **Samsung**, did the company take a stance of advocacy or apology?

"In response to recently reported cases of the new Galaxy Note7, we conducted a thorough investigation and found a battery cell issue. To date (as of September 1), there have been 35 cases that have been reported globally and we are currently conducting a thorough inspection with our suppliers to identify possible affected batteries in the market. However, because our customers' safety is an absolute priority at Samsung, we have stopped sales of the Galaxy Note7. For customers who already have Galaxy Note7 devices, we will voluntarily replace their current device with a new one over the coming weeks."

If you're thinking advocacy, you're right, especially when you compare it to the video statement put out later by COO Tim Baxter, which is clearly apologetic.

"At Samsung, our highest priority is our customers: their aspirations, their needs, their safety. And with battery cell defects in some of our Note7 phones, we did not meet the standard of excellence that you expect and deserve. For that, we apologize, especially to those of you that were personally affected by this…We take seriously our responsibility to address your concerns about safety, and we will work every day to earn back your trust through a number of unprecedented actions and with the extraordinary support of our car-

Ryan Ruggiero
@RyanRuggiero

INBOX: @united CEO sends letter to employees about United Express flight.

Dear Team,

Like you, I was upset to see and hear about what happened last night aboard United Express Flight 3411 headed from Chicago to Louisville. While the facts and circumstances are still evolving, especially with respect to why this customer defied Chicago Aviation Security Officers the way he did, to give you a clearer picture of what transpired, I've included below a recap from the preliminary reports filed by our employees.

As you will read, this situation was unfortunately compounded when one of the passengers we politely asked to deplane refused and it became necessary to contact Chicago Aviation Security Officers to help. Our employees followed established procedures for dealing with situations like this. While I deeply regret this situation arose, I also emphatically stand behind all of you, and I want

Oscar

Summary of Flight 3411

- On Sunday, April 9, after United Express Flight 3411 was fully boarded, United's gate agents were approached by crewmembers that were told they needed to board the flight.
- We sought volunteers and then followed our involuntary denial of boarding process (including offering up to $1,000 in compensation) and when we
- Our agents were left with no choice but to call Chicago Aviation Security Officers to assist in removing the customer from the flight. He repeatedly declined to leave.
- Chicago Aviation Security Officers were unable to gain his cooperation and physically removed him from the flight as he continued to resist - running back onto the aircraft in defiance of both our crew and security officials.

7:26 PM · Apr 10, 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

rier partners, suppliers and the ***United States Consumer Product Safety Commission****.*"

Read the comments of that video. People actually give them credit for taking responsibility. Some even say they feel sorry for the company having to deal with the crisis.

Let's look at the United Airlines statement to employees (see above). Advocacy or Apology? If you're saying advocacy again, you're right.

How about the message from **Starbucks** CEO Kevin Johnson, following racial targeting in one of the company's stores?

"I'm writing this evening to convey three things: First, to once again express our deepest apologies to the two men who were arrested with a goal of doing whatever we can to make things right. Second, to let you know of our plans to investigate the pertinent facts and make any necessary changes to our practices that would help prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. And third, to reassure you that Starbucks stands firmly against discrimination or racial profiling…"

Now this one is clearly an apology and outlines steps to remedy the situation. The follow-up video statement from the CEO reaffirms this stance. The only criticism in this situation is that it took them a few days to respond and by that point #BoycottStarbucks was trending on Twitter.

Which Approach is Best?

First, you can do both, advocacy and apology. But one will always outshine the other. Whenever you're crafting a narrative in a time of crisis, consider both sides of the paradox.

- Put your audience first. Meet them in the middle and tell them what they need to know.
- Advocating doesn't always mean being firm about your organization. In the hypothetical example above, the gym statement indicated, "We believe this is the right thing to do, and that it is our social responsibility to put the health and safety of our community first." This is an organization taking a stance of advocacy for the greater good of the community.
- Apologizing doesn't necessarily mean you're at fault. There's always something to apologize for in business.
- Write your statement, then reread it to see how much you favor one side over the other. Then ask yourself, is that the stance you want to take? How likely are you to change that stance? What does your audience need to know? How does your stance affect that? Should the legal department weigh in?
- Whether you advocate or apologize, ensure you are making promises you can follow up on, and remind your audience when you do. As you move through the crisis you'll have ample time to make good on promises and even make changes that result in positive outcomes. Starbucks, for example, held mandatory training for its employees, clearly following up on its promise.
- Mix in the good with the bad. Offer remedies, solutions and resources to help your audience through the crisis. Think beyond what you can offer and point your constituency to resources from other organizations. It shows you care about them more than your bottom line.
- If you're going to purely advocate, expect pushback. Some might see it as rude, insensitive or irresponsible. Brands that advocate have to be matured and ready to stand by their statements. Taking a stance of pure advocacy requires conviction and strong leadership. Make sure you have both.
- Apologize when you have solutions in place. You can't just say sorry. You have to say sorry, and we're working to fix it by taking a number of particular steps. ■

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Responding to Media Inquiries about Employees Testing Positive for COVID-19

By Aidan Ryan

[Editor's Note: The below is an edited version of guidance the law firm Goldberg Segalla sent to clients to handle coronavirus media inquiries.]

Employers of all types should prepare to occupy the local or national media spotlight in the event that an employee tests positive for COVID-19. This doesn't have to be damaging. While having an employee fall ill is of grave concern, it offers employers a chance to convey calm and control. In addition, the company can communicate key messages about response measures. It is a moment to bolster credibility. Employers confronted with media inquiries should keep the following in mind:

Ensure your organization has a COVID-19 response team

All companies and organizations should create an internal team dedicated to monitoring news about COVID-19. In addition, the team typically makes decisions to ensure workplace safety as well as business continuity. It should have a PR professional attached to it as it communicates updates, both internally and externally.

In the event of a media inquiry or the need to make a public statement, this responsibility should fall to a person with experience in issues management and strategic messaging. Since timeliness is critical, this person should be familiar with the organization's COVID-19 response and decision-making.

Be transparent about what you know and don't, and how you're controlling the situation

Dispense with the windup. Whether releasing a written statement or communicating verbally with reporters, avoid sharing generic information about the virus. Similarly, while there will be a place to discuss your organization's response measures, this does not belong in the front-end of a statement.

Instead, plainly and directly confirm the case of infection. Explain how and when this knowledge reached your organization's leadership. After that, lay out safety measures that the organization took in response to this case.

Anticipate and prepare answers for questions that reporters likely will ask

While it is understandable and acceptable for an organization to respond "We don't know" to certain media questions, this should be due to legitimately missing or unverified information—not a spokesperson's poor preparation for the question.

If a spokesperson claims that the organization doesn't know something, and later reporting reveals that the organization had knowledge about the subject, media attention will shift from the facts of the case to a perceived cover-up—even if a cover-up was never the organization's intention.

Communicate the organization's COVID-19 response measures

Once you have answered the most pressing questions about the employee, active risks and case-specific response measures, communicate key messages about your organization's overall COVID-19 response measures.

You do not want coverage about a confirmed workplace illness to portray your organization as unprepared or worse, knocked back on its heels. Instead, frame the case as a statistically probable eventuality that your leadership identified early and prepared to mitigate. Explain workplace safety and business continuity measures you have taken. This messaging may be nearly identical to communications you have released internally and to clients, patrons or other stakeholders.

A media inquiry regarding a case of COVID-19 within your organization does not call for panic, nor does it call for no comment. Adequate preparation can ensure that you satisfy the public's need for information, protect your employees and stakeholders, avoid legal risks and promote your credibility and organizational values.

Please consult with your legal counsel and, if necessary, a trained crisis communicator to discuss your organization's COVID-19 media and crisis PR plans. ■

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MLB Learns to Get in Front of the Story During Astros' Cheating Scandal

By Nicole Schuman and Seth Arenstein

In January 2020, **Major League Baseball** found itself entangled in the details of a cheating scandal. Unlike the steroids era of the 1990s, where Congress held **MLB** accountable, we now find the sport policing itself, taking its teams to task.

In Nov. 2019, *The Athletic* reported a former player's account of the Houston Astros using a video camera during the 2017 season. The player, Mike Fiers, said the camera recorded and helped steal other teams' signs—manual signals between players on the field to strategize actionable plays.

In response to an internal investigation, MLB imposed year-long suspensions of the Astros' manager and general manager. The Astros' owner took one more step, firing both men in an attempt to regain trust.

On first glance, MLB's quick action seemed like the right thing to do, PR-wise, to avoid a larger crisis. It's right to suspend those who break rules. But did the punishment make a real impact on the game's relationships with fans, or even tell them the full story? Leaving questions unanswered rarely makes for good PR, and the MLB imposing a gag rule for employees did not help.

MLB's investigation exonerated Jim Crane, the Astros' majority owner/chairman. Many journalists questioned this. "Crane won...he got his championship. He keeps his team. His fine is (minimal). The sport lost, but Crane won," Jeff Passan wrote for ESPN.com, quoting an ownership source. The punishment, the source added, seemed designed to protect Crane and his investment.

Complexities

Several factors complicated this issue. The Astros won the World Series in 2017. MLB's investigation showed the team cheated during the Series. As such, the report tainted the championship. In addition, the Dodgers, the opposing team in the Series, expressed anger about this.

Alex Cora, who at the start of 2020 managed the Boston Red Sox, was a coach with the Astros in 2017. Cora became a central figure of this incident and a second MLB cheating investigation. That investigation covered the 2018 season, when the Red Sox, under Cora, won the World Series. Calls multiplied for Boston to fire Cora.

Boston Globe sports writer Dan Shaughnessy sounded like a PR pro in his column, urging the Sox to get in front of the story. For the sake of the team's reputation and "dignity," he said, oust Cora now, before MLB finishes its investigation of the Sox.

A day later, the Red Sox and Cora announced they were "mutually parting ways."

Accountability Leads to Trust

Arthur Solomon, a former sports journalist, also worked as an SVP/senior counselor at **Burson-Marsteller**. Solomon played key roles in managing some of the most significant national and international sports marketing and non-sports programs.

Having worked with CEOs and international leaders, Solomon said team owners are akin to executives running businesses.

"Their first responsibility is to make money," he said. As such, they attempt to cover up scandals. Leaks to the media or government revelations are the only ways damaging things such as scandals go public, he added.

Solomon believed the MLB kept too much in-house, risking reputation.

"I think the commissioner's action didn't seem like a complete solution to the problem," he said. "When any business investigates itself, there always is a suspicion of the entire truth not being told. Baseball investigated itself—its own staff." What's happened reminded Solomon of similar PR crises where too many people were spared. "Top management must be fingered," he said.

Protecting Players

Another part of the scandal included Carlos Beltrán, a member of the 2017 Astros. He was the sole player mentioned in MLB's nine-page report. It was a short mention. Beltrán "discussed that the team could improve on decoding opposing teams' signs and communicating signs to the batter," it said. The MLB did not discipline Beltrán, now retired.

The report, though, noted, "It is difficult to [discipline players] because virtually all of the Astros' players had some involvement or knowledge of the scheme." The report acknowledged it's impossible to know the degree to which each player was involved. In addition, many of the players no longer play for the Astros.

A Hall of Fame-caliber player, Beltrán's situation was sticky. In November 2019, he became manager of the New York Mets. During a press conference announcing his hiring, the media asked Beltrán about the Astros' cheating scandal. The first-time manager made a PR error. He denied knowledge of cheating. The Mets have since parted ways with Beltrán.

PR Takeaways

A PR takeaway here, of course, is to never lie to the press. Similarly, avoid saying anything to the media that you can't prove.

Though PR law usually argues against the "no comment" response, Beltrán would have been better off using it. He'd have been justified, too. The commissioner's investigation was ongoing at the time he responded. "I can't comment about an ongoing investigation" would have been a much better response than lying, which is what Beltrán did.

The Mets, whose ownership prides itself on following rules, truly faced a dilemma. Should the club jettison Beltrán, or allow a tainted individual to lead it? The Mets' antiquated PR approach was to say almost nothing to the press, unless absolutely necessary. In the end, booting the coach, who was found guilty of cheating, was the Mets' ultimate strategy.

Leaving questions unanswered rarely makes for good PR.

Surviving the Scandal

Just moments after releasing its internal investigation, the MLB placed a gag order on teams commenting on the scandal. In response, the Dodgers issued a non-statement statement, which appeared across various social media platforms.

The cheating scandal seemed to be reverberating through baseball. Not a surprise considering teams were not allowed to comment. So what were teams like the Mets, Dodgers and Red Sox, forced into the crosshairs, to do? Solomon provided several best practices.

"[First], I would re-investigate the entire thing with outside investigators." In addition, he'd release all evidence and transcripts to media that illustrated MLB's decision. "[Next], I would hold a lengthy press conference with the commissioner and team owners. No holds barred."

In other words, the truth just may have set Major League Baseball free. ■

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Finding Your Brand Voice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Rick Lyke and Beth Egan

As COVID-19 continues to spread and its economic impact grows, entire industries—hospitality, auto manufacturing, sports and entertainment venues—have been brought to a standstill, while others—from hygiene products and work-from-home tools to e-commerce and delivery services—are being stretched thin by demand. Some businesses in hard-hit industries are finding relevance by pivoting to fill a need created by the pandemic. Automakers and tech companies are producing ventilators. Distilleries are producing hand sanitizer. Hospitality groups are providing food and beds to first responders and raising funds for employee relief.

Whether your brand experiences a surge or decline, as a marketer your challenge is to stay actively engaged with customers and to do so with the right messaging tone.

Striking the Right Tone

History shows that brands that continue to communicate during a crisis recover more quickly and robustly when it's over, while going silent risks long-term damage. The trick is what to say, and how to say it.

Customers are paying attention to how brands are behaving during the pandemic and belief-driven buyers are calling out on social media those perceived to be exploiting the situation. It's critical to strike the right tone now so that your brand emerges stronger when the crisis ends.

Some good news: Recent research from the **4A's** and **GlobalWebIndex** confirms that consumers still want to hear from brands. More than half report they want to know about brands taking action, such as donating goods and services, 40% are interested in how brands are responding to the pandemic and 43% are reassured to hear from the brands they know and trust.

The Message

During a crisis, people's mindsets matter more than their wants and needs. Messaging needs to set the right tone and communicate something meaningful in relation to the situation.

Drawing from historic research and literature on past pandemics and recessions, and examining what we have already learned from the coronavirus threat, **Syracuse University** associate professor Beth Egan partnered with the **Mower Insight Group** to develop best practices for marketers. Compiled in a white paper titled *How Brands Should Respond During the COVID-19 Crisis*, these best practices address three critical areas of concern: investing for future brand health, finding a brand voice that resonates now and applying spend according to shifting media habits.

Post 9/11 research from **Hofstra** and **Pace Universit**y revealed that consumers reacted positively to three out of four messaging approaches in the wake of the tragedy: image ads that showed an organization's human

Best Practices to Help Organizations Determine How Best to Communicate Now:

- ☐ **Engage with customers**. Focus on relationship building, gathering feedback and listening. Customers will remember and reward brands that exude compassion and caring during difficult times.
- ☐ **Be social**. Consumers mandated to stay home are spending more time on social platforms. This gives brands an opportunity to reach more people than in the past. Serving up interesting content with appropriate tonality means your message will reach more of your audience. Deploying humanizing messages and operational updates on a regular cadence is reassuring to key audiences. Targeted ads and promoted posts are also likely to get more engagement now.
- ☐ **Evaluate your brand position**. What made perfect sense before COVID-19 might appear out of touch now. To resonate with your customers during the crisis requires understanding how they view the world. Consider redirecting budget dollars for canceled trade shows and events to market research.
- ☐ **Challenge your assumptions**. At your next strategy or planning meeting, challenge the "we've always done it that way" point of view and cause people to take a fresh look at the obvious. This may surface new, more effective ways of marketing in a post-COVID-19 world.
- ☐ **Focus down the road**. Look three to six months ahead at projects on the horizon and get started now. When business returns to some semblance of normal you may find yourself overwhelmed by competing deadlines.
- ☐ **Measure what counts**. What type of metrics do you have in place for your marketing campaigns? Are you measuring activity or accomplishments? Focus on your company's KPIs. You may want to consider building an entirely new "recovery marketing plan" that considers the new realities your business will face and steps necessary for success.
- ☐ **Hold virtual events**. If your trade show schedule has been sidelined and your sales meetings canceled, consider hosting an online event. Creating the right content and user experience can open doors while the world is in shutdown mode.
- ☐ **Evaluate your website with a critical eye**. Use this time to strengthen your online presence across channels.
- ☐ **Review media and sponsorship plans**. As companies cancel media buys and pull out of sponsorships, it's a buyer's market right now. This presents opportunities that did not exist a few weeks ago.
- ☐ **Create compelling content**. Tap the subject matter experts in your organization who have time now to help create content.
- ☐ **Look for the new opportunities**. Seismic shifts are taking place in how and where people work, how they buy services and what they value. Analyze what your competitors have in the pipeline and exploit gaps in the category to create a brand extension, new product or business that meets consumers' new priorities.

face; ads designed to encourage political or community participation; and patriotic ads. Only commercial ads—those that exploited the crisis for commercial gain—sparked an overwhelmingly negative reaction. ■

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Communication Proves Critical to Orange County Corrections Pandemic Response

By Tracy Zampaglione

Running a jail is a complex operation. Factor in a pandemic and the challenges multiply. Unlike other businesses and organizations, a jail can't just close. While it's true that many administrative staff can work from home, the reality is that correctional officers—the ones on the frontlines—don't have that option.

One of the primary tools in the **Orange County Corrections** coronavirus vault was communication. The department took a proactive and fully transparent strategy in communicating with employees, inmates and the media amidst the pandemic.

Initial Immediate Response

At the onset, the chief of corrections began issuing regular department-wide emails several times a week when there was new information to share. Each new message used a standard subject line: COVID-19 Update # (whatever the number was).

In conjunction, the chief's office developed recognizable graphics that were included on each update. These graphics signaled to employees the importance of the information being conveyed. Having this open flow of communication on a frequent basis went a long way in keeping anxiety levels in check.

One update contained information about disease prevention best practices and the **Centers for Disease Control** (CDC) guidelines. Another provided new figures for the number of officers who tested positive and

The Orange County Corrections team received regular communication from the chief of corrections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

who were self-quarantining. Internal communication was a vital part of the crisis management plan. Again, we wanted to have full transparency every step of the way.

A Physical Presence

After three correctional officers tested positive for the coronavirus, there was panic on the jail compound. The chief of corrections took a boots-on-the-ground approach and personally walked the 76-acre compound—quelling rumors and putting minds at ease.

The chief also assembled a crisis-response team with key players from security, operations and medical staff serving as its core. Throughout the crisis, members of this pandemic team participated in standing daily leadership calls every afternoon.

Amid the pandemic, the chief was in constant contact with the mayor's office, providing information and updates for the thrice-weekly late afternoon press conferences held every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The press briefings aired live on Orange TV, the county's government access TV channel. They were also archived on a dedicated COVID-19 content area of the county's website.

Opportunities to Share

There were bright spots to the crisis. With a county-wide curfew in place from 11 p.m. until 5 a.m., there were far fewer jail bookings and the population declined. The population was at its lowest in almost 20 years. This was a positive message shared with the media.

It was fully anticipated that the decision to close the Video Visitation Center would not be a popular one. Still, it needed to happen to ensure public safety and to comply with guidelines from the CDC.

The department used media channels to get ahead of a potential public outcry, communicating that we understood the importance of contact and support from loved ones while incarcerated, but we could not have a large number of visitors gathering in public. And our numbers can be large. Last year, more than 58,000 visits were completed at Video Visitation. Sunday is the busiest day, and it's not uncommon for some 250 to 300 visits on average to occur. That clearly wouldn't work during COVID-19.

To offset the blow, we negotiated with our phone service provider, and the company agreed to provide two free five-minute phone calls to all inmates each week during the pandemic. Then we gave a shout-out to the phone provider in our newsletter and on social media.

With public access to the jail severely limited during the threat of the deadly disease, volunteers could no longer visit to provide inmate programming. This prompted a group of inmates in the faith-based dorm to start a self-study daily bible group. This inspired a great potential news story: keeping the faith from behind the walls. We pitched it to Central Florida's largest daily newspaper and provided high-resolution photos of the inmates meeting for bible study.

While administrative staff worked remotely, correctional officers had to continue to come to work.

In addition to the proactive media outreach the department was doing, we were also fielding calls from everyone from the local media to national news bureaus. They wanted to know numbers and measures taken to protect the vulnerable inmate population. The public information office responded with speed and accuracy.

What Lies Ahead?

Surviving a crisis like COVID-19 is difficult and trying. Being prepared and proactive makes the process more manageable, and paves the way for a successful recovery.

In an instant, the world was forever changed and the department—like other organizations everywhere—found itself in uncharted waters. After the public health threat has abated, communication will continue to be essential as businesses and agencies navigate toward some sense of pre-coronavirus normalcy. Only time will tell if that's even a realistic expectation. ■

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5

Social Media

3 Tiers of a Social Media Crisis (and How to Manage Each One of Them)

By Katie Goodale

It is no secret that the digital landscape has forced public relations practitioners to completely re-engineer their crisis communications plans and policies. We once had time to collect information, craft statements and communicate with constituents before the next news cycle.

In today's always-on world, if you are not communicating in real time you're already too late. Reporting now happens in the moment, via multiple online channels, by anyone with an online audience. Established media contacts are no longer information gatekeepers. Instead, the world is talking about your brand whether you are part of the conversation or not.

In this real-time news landscape, it is easy to assume that crisis communications in social media must be reactionary. Brands often focus their resources on watching for negative comments and stories across their social platforms, with the measure of success being how quickly they can post a canned response to a complaint or potentially harmful story. While speed is key, taking this one-size-fits-all approach to issues management in social media can fan the flames of major issues and turn minor hiccups into reputation killers.

To break free of one-track crisis management on social media, savvy communicators are looking at social crisis events in terms of tiers. By evaluating your brand's vulnerabilities and bucketing in one of three zones, isolated incidents are extinguished before gaining traction and widespread issues are mitigated more quickly.

Thinking in Tiers

Not all crisis events are created equal—so the content and goal of your response to an issue should vary as well. By tiering possible social media crises before an issue is ever encountered, your messaging and protocol will match the severity and impact of a crisis.

In the moment of a social media crisis, this exercise helps social media managers take a step back and evaluate the best course of action without the burden of emotion and chaos clouding their judgment.

Tier 1: Multi-Channel

- **What it is:** A multi-channel crisis event is an unexpected, at-fault situation with a high level of publicity across channels. While these events will likely travel beyond the digital world and into traditional media outlets, social is a key place where updates and messaging should be shared and updated frequently. Social platforms also provide a window to changes in public sentiment related to a crisis event, giving social media managers the ability to evaluate if key messages and statements are resonating with their target markets.
- **What it looks like:** Multi-channel crisis events on social media include posts and conversations related to significant negative brand events. These include allegations of workplace discrimination, impropriety or violence, product integrity issues and recalls, natural disasters or security breaches.

- **How to prepare:** Multi-channel crisis events have the potential to cause significant damage to your brand's reputation and bottom line, so creating a robust issues management plan with protocols for online and offline channels is well worth the effort. Be careful not to file the plan away once complete. This evolving document should be evaluated and updated quarterly and used to run real-time drills for the key internal players on your team.

By tiering possible social media crises before an issue is ever encountered, your messaging and protocol will match the severity and impact of a crisis.

- **How to manage:** If a multi-channel event has reached your social channels, the response must be authentic, fast and accurate. Statements and key messages should be posted within the channels where the crisis is occurring—not just in a designated area of your website. Ensure that all social channels are consistently monitored and that fan posts and your responses are logged, especially in the early hours and days of the crisis event. Because a multi-channel crisis will likely garner a high volume of comments, ensure that all responses are on message but varied—your authenticity will take a hit if your community sees the same three canned statements used for all fan and follower responses.

Tier 2: Emerging

- **What it is:** In an emerging crisis event, your social community is bringing you an issue on those platforms first—and it's up to you to extinguish it before it gains traction and becomes a multi-channel event. An emerging crisis is small-scale and can likely be managed within your social channels if spotted early and handled quickly. Conversations on social and posts to your pages are typically how these crisis events come to light, versus an inquiry from an external source. While emerging crises could escalate if they attract enough eyeballs, direct communication typically defuses them before they cause widespread damage.
- **What it looks like:** Customer complaints, service issues and changes to a brand's offerings with the potential to cause confusion or anger are considered emerging crisis events.
- **How to prepare:** Because service issues make up a large number of emerging crisis events, evaluate your organization's customer pain points and develop protocol and messaging for specific situations. Monitoring social channels is key for spotting and addressing emerging events before they pick up steam.
- **How to manage:** A common brand mistake is to treat emerging events like widespread crises. While it may feel like 30 complaints about a faulty product requires a community-wide post with an apologetic statement, chances are that mass communication around emerging issues will draw more attention than one-to-one responses. Immediate and personal issues resolution is the best way to prevent an emerging crisis from becoming a multi-channel situation that takes the narrative out of your hands.

Tier 3: Industry-Adjacent

- **What it is:** An industry-adjacent crisis occurs when a competitor, vendor or business partner is embroiled in a social media crisis. While it may not appear to be a problem for your brand, a negative halo effect could put your company in the (unwanted) spotlight.

- **What it looks like:** Any significant crisis event that does not begin within your organization, but could be connected to you via your business or industry relationships. For example, one of your vendors could take a political stance in a tweet, leading to anger and questions from your own fans and followers.
- **How to prepare:** Industry-adjacent crisis events are dangerous blind spots for brands. Look outside your own organizational vulnerabilities to identify potential land mines in your business relationships. Form alliances with key associations and industry groups to speed communication if an event does occur.
- **How to manage:** As soon as an industry-adjacent crisis begins, start drafting key messages and posts that distance your organization from the issue in the event you are approached for comment. Highlight corporate initiatives, protocols and proof points that will instill confidence in your brand. Don't forget to evaluate planned social posts in light of the industry crisis.

Evaluating Your Social Media Crises

Now that you're familiar with the three tiers of social media crises, it's time to apply them to your own brand. The first step is to truly understand your audience and the political, economic and cultural landscape that surrounds them. You can't prepare messaging for every issue your brand may encounter, so this examination of your customer's mindset will focus attention on the crisis events with the potential for the most significant impact.

By evaluating your target audience beyond basic demographics and intersecting those findings with your brand's role in their lives, you can prioritize what crisis events could have the most impact on your business and your customers' relationship with you. For example, a financial institution entrusted with personal customer data will tier crisis events very differently than a baby food producer responsible for infant safety and nutrition.

Get started by brainstorming a list of potential crisis events that could impact your brand on your social platforms. Once your list is complete, assign them to one of the three tiers, updating the list quarterly based on activity on your social channels and shifts in consumer mindset.

Creating a Crisis Prevention Protocol

With a prioritized list of crisis events in each tier, you can begin to create messaging and response protocol for each. While no crisis can be fully planned for, thinking through how you'd respond to issues is much more effective when cooler heads prevail.

Prepared posts and messages aren't effective when they aren't deployed at the right time and place, so invest time in training and running crisis drills for your social media team. Helping them understand the nuances of each tier can keep major events from gaining steam and seemingly harmless complaints from blowing up. These are the people on the front lines of a crisis, so ensure that they have the right listening tools and support to maintain a 360-degree view of your brand.

Finally, remember that the issues within your brand's tiers are fluid. Plan to consistently update your list of crisis events based on your customers' perspectives on cultural and political events. Likewise, an industry-adjacent crisis could shift the mindset of your target audience, requiring new ways of approaching emerging and critical events for your organization.

By throwing out a one-size-fits-all approach to crisis management on social media, you can protect your brand and keep the focus of your digital community on your content. ■

Katie Goodale is associate director, PR & social media at Hiebing. kgoodale@hiebing.com.

A Social Shift in Response to COVID-19

By Audrey Miller

It's odd to say that you feel lucky during a crisis, but that's exactly how our social media team felt during the COVID-19 pandemic. I felt unironically #blessed to work at an organization that has access to some of the world's finest doctors and medical professionals.

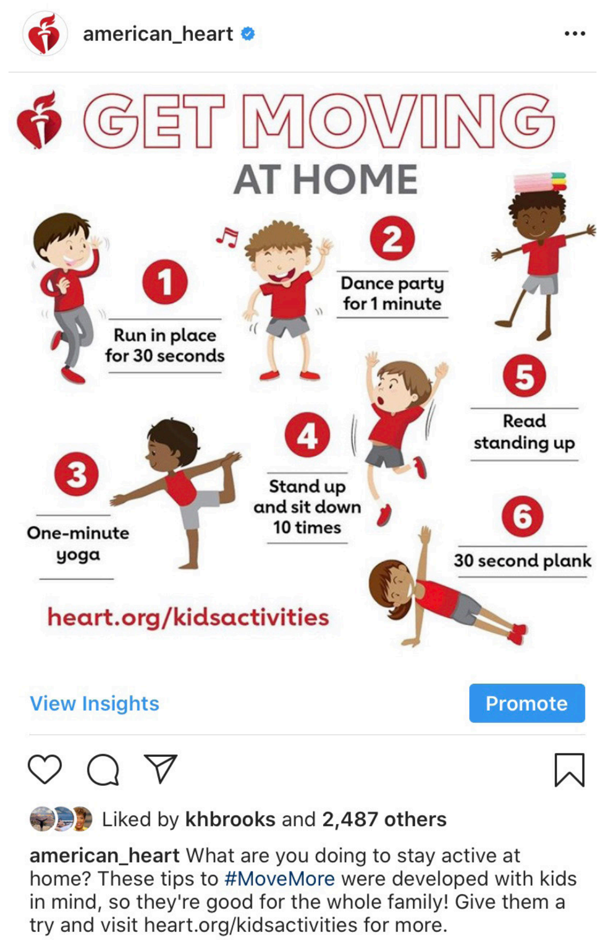
When our staff had personal or professional questions about the virus, the medical leadership at the **American Heart Association** were not only available to share the latest facts, but they could share also perspective and comfort that eased our collective anxieties. That sense of feeling informed, but not overwhelmed, was the same feeling we wanted to give to our social audience.

Keeping it Casual

During the pandemic, we shifted our focus to feature a mix of both breaking COVID-19 science and fun messaging that encouraged our community to (virtually) gather together.

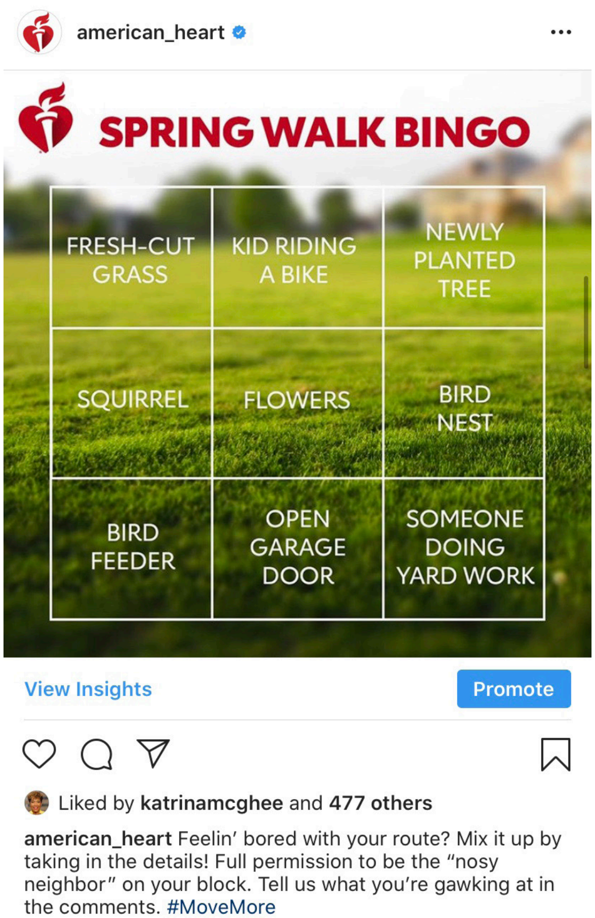
Top Tips for Engagement

- ☐ Inform but don't overwhelm the audience with news, facts and figures. Keep it fun too!
- ☐ Lean on your community when you need help. Volunteers are everywhere, especially now.
- ☐ Engage with macro- and micro-influencers to help you reach the sweet spot for reach and authenticity.
- ☐ Utilize actionable content that audiences can use as soon as they see it to drive strong results.



During the pandemic, the American Heart Association created messaging that encouraged its community to (virtually) gather together and #MoveMore.

Our primary goal was to reinvigorate our social community in a time when many were looking for connection. To do so, we created a campaign to encourage everyone to #MoveMore together, even while stuck at home. Our theory was that social distancing does not equal social isolation.



At left and above: The organization coupled fun messages with scientific facts to engage with its followers during the pandemic.

To do this, we created a content series with graphics and resources encouraging families to get active together. We also launched a series of live at-home workouts to bring a virtual community together.

We tapped our staff and volunteers and found a wealth of yoga instructors, Pilates experts and other fitness trainers through personal connections, all of whom volunteered to host live workouts for free. We began streaming 30-minute morning and afternoon workout sessions on **Youtube** and **Facebook** with these micro-influencers and saw tremendous response. Each post averaged over 14K views with hundreds of live participants.

Even though we were not in a studio, and the lighting and sound from our volunteers' living rooms were a little different than our normal setup, our social following was still actively engaged and hungry for more.

Macro influencers Stephen tWitch Boss and Allison Holker also joined the party with dance workouts, and we expanded to **Instagram** live streams. tWitch and Allison were already promoting their "Boss Family workouts" as a way to stay active during quarantine, so the partnership was seamless and embraced a great combination of our mutual brand strength.

To date these workout sessions drove over 300K views, with over 7k live viewers and our followers are growing every day. ■

Audrey Miller is senior manager of digital content and social media at the American Heart Association. audrey.miller@heart.org.

How Walmart Uses Numbers and a Human Touch to Define Social Crises

By PRNEWS Editors

Over the last decade, many brands have learned difficult lessons about crisis management, from **Uber** to **Wells Fargo, Chipotle to Equifax.**

Walmart has experienced a few of its own social media crises, so we were fortunate when Dan Kneeshaw, senior director, global communications, digital strategy & brand engagement, shared the brand's take on social media crisis prevention and management.

Not If, But When

When a brand has 2.3 million employees serving 260 million customers weekly at 12,000 outlets and online properties in 28 countries, the sheer scale and brand visibility poses challenges to reputation on social "that we face on a regular basis."

Facebook and **Twitter** provide most of the issues, Kneeshaw adds. The common element is often visual, since just about everyone has a phone with a camera. As social media has grown, so has the possibility for social media crises.

With so many possibilities for social incidents, the brand monitors social constantly.

Defining a Crisis

Walmart's social response unit is precise in its definitions. A social media crisis for Walmart is "any issue or event that has escalated to a broad point of public attention and poses a direct threat" to Walmart's brand reputation, Kneeshaw says.

The Walmart team monitors its social mentions constantly. Here, the organization provided its stakeholders information on what its response was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The brand also classifies the types of issues it's confronting, including: state of emergency (a hurricane or pandemic, for example), offensive items (such as illegal drugs) and flashpoint issues (situations where you "drop everything and act," including discrimination, videos of negative customer service or any incident involving a celebrity).

By the Numbers

In terms of social conversation, Walmart considers itself in a viral crisis when it monitors 4,000+ mentions per hour; an emerging trend is defined as 2,000-3,999 mentions per hour. signals the "all clear" when no more than 2,000 mentions per hour are tracked.

A tip: To calculate benchmarks for your

brand, monitor mentions over time when social conversation is normal and when it's abnormal; set thresholds based on these figures.

At the time of our talk with Kneeshaw, Walmart used two primary tools: **Brandwatch** (for real-time mention alerts) and **NewsWhip** (which shows which articles are being shared "on the more private platforms like **Facebook**,"), allowing Walmart to prepare for what's coming.

Responding and Being Human

For incidents that rise to the level of social crisis, Walmart deploys a cross-functional command center, which consists of members of the social media response team and other teams as needed, such as legal, marketing, press relations, corporate affairs and HR.

The brand takes action based on a protocol included in its social crisis response playbook. If you lack a written plan for responding to social crises, Kneeshaw says, "Today is the day to create one." Trying to cobble together a protocol in the middle of a crisis when "all hands are on deck…will not help you."

In addition to having the correct team members involved in social crisis response, he says, Walmart emphasizes that the written response be posted on the platform where the crisis originated.

The brand emphasizes responses be human. "Forget corporate-speak…be as real as you possibly can" when composing a response or apology statement, Kneeshaw says.

"When we sit down with legal and other departments, we sometimes forget that people are at the other end of a statement and that they want to be spoken to as people."

Generally, Walmart sends an acknowledgement quickly when an incident is occurring; after investigating and gathering information, the team will issue a "sincere apology…if Walmart is at fault."

The apology statement should be "honest, transparent and use language that addresses emotionally-affected individuals." A tip: Think how you'd communicate with your family and use similar language. ■

Takeaways
1. The possibility of social crisis is rising. Be prepared.
2. Don't wait for a crisis to occur to create a social response playbook.
3. Abandon corporate-speak in your social responses.

Make TikTok Work for Your Brand During a Global Pandemic

By Tuck Ross

While many industries pulled back on their marketing due to radical changes in the macro-economic environment impacted, there are some industries that exploded in growth in the same period. Toilet paper suppliers, for sure. But also streaming media giants like **Netflix** and **Spotify**, webinar and video conferencing tools like **Zoom**, personal devices like iPads, apps for mental wellness and fitness, subscription and delivery services, and many others.

Entertainment in Social Media

Facebook, **Twitter** and **Instagram** all saw record increases in engagement and consumption, but what about the up-and-coming **TikTok**? The new kid on the block is on an explosive rise as consumers, looking for ways to entertain themselves, are downloading TikTok at an blistering pace, curious about the buzz.

But I know, you are probably saying to yourself, "TikTok is for kids; brands and business have no reason to be there." This assumption is a common misconception and that may have been true two years ago, when it was called musical.ly before it was acquired by **ByteDance**.

TikTok has grown up. If you do a quick search for hashtags on TikTok, you will be surprised to see thousands, perhaps even millions, of videos tagged to topics related to your industry, reaching your demographic.

Why TikTok Now?

US TikTok Metrics, Oct 2019-March 2020

	TikTok.com*		TikTok**	
	Total unique visitors (millions)	Average minutes per visitor	Total unique visitors (millions)	Average minutes per visitor
Oct 2019	27.0	305.9	18.6	442.9
Nov 2019	29.0	366.7	20.1	526.1
Dec 2019	32.9	383.8	22.4	561.2
Jan 2020	35.2	429.8	22.2	680.0
Feb 2020	40.0	425.6	23.2	731.6
March 2020	52.2	476.0	28.8	858.0
—% change Oct-March	93.7%	93.2%	55.6%	55.0%
—% change Jan-March	26.2%	48.3%	10.8%	30.1%

*Note: *ages 2+, includes desktop, mobile website and app; **ages 18+, includes mobile app only*
Source: Comscore Media Metrix Multi-Platform, April 17, 2020
254905 www.eMarketer.com

Based on data from **eMarketer**, TikTok is still in a strong growth phase and is expected to beat the forecast of 45 million total US users in 2020, up to 52 million users just by the end of March. Overall, as social media increases, TikTok will drive outsize growth due to the nature of the content on the platform – intentionally creative, engaging, and fun!

And with 70% of consumers in lockdown

TikTok Stats:

- ☐ 41% of TikTok users are between ages 16-24.
- ☐ Approximately 50% of the global audience is over the age of 34.
- ☐ 56% of TikTok users are male .
- ☐ The platform grew 5.5x in 18 months (in the US).
- ☐ 90% of TIkTok users visit the platform more than once per day.

By following the pro tips for building a TikTok video, the author created a viral hit.

spending more time on their phones, they are spending so much more time seeking content when they want to escape or when they are increasingly bored.

Think about it like this: It's the only time ever that everyone is staying home, cooking and baking; drinking whatever, whenever; working from home; dealing with kids out of school; getting things delivered; DIY masking; conference calling; trying to stay fit; trying to find toilet paper. Bored. Busy.

The incredible amount of communion around these same topics breeds creativity to create escapes for the pain, frustration, mental weariness, isolation,and confusion in this time. Everyone has something in common right now.

Trends around COVID-19

- TikTok launched the #HappyAtHome hashtag in March and it instantly became a trending hashtag, pulling together the common effort (and struggle) of everyone from New York to Los Angeles staying safe by staying at home. With nightly live programming in the TikTok app presented by top influencers and celebrities, TikTok enabled the platform to carry the positive message of safety to over 11 billion views and counting.
- WHO wanted to promote hand washing (which evidently a lot of people still don't know how to do properly) with a trending hashtag promotion called #SafeHands. This promotion brought in celebrities and influencers goofing around in their bathrooms while washing their hands for 20 seconds. The simple concept encouraged a high adoption rate, now at 4 billion views as users piled in with their versions, keeping this hashtag trending for weeks.
- The state of Ohio asked **Proctor and Gamble (P&G)** for help in getting the word out about social distancing. P&G worked with its agency to pitch an idea to TikTok, which caught the interest of Charli D'Amelio, the most significant influencer on TikTok with over 50 million followers. She loved the idea and developed a trending hashtag and the choreography for the #DistanceDance. The hashtag trended at the top of the Discover page with over 11 billion organic views, with 187 million views on her #DistanceDance video alone – now her most viewed ever.

Back in January, I was watching the news and the international market was starting to get concerned about the spread in China. Wanting to get a jump on it, I developed a video making light of the coronavirus name and comparing it to an actual Corona beer before this was a running joke. I thought it was hilarious; no one watched it – only 3,000 views, 265 likes.

My audience wasn't aware of the international concern (nor was TikTok in the US). The video fell flat. I wanted to figure out how to make my content hit, so I spent time breaking down how to pick the trend so my video was better designed to succeed the next time.

First, I had to find my audience.

Start with Analytics

When you get a TikTok account, the first thing you should do is "go pro." Turn your account into a professional account in Manage Your Account. It's free, and it gives you analytics from the day you turn it on.

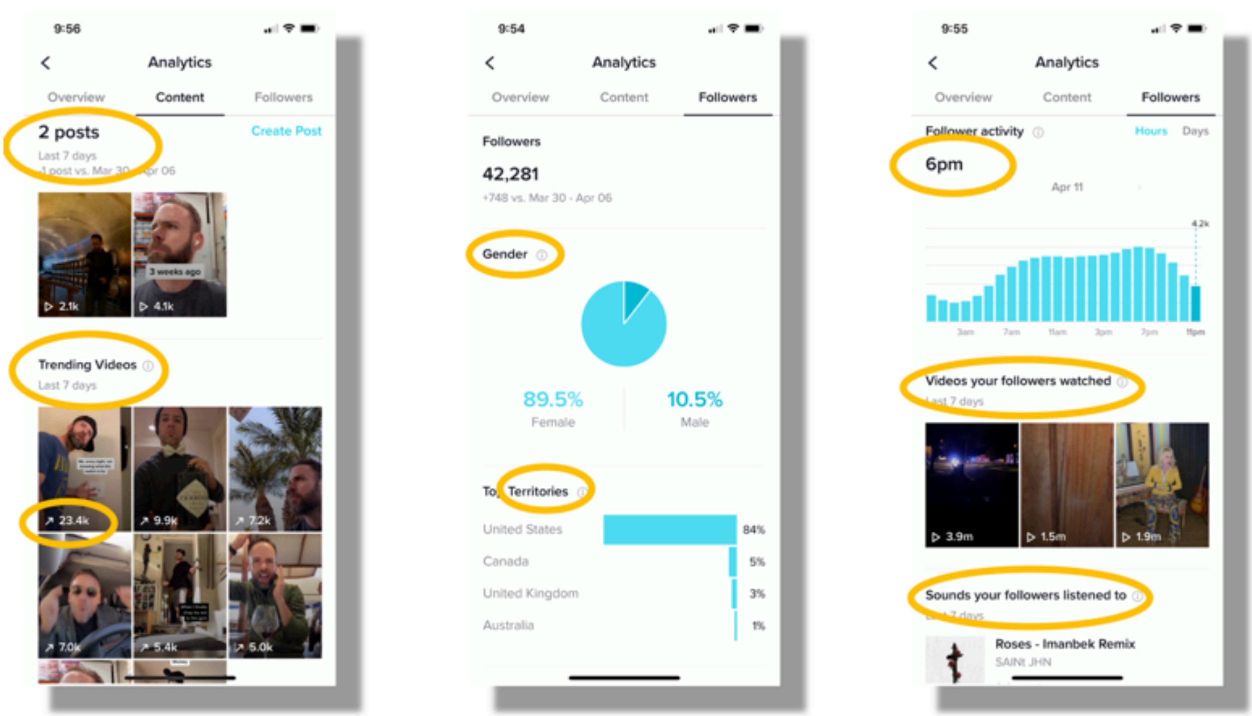
In the Analytics section of your TikTok account, you will see your recent post performance, as well as what's trending in your content. Whatever you see working here is popular with your audience; if you do more videos like these, you will have a pretty high chance of success.

In addition to other metrics, like gender and general location, you will find value in the Followers tab by looking at Follower Activity (which shows you when your audience is typically in the app and engaging with any content), Videos Your Followers Watched and Sounds Your Followers Listened To. These metrics showwhat is entertaining your audience and with what they are engaging most.

What's Trending

Need more ideas? TikTok is built off what is trending and memes that build over time. Pick a trend and get to it.

In the Discover tab in the app, you can utilize hashtags to see what's trending. Watch a few of the top videos to see what's working and to get the idea of the trend. Then make your version of it. Be authentic. Copycat content is not ideal, but riff on the original concept and music based on your profile or brand persona.What's your version of the meme? That's what will pop because it will be most relevant with your audience. You need your audience to love it so you can breakthrough to get to the For You page.



Make sure to check your analytics to find out more about your audience.

Pro Tips for Making a TikTok Video:

- ☐ **Make a clear preview tile showcasing what your video is about.** This comes after you make your video, but I put it as the first step because it's the first thing someone will see when they visit your profile. You want this video impression to draw viewers in.
- ☐ **Start with a hook.** Just like any other video platform, you have a short moment to stop the scroll. Do something at the front of your video (titles, action, etc) to incentivize someone to watch until the end.
- ☐ **Be expressive.** Remember, people are here for entertainment and escape.
- ☐ **Create emotion.** However you express yourself, focus on creating an emotional reaction. Humor, suspense and awe all work to engage. People share things that make them laugh.
- ☐ **End with a twist.** A twist at the end is the reward for the hook at the beginning. Surprises encourage re-watching and shares.
- ☐ **Use thoughtful descriptions.** Don't spend all this time on a video and shortchange on the descriptions. Make them smart, and encourage curiosity and emotion. Ask questions and challenge assumptions.
- ☐ **Involve your audience.** A pandemic. Stuck at home. Everyone sharing common experiences. It's easy to find ways to engage your audience with shared pain points, frustrations and boredom. How are you getting through this? How is your brand getting through this? Find a way to translate that into something you can share.
- ☐ **Use fewer hashtags.** Lots of people will tell you to use as many hashtags as you can. Instead, think about where you want your attention and choose the best hashtags for that audience.
- ☐ **Watch all, watch again.** Steps 1-8 encourage someone to watch all the way through. If you do each of these right, you get the re-watch – someone trying to learn your dance or catch that fast caption – which tells the algorithm that your video is important and more people need to see it.

Stay Engaged to Go Viral

Analytics are a good place to start with a baseline to develop engaging video. But how do you create amazing videos that pop with views, comments and likes?

In March, I was watching my Analytics and starting to see COVID-19 content popping up in the Discover tab. It was now two weeks before quarantine, but the **World Health Organization** (WHO) just told the world that they should begin to practice social distancing.

After taking a look around other social platforms, like **Instagram** and **Twitter**, I noticed that introverts were thrilled by the prospect of having to stay home solo. As a result, I put together a celebration video around the WHO announcement with a few of the global hashtags around #covid19 and #coronavirus.

This video popped! 246k organic views, 24.5k likes, 360 comments. It was relevant due to the timing of the pandemic, on trend for social distancing and relatable especially, to an introvert audience looking for connection. By following the pro tips for building a TikTok video and leveraging my analytics, I designed my own success.

Brands, businesses, entrepreneurs, real estate agents, grocerers, gig workers, anyone can do the same. As they look at creating content during the COVID-19 window, many brands paused or pulled back on their paid media and content marketing, while TikTok exploded with new users and new content. Corporations reduced their influencer marketing and paid collaborations while TikTok boomed with celebrity and influencer videos. The opportunity on TikTok is to be authentic, create relatable content and grow organically – even during a pandemic.

Consumer behavior is changing and attention is shifting, but one thing hasn't changed: being a human builds relationship. TikTok is the most human social media platform, which is why it is seeing truly explosive growth. It's going to be truly transformative for a business that is smart about adding TikTok to its marketing strategy, even during the pandemic. ■

Tuck Ross is senior vice president of marketing at Synchrony. tuck@tuckross.com.

Southwest's Communications Chief Shares Top 3 Social Media Crisis Management Tips

By PRNEWS Editors

Nearly half of all organizations make the mistake of not planning for a crisis, thinking it's either superstitious or somewhat futile. After all, you can't foresee all of the nuances and dynamics that may constitute a crisis.

But while each type of situation has its own unique aspects, there are incidents—such as a data breach—that many organizations can, and must, prepare for in advance, says Linda Rutherford, vice president and chief communications officer at **Southwest Airlines**.

Rutherford should know: Few industries are as prone to potential crises as the airline sector, from disgruntled customers posting on social media to accidents and fatalities.

For organizations just beginning to think about crisis management, the first step is cataloguing all of the potential pitfalls that could be lurking down the road. Second is preparing what a response to each would look like, she says. But crisis management is an ever-evolving skill, part art and part science.

"I don't know that there's any organization that handles a crisis perfectly," says Rutherford. "Every time you go through a reputational incident, it's an opportunity to learn." Rutherford provides a few lessons learned from the airline industry and beyond in how best to manage a calamity.

Respond in Real Time

In the social media age, there isn't a lot of time to get your arms around an issue before you start grappling with the fallout. But it's absolutely necessary to react as quickly as your team is able.

"We have watched other organizations be slow to respond to incidents, or they're slow to put a face and a voice to a situation, so speed is something we've made as one of our cornerstone tenets," Rutherford says.

Southwest has been creative in both putting a face to a situation and managing it quickly. In 2016, the airline experienced a massive technology outage that lasted four

days. The blackout caused thousands of flights to be cancelled as Southwest lost many basic back-end capabilities, such as systems to process customers and schedule flight crews; even its website was down for the count.

The organization employed **Facebook** Live to address the situation, and watched as its audience interacted with the content in a much more favorable way than if it had merely issued a statement.

"Words are great, but if you do a quick photo that shows an airport and [offers] information, or if you put a person on Facebook Live to give the update, the sentiment scores change quickly," she says. "You can watch the sentiment move to neutral, or even into positive territory when the user can see somebody talking to them."

In the digital age, an organization no longer has the luxury of fully digesting an issue before it responds.

Be Transparent

Tell the truth about what you know, and what you don't know, about a crisis on social. It sounds simple, but many organizations don't follow that rule.

For instance, an organization may not understand for hours or days the depth and impact of a cyber-security breach—or why and how it happened—but in the digital age, an organization no longer has the luxury of fully digesting an issue before it responds.

"You may not fully understand what happened, but it's an ongoing conversation, so tell the truth as much as you can and tell it quickly," says Rutherford. "The most important thing is to say what you know when you know it."

Rutherford points to the **Tylenol** crisis of September/October 1982, when seven people in Chicago died after taking capsules laced with poison, as a textbook example of crisis management.

"Even though the company wasn't sure if they had a manufacturing problem or sabotage, they went for the public good and removed all products from the shelves throughout the entire country," she points out. "That's a strong tenet: What's the public good here?"

Cover the Waterfront

There are many digital avenues to get a message out, but one mistake many organizations make when planning responses to potential crises is in leaving one or two of those channels behind.

"It can look like a real disconnect if you deal with a crisis on a website but forget to address it on **Instagram**, so it looks like business as usual there," she says.

Southwest works in advance with its legal partners to have statement templates and creative digital assets ready to go, both internally to its employees and externally to the public, in case of a crisis. Beyond creating dark sites, the company learned that logos matter, specifically, the colors of a logo.

When airline **Germanwings** had an accident in 2015, it toned down its logo, a lesson Rutherford took in-house.

"We have artwork that has been created for several different types of situations—if there was a significant loss of life, we have options to go monochromatic and options to go black and white," she says.

While that's an extreme example, the lesson is clear: Prepare digital assets for various scenarios in advance so they can be deployed at a moment's notice. ■

How Brands Should Respond to Negative Online Reviews Appropriately

By Mark Lange

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos once compared the immense value of a corporate brand to one's personal reputation.

He's right. Senior executives of successful businesses are very proud of their company's reputation. They take it very personally. But here's where things get hard: Although reputation rests on a company's values and actions, your customers increasingly define it. After all, it's *their* perceptions that ultimately count—not yours.

Brand reputation is built on the public's critical judgment, pros and cons. And that feedback is coming from every direction, posted as comments and star ratings on review websites that have a big influence on potential customers—similar to social media, but with a longer shelf life.

As most things are with the internet, online review sites are double-edged swords. Positive ratings slice through advertising and SEO clutter to bring new customers and life to your enterprise. But credible-sounding negative reviews can cut the heart out of your marketing effort before prospective clients have a chance to learn anything about you directly. How should your team handle negative reviews?

Keep Your Ego in Check

The first step is attitudinal: Get a grip. Fast. Even the most professional service organizations sometimes react poorly to negative feedback. Avoid that trap. It's imperative to make sure your brand responds—correctly, to every review—to avert damage. And paradoxically, value can be created.

Negative critiques of your business represent opportunities to improve operations, customer experience and brand reputation, if you address them quickly and directly.

Do Your Homework

To respond to an online criticism effectively, your team should start with the facts.

- Can the customer and his or her history with your business be identified, or is the person anonymous?
- Could there be a problem with how your company sets expectations through customer communications?
- Is there a pattern of similar feedback from others that suggests an operational issue at play?

Depending on your business, this sort of simple investigation can prove invaluable if it uncovers systemic problems such as rude personnel, lack of location cleanliness, parking difficulties or subpar product quality.

Solve the problem and you can hopefully improve operational effectiveness, raise customer satisfaction, drive brand loyalty and accelerate customer advocacy.

Respond Rapidly and Effectively

The path to an effective resolution is straightforward. Regardless of whether the negative review is true or false, someone from your team should engage the complaining

Checklist: Responding to a Bad Review

- ☐ Thank the person for taking time to provide feedback.
- ☐ Listen without interrupting while exploring details of the situation.
- ☐ Empathize with the person's frustrations or concerns.
- ☐ Apologize for not meeting expectations or living up to company standards.
- ☐ Suggest connecting offline if necessary to resolve the issue.

customer in an online conversation.

Responses must post within 48 hours. Provide templates that support a personal, polite and pleasant engagement. Short and to-the-point responses are best.

Our data show that customers often convert negative reviews to positive ones when teams respond with genuine concern and help reach a resolution. In addition, other visitors to the site will see how conscientiously your business handles customer complaints.

In the case of a fake negative review posted by a competitor, disgruntled former employee or someone who is clearly off-kilter, it's fair to consider stronger measures, though they're not always productive.

For example, if you have strong evidence that a false review is defamatory and/or violates the terms of service of the review site, you could ask the site to remove the offending review. Otherwise, Section 230 of the Federal Communications Decency Act shields online review publishers from being forced to remove unfavorable reviews posted by users except in limited circumstances.

Your best option is to focus on soliciting reviews from all of your customers, including the satisfied silent majority.

When you increase your volume of honest reviews, the social web will represent accurately the broad customer satisfaction your company earns daily.

Prospective customers or clients are being presented with star ratings and reviews of your locations all across the internet. Bad reviews represent an important opportunity to generate value. When you engage customers, resolve their issues and make operational improvements, you keep your brand promise—and maintain the kind of reputation that drives business. ■

Mark Lange is Chief Marketing Officer at Area 1 Security.

How to Set Up and Interpret a Social Listening Stream to Head Off Crisis

By Daniella Peting

As a public relations practitioner, you are aware of the crises that your organization may face and how to manage each crisis via traditional PR tactics; however, those same tactics may intensify or extend the crisis if executed via social media.

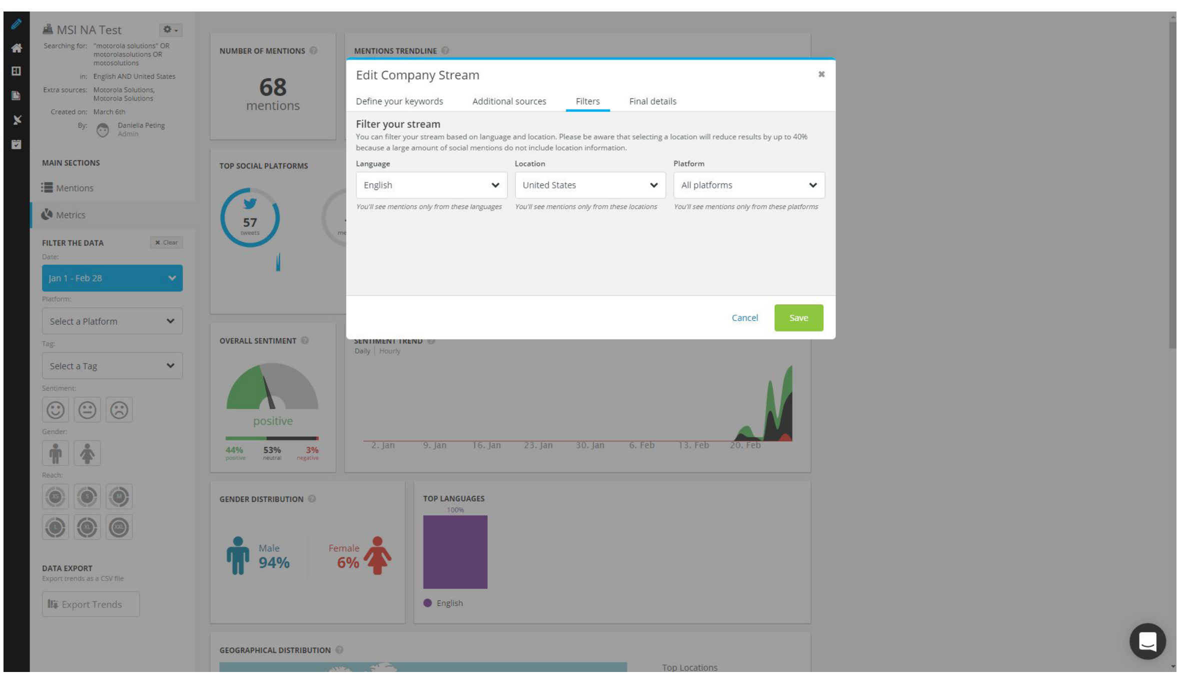
It's crucial to understand the components of a useful social listening stream and how to use these streams to determine when and how to respond to crises via social media.

The Importance of Social Listening

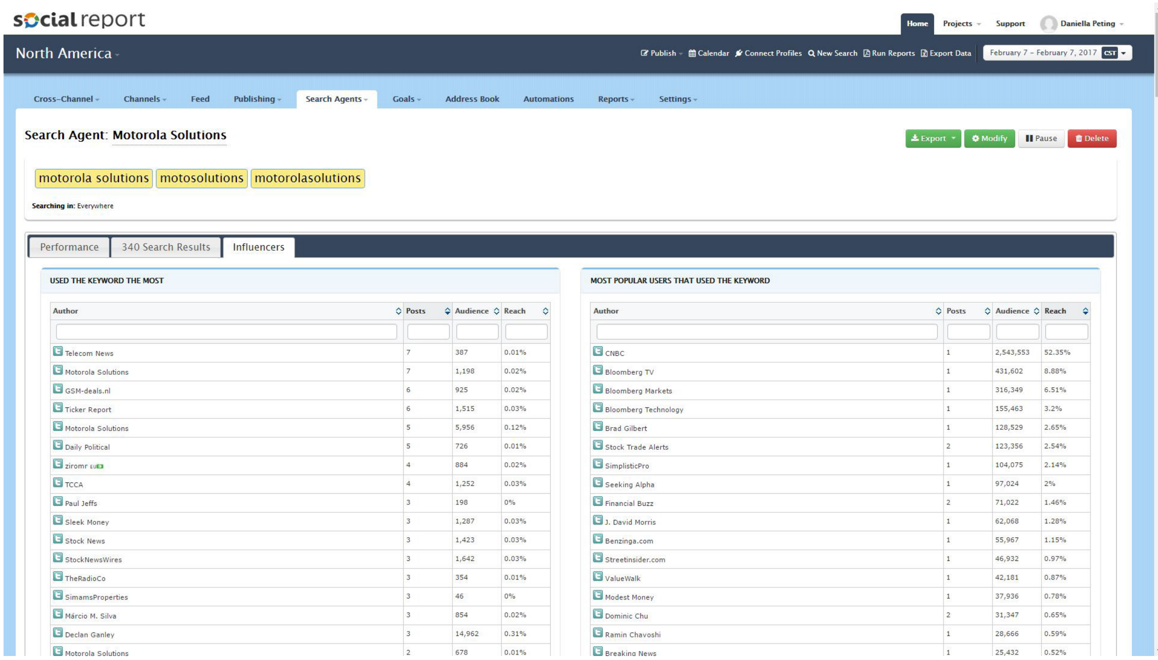
Ten years ago, communications about your organization were primarily one-to-many, controlled by your PR team. Now these same communication tactics may be perceived as deceptive if applied via social media. With the addition of this communication medium, conversations are now one-to-many and one-to-one and require different approaches. These approaches can be determined by expanding your monitoring capabilities to include social listening.

Social listening—as defined by **Sprout Social**—is "the process of tracking conversations around specific phrases, words or brands, and then leveraging them to discover opportunities or create content for those audiences."[1]

The process of social listening is similar to the process used to monitor mentions of your organization via print, radio or television,



This image illustrates a social listening dashboard.



This image is an example of conversation influencers. The column on the left illustrates the persons who have posted the most about the conversation during a specific period of time. The column on the right illustrates the persons who have the largest share of voice regarding this conversation during a specific period of time. The share of voice is determined by either the audience size or the reach, whichever is greater.

but it is immediate and more comprehensive. According to **HootSuite**, social listening is more than "searching for and collecting data and mentions of your brand, industry and audience conversations, [it is also the process of] analyzing this information and taking action—turning the data you have collected into a viable strategy."[2]

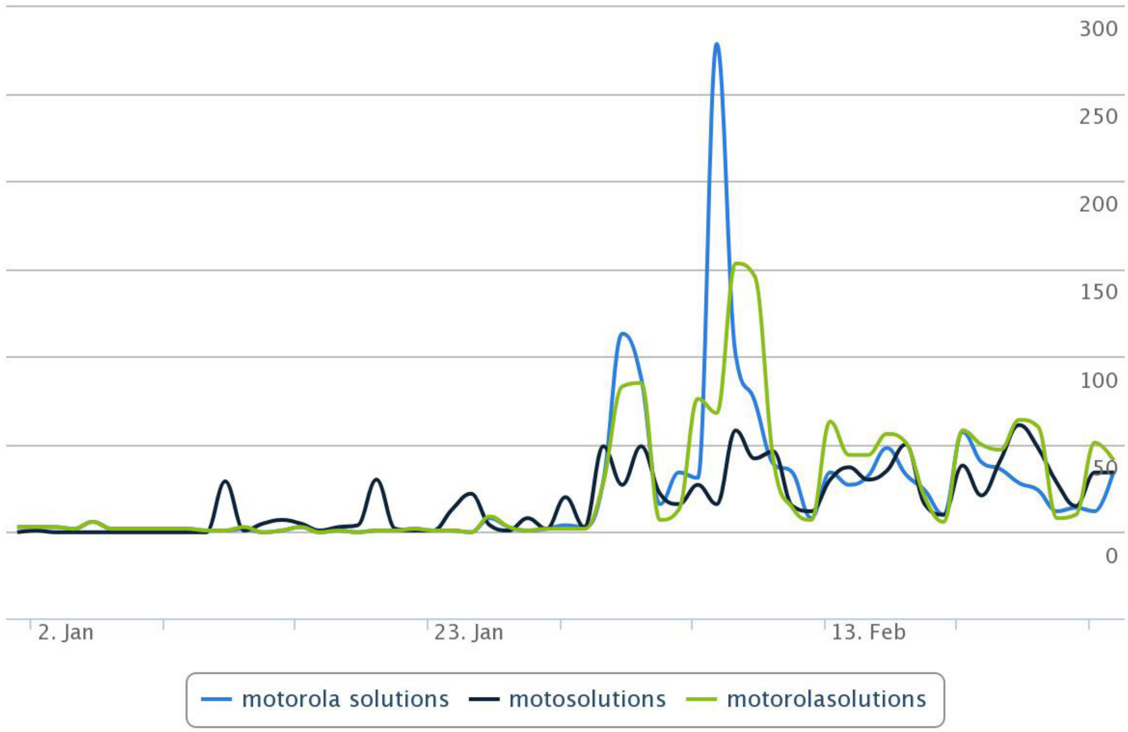
The Components of a Useful Social Listening Stream

Successful social listening is not a set-it-and-forget-it activity. In fact, it requires many resources to be useful: tools to gather and analyze social data, people to set up and manage the tools, people to interpret the data and communicate the analyses, people to prioritize the results and develop strategies based on the results and people to execute and manage the tactics.

If you have a social media team, it will assume these aforementioned roles and consult you for set up, reporting, messaging and escalation strategies. If you do not have a social media team, then you will need to assume these roles.

When selecting a social listening tool, look for one that 1) analyzes data and aggregates points of commonality, 2) finds themes without being prompted by keywords, 3) automates the highly labor-intensive aspects of recording, analyzing, categorizing and visualizing data and insights, 4) enables leaders to evaluate the analysis and 5) offers a genuine price value. Although free tools are available, you should invest in a solution like **Social Report** or **BrandWatch** that provide insights including message frequency, reach, placement and sentiment, poster demographics and keyword identification.

Once you have selected a social listening tool, you will need to set it up. Begin by determining what you want to learn from your social listening stream. For the purpose



This image illustrates a sudden or large increase in conversations about a brand and/or company via a social listening tool.

of crisis management, I recommend that you start with a broad search of your brand name, including all spelling variations of your brand name, in all social networks, in all physical locations and in all languages, and create notifications for sudden or large frequency increases. Once your stream starts to aggregate and analyze data, you can adjust the settings to achieve the results you need.

What Social Media Listening Can Tell You

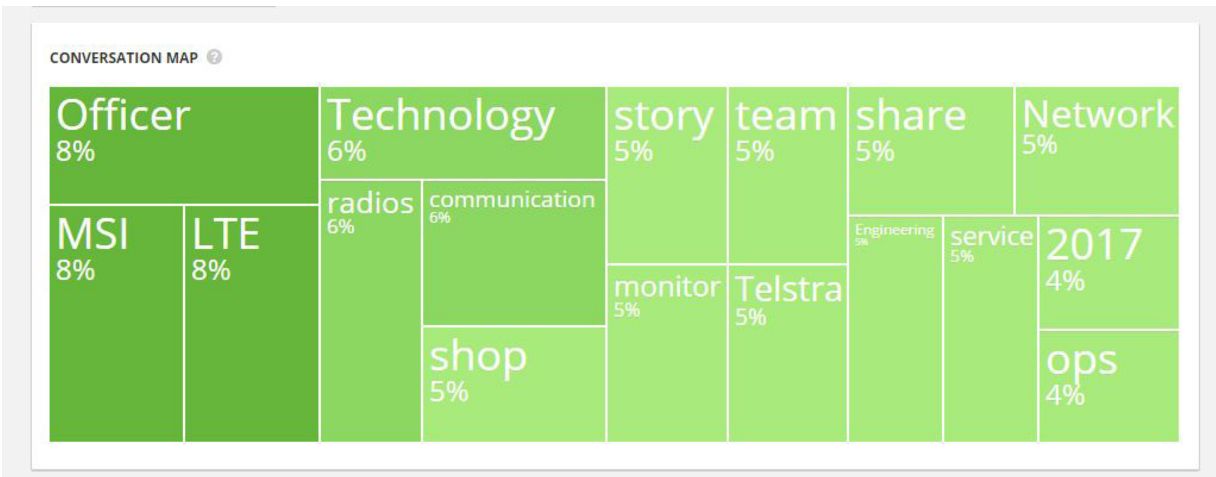
- ☐ Who is talking about your brand
- ☐ What is being said about your brand
- ☐ When the conversations about your brand are occurring
- ☐ Where the conversations about your brand are occurring
- ☐ Why the conversations about your brand are occurring
- ☐ How you will address the conversations about your brand

Interpreting the Results and Identifying a Course of Action

As your stream gathers information, look for sudden or large increases in conversations. If you notice these, *do not* respond immediately. Instead, monitor the conversation's frequency, reach and influencers, sentiment and keywords.

If the conversation's intensity lasts beyond 24 hours, you may have a crisis to manage; however, conversations losing intensity within 24 hours are less likely to be considered cri-

An example of conversation sentiment. Sentiment may be positive, neutral or negative and is determined by the words used in and the structure of the post.



This image is an example of a conversation map. Some social listening tools create conversation maps based on the frequency of words used in a conversation during a specific period of time.

ses. If you are unsure, consult with your social media team. They will know if the conversation has become a crisis.

If you determine that you indeed have a crisis to manage, allow your social media team to determine the best manner to respond to the crisis. As a PR practitioner, you are trained to get in front of the conversation by responding with prepared statements that support your organization's position and/or refutes the alleged accusations about your organization, but this tactic may not be the best course of action for social media. Prepare statements for use should the need arise; however, only use these statements if absolutely necessary and allow the social media team to revise these statements to reflect the voice and medium to which it is shared. Remember that unlike other forms of communication, social media is more emotive and reactive, so it is better to err on the side of caution when responding to a crisis via social media.

Now that you see the value of incorporating social listening into your crisis management plan, schedule a meeting with your social media team to learn how your teams can work together better. You both bring unique and valuable skills to your organization that will both be needed in a crisis. ■

Daniella Peting is the senior manager of social media strategy at YPO. @dnpeting

Questions to Determine Whether New or Established Sites Should Be Used in Crisis

By Stacey L. Knott

The zombie apocalypse (or pandemic, environmental disaster, etc.) has begun and your organization is involved. Or maybe you are in charge of a major upcoming event at your company to meet this post-crisis reality.

Question: Do you create new social media sites for those events, or do you use your established sites?

Chances are you have a bevy of co-workers and bosses with their own opinions, but as the social media administrator, how do you decide, and how do you explain or defend your choice?

Consider Carefully

Before running off to create microsites to address the zombie problem, you need to carefully consider the best options. Here a few important strategic items to keep in mind:

- **Time**: Although it does not take long to create new social media posts or accounts, it does take a few minutes to create your profile with the proper bio, profile pictures and contact information. More importantly, it takes time to monitor those new sites. If you create sites, you will need to create bandwidth to maintain both your established sites and new ones.
- **Content**: Where will the content come from for these channels? What about content for your previously established social media channels? Never underestimate the value of great content, which includes not just the well-written post, but compelling photos and videos; these take time and thought.
- **Audience**: Will your established site's audiences meet your needs, or do you have a different audience for this crisis? If creating new sites, where will the audience come from? In a crisis moment, you will need to decide if you should work to build a whole new audience for new sites (e.g., individuals affected by the crisis) or continue communicating with the audience you already have on your established sites.
- **Communication Objectives**: Consider whether creating a social media account fits your communication objectives. Remember, even if you have a communication plan to help guide you during the event, you may need to reevaluate that direction and course-correct.

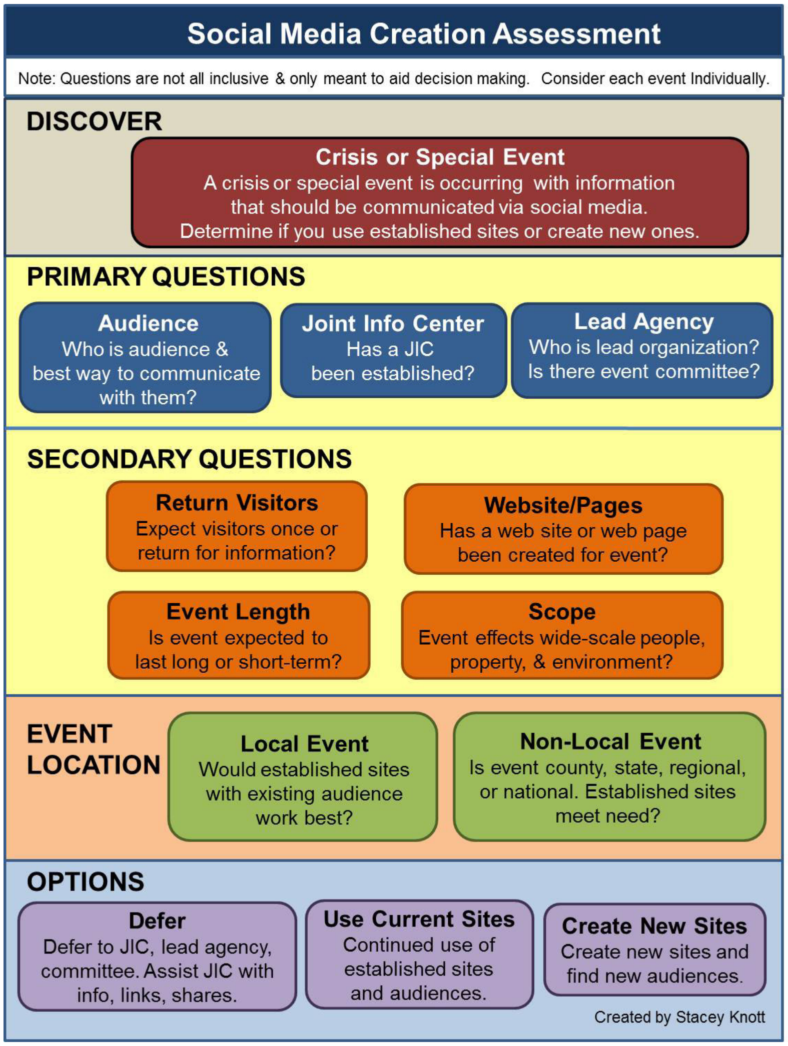
Once you begin to consider the strategic and logistical management of your social media sites, you will need to ask yourself more tactical, in-depth questions.

In-Depth Questions

These questions are not all-inclusive; they are meant to aid your decision-making.

- **Who is your audience?** Is your audience internal? Does your audience include the general public and the media? Your audience may include people from each of these groups. The smaller and more focused your audience is, the more likely it is that you can use your previously established social media sites. Hopefully, that small, focused audience is already following your content. If the audience is varied, then mark your audience as one variable for creating new channels.

- **Will the audience be one-time visitors or return multiple times?** When your audience visits your social media sites, will they get everything they need in a single visit, or will they return multiple times for information? If the information on the site will only be used once by the audience, more than likely they will not return to your site. Perhaps a new channel is not necessary.
- **Is this a local, statewide, regional or national crisis?** This question is the geographic location of the event, not the level of interest, which could be much larger. For example, if an event occurs at a military installation, then the social media sites at the installation may be best. But if an event covers a larger area such as a state or region, then an existing site may not cover the need, especially if there are multiple organizations involved.
- **Are you the lead organization for this event?** Or are you a subgroup? When the government responds to an event, there is always a primary organization put into the lead role, which coordinates every facet of the response. If you are dealing with a large event that concerns multiple organizations, there is possibly a lead organization or a committee overseeing the event. Consider checking with the lead organization or committee before creating any new social media accounts.
- **Is there a joint information center (JIC) established for this event?** If the event is for a crisis or disaster, the government may establish a JIC to coordinate and streamline communication. If so, social media administrators should consider the JIC the lead for the event, which may already have created sites or be in the process of creating sites. Duplicating sites will not help with communication. Additionally, a JIC helps portray a cohesive and coordinated response.
- **Will a separate website or page be created for this event?** If an event does not warrant creating an additional website, why does it need its own social media sites? And even if you create a separate web page for this event, you may still not need separate social media sites.
- **Will this be a long-term event?** Although this can be difficult to determine initially, a short-term event may not need a new site, whereas long-term events do need them. For example, if your company is holding a one-night charity event for disaster relief, then perhaps a microsite in your web domain with targeted messaging on your established social media sites is exactly right. But if the event is a long-term, ongoing initiative, then new sites may be needed.
- **What is the scope of this event?** Does it affect a large group of people, property or the environment? During a crisis, these are usually people's main concerns. For example, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, people were concerned about the effects of the oil on the water, wildlife and sea life. Fishermen and the tourism industry in the area were concerned about how it would affect their livelihoods. Additionally, the spill affected a huge geographic area, since every state along the U.S. Gulf Coast was affected. This was an event with a huge scope in terms of time, audience, geography and more. The JIC for the response created a separate website



and social media sites. Your large scope event may need new social media sites created too.

Your Options

- **Defer**: It turns out the zombie apocalypse is huge and never-ending, and the government has set up a JIC with a lead agency. Defer to the JIC for social media guidance. Or contact the JIC and ask to participate. You can also use your organization's sites to share the agency's messaging with your audiences. Also consider posting a link on your organization's sites back to the event or crisis social media sites to help show your audience the best sources for information.
- **Use Established Sites**: After working through the above questions, you determine you will use your organization's established social media pages. You can view the event as an opportunity to build your long-term audience and reputation. During the process, remember to measure and evaluate whether those sites are meeting your organization's needs.
- **Create New Accounts**: In the event you have determined that you need to create social media accounts specifically for the crisis, ensure you have timely, accurate and quality content. Find your new audience by using all available resources. On your established sites, share links to your new channels and recommend your audience go there for specific information. If you are the lead for the event or working with other partners, ask them to share the links for the new sites on their organizations' sites. Add the links to the new social media sites to your website, press releases and other products.

Ultimately, every situation is unique and the options and results will vary, but trust your training, trust your communication guidance and trust your instincts. ■

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How PR Pros Combat the Growing Threat of Weaponized Social Media

By Richard Levick

The weaponization of social media played a critical, albeit insidious, role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, particularly as the race came to a close.

Take the now-famous *BuzzFeed* analysis showing that in the final three months of the campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on **Facebook** generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets.

Fake news continues to steal all the headlines, of course. But it's just one way social media is being weaponized. Botnets, high-frequency automated messaging saturation and similar tools are being deployed to spread false and fraudulent information via social platforms. Social channels are the main depositories for bogus information because it's where most people get their news and information these days, and ill-inspired campaigns will garner the most traction.

The various tools used to spread misinformation… are encroaching on the corporate sector—and senior communicators need to brace themselves.

The various tools used to spread misinformation throughout the political arena are encroaching on the corporate sector—and senior communicators need to brace themselves. The methods required to detect, respond to and mitigate these attacks via social platforms require a rethinking of PR strategy-cum-crisis communications, especially among publicly traded and global companies.

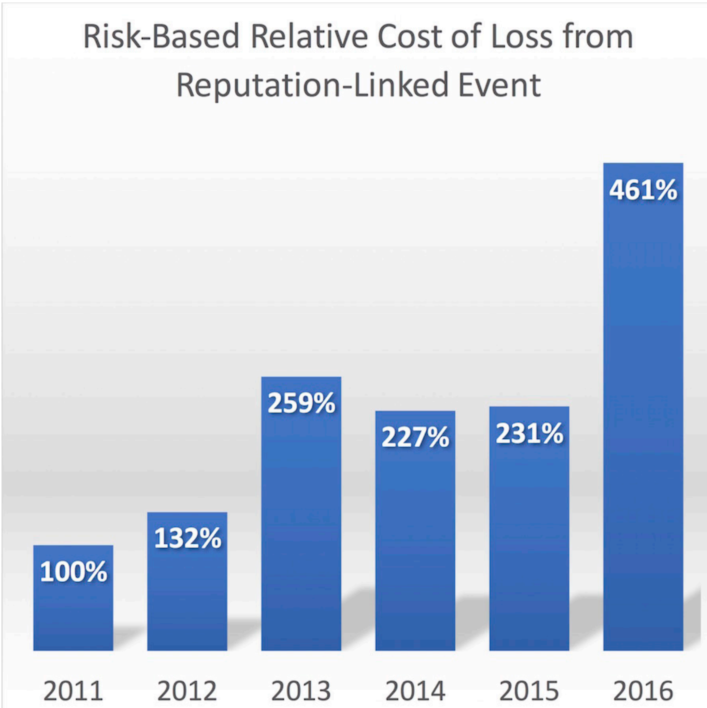
To bolster their value in the eyes of the C-suite, PR pros must be proactive.

Losses linked to reputational damage at publicly traded companies grew 461% from 2011 to 2016, according to a 2016 study, with a large spike in anger among the general public and the weaponization of social media the primary culprits. The study, which was released by **Steel City Re** and **Hanover Stone Partners**, is based on an analysis of reputational-related losses for roughly 7,500 companies covering the past five years.

It's an unsettling chain of events. When social media channels started to emerge in the early 2000s, the narrative was that they would improve understanding throughout the business landscape and break down barriers between companies and consumer/social activists. But, more than a decade later, it hasn't exactly turned out that way.

These days the pressing questions for senior communicators are not so much how brands can use social media channels as a charm offensive but, rather, how to defend their companies against increasingly vituperative and nasty attacks on social.

As social channels become more powerful, PR pros need to develop and steer the best practices required to prevent and mitigate attacks via social platforms. They also need



Losses linked to reputational damage at publicly traded companies grew precipitously during the past five years.

to establish the guardrails to protect brand reputation and ensure that such attacks don't devolve into severe crises.

Indeed, whether it's from a sitting president or an irate individual with a modem who will stop at nothing to attack a brand or organization (even for making honest mistakes), PR managers must be able to confront myriad parties that are using social channels as the online equivalent of precision-guided missiles. With that in mind, here's a strategic blueprint for how senior communicators navigate what remains uncharted social media terrain.

Know the Rules of the Road (and the Regulatory Landscape)

There are two sets of rules communicators must follow when it comes to developing a defense against weaponized social media. First, communicators must understand the terms, services and conditions of the various social platforms. For global companies whose social channels are inexorably moving to the core of their marketing communications activities, knowing the granular details of each specific social channel is mission-critical.

Second, PR pros have to stay abreast of the regulatory landscape, both at home and abroad. When defending your brand against a possible attack you don't want to expose the company to accusations of having a double standard. Hewing to regulations doesn't necessarily mean you can't fight fire with fire. But the way in which you respond must be above board and transparent (you also need to be cognizant of the message your response sends to the marketplace).

You must make sure your communications via social channels adhere to the Federal Trade Commission (**FTC**) rules for the U.S. and European Union (EU) regs for European-based operations. At the same time, there are many countries in which FTC and/or EU regs don't apply.

That's why it's important that communicators exercise caution when considering the origins of an attack via social media. PR pros are paid to know the difference between someone who's simply angry with your product and has a legitimate gripe and a concerted attack by a false online identity created by an individual or group to push a specific agenda.

Constantly Assess Potential Threats

Communicators need to constantly track threat assessment via social media platforms. The coming communications crises was always foreseeable with a close and constant reading of the digital tea leaves. Remember, companies advertise, critics and activists organize. Your adversaries need to leave their footprints to find allies. Communicators also must learn about the trends in hashtags used by critics; NGO fundraising and communications strategies; who **Change.org** or #Grabyourwallet are listing; and what videos are trending. Such tracking gives communicators a clearer window into what's next and what they may need to anticipate. If you track successfully enough, you can modify behavior, negotiate or counterattack, as the opportunity dictates, without being caught off guard.

Contain the Engagement

In the event of an attack, it's usually crucial to keep the exchange strictly to the platform on which it happened. If your brand or organization gets attacked via Facebook, it does you no good to open up your defense strategy to, say, your Twitter followers. You want to isolate the audience that's been exposed to the attack and not let the issue seep into other channels. However, if the attack toggles from one social platform to another it's a strong indication that it's probably a coordinated, well-funded and sustained attack and you'll have to respond accordingly.

There are also exceptions to this rule that are well worth noting. **Nordstrom** didn't respond to President Trump's criticism via Twitter, but on other platforms. The rule here is, if there is already enough attention on the issue a cross-platform response may be just what the doctor ordered.

Cultivate Relationships With Social Channels Beyond Sales

Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are scrambling to develop new policies designed to cut down on fake news appearing on their platforms. Nonetheless, the onus remains on communicators to develop and nurture relationships with senior executives from all social channels, including technical support and content teams. By having a strong relationship with these skill sets, communicators can learn about the "dirty tricks" that social media channels uncover among users and, in the event of an attack, they'll know whom to speak to in order to get the issue resolved as quickly as possible.

Know Them Before You Need Them

Another effective tool to combat social media attacks is to develop audiences and influencers now, during peacetime, so when the company is attacked, various stakeholders can act on the company's behalf and dismiss the fake news and/or negative chatter.

This area of defense is not to be underestimated among communicators. A third-party player, with a large number of followers and a solid reputation, may be able to share mitigating technologies regarding an attack. In a similar vein, you need to cultivate influencers in-house. By keeping them abreast of the challenges presented by weaponized social media, employees can serve as a bulwark against social media attacks. What is more, by having employees share in the defense, you're improving brand affinity among employees, which is crucial for employee retention and encouraging *esprit de corps*.

In the topsy-turvy world of online communications, it's probably not a matter of if your brand will be attacked via social channels, but when. If it hasn't happened already, don't lull yourself or the company into a false sense of security. Possessing an "it can't happen here" mentality is bound to make matters worse once you come under attack. If you don't have the proper protocols in place now—during peacetime—to respond effectively and mitigate damage to your brand and your stakeholders, it's not going to get any easier once the warheads start landing. ■

Richard Levick, Esq., is chairman and CEO of LEVICK. @richardlevick

Everything You Need To Know About Livestreams During COVID-19

By Amelia Oliver

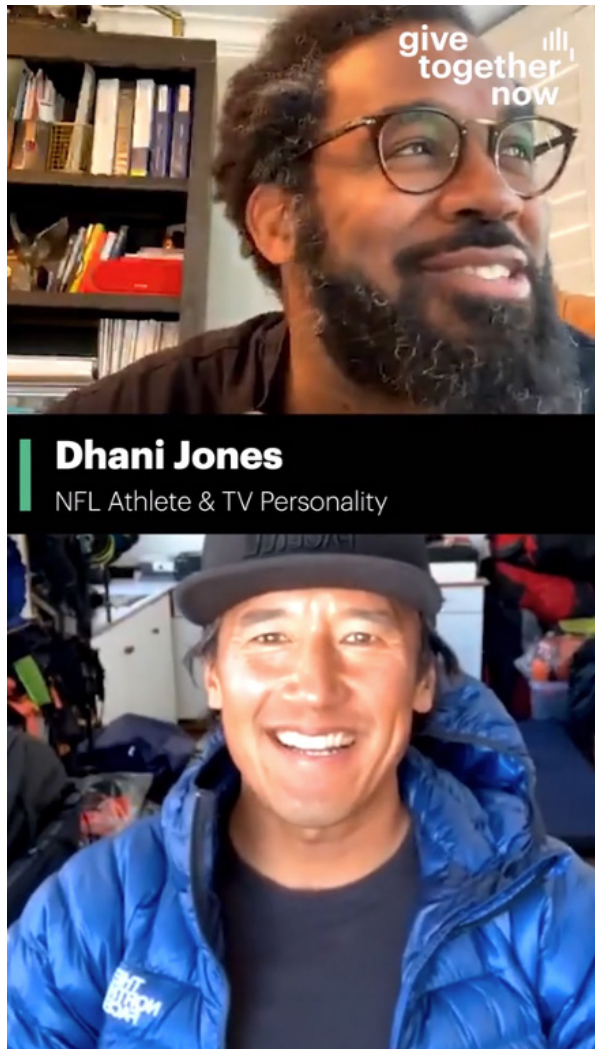
COVID-19 created, almost overnight, a shift in the way we create and consume content. The paradox for PR, marketing and other communications professionals is having to calibrate to the increased appetite for content, alongside a new set of limitations for doing so.

Enter the rise of live video streams.

Facebook and **Instagram** algorithms have favored live experiences for some time now, which exploded as stay-at-home orders became commonplace. The ease of which users are able to livestream from their homes, coupled with the need for brands and businesses to stay connected with their consumers, made live video content one of the most popular platform choices of the COVID-19 era.

With such a mad dash to stay connected, and so many brands, businesse, and celebrities going live, it's important to know how to push past the clutter to engage your audience.

Green Buzz Agency has been producing weekly livestream videos for a number of its clients, including **Stand Together**. In the wake of the global pandemic, Stand Together launched its #GiveTogetherNow campaign and approached Green Buzz to expand the reach of the campaign through a series of Instagram Live videos.



#GiveTogetherNow livestream produced by Green Buzz Agency featuring host Dhani Jones and Academy Award-Winning Director, Jimmy Chin.

Getting Started

As with any campaign, tying a unique value proposition to campaign goals is going to make the livestream most successful. In the case of Stand Together, Green Buzz wanted to leverage its roster of celebrities to create casual conversations that would organically hit the major themes of the campaign.

To ensure core campaign messaging was woven into the conversation, we included a host to steer the dialogue. Whether or not you have a consistent host, it's important to have a point-person drive the conversation in your livestream to draw out campaign arcs and ensure you stay within your time limit. It's also recommended to have a private and direct line of communication with your host so that you and your team can direct remotely and navigate any potential hiccups.

It's also important to be mindful of your viewers and how they are going to experience your content. Livestreams are inherently made to be temporary, interactive and of low production value. You don't want to use this format if, for example, your concept requires 4K video or lots of replays.

Livestreams are built for user engagement and interaction, so this format is ideal for vibrant conversations and tutorials, as well as driving awareness to particular issues, as with the #GiveTogetherNow campaign.

Preparing to Go Live

The raw, interactive nature of a livestream makes it different from any other type of social content. As you get ready to go live, prepare for the elements of your audience you can't control, such as when they drop in and out of your segment. Remember, it takes time for your audience to log on, so the clock doesn't really start the second you go live. Treat the first 10 minutes as a warm-up and allow your guests to chat with each other or with the live audience.

Our recommended runtime for a livestream is between 45 and 60 minutes. Shorter, 20-30 minute segments can also be successful, but remember the opening buffer you want to leave before getting to the heart of your conversation.

Keep in mind that your audience will also be able to see how many other viewers are tuned in. In the case of Stand Together, we leveraged its roster of well-known figures to draw in a larger viewership. If your brand doesn't have a large social following, explore partnership opportunities with public figures, content creators and interesting brands. Everyone is looking to feed the appetite of an active audience and create something of value during this uncertain period. You may be surprised by what you can create when exploring these new avenues.

Repurposing the Content

There are a number of ways you can repurpose your live content. Each week, Green Buzz Agency produces 2-3 Instagram Live episodes for Stand Together.

Within 24 hours of going live, we're able to create a full-length episode with light graphics and small edits, which uphold the authenticity of the original premiere. Once the full episode is created, we redistribute it across all social channels to continue drawing in new audiences and allow viewers to keep replaying and interacting with the content.

The team also creates :30 episode cuts, which are also cross-posted and provided to our host and guests to post to their social networks. With preparation and post-production, a single livestream can allow you to tap into new audiences well after your premier and keep the content flowing.

Ultimately, we're in the midst of a rare cultural moment where we're all enduring similar challenges, making the connective ability of a livestream so powerful. Audiences are engaging most with content that reflects creativity, positivity, development and fun diversions. People are thankful for vulnerability and transparency during so much uncertainty. Let your content reflect the ways our world has become more informal, and lean into the raw human moments for an open conversation over a livestream. ■

Amelia Oliver is a marketing strategist at Green Buzz Agency, a Washington, D.C.-based video production agency.

How Large and Small Brands Monitor to Prepare for Social Media Crises

By Phil Watson

Preparing your company for a social media crisis has one recurrent theme: speed. In the past when a crisis occurred, you usually had one day, or at least a few hours, to prepare. Today, you may have mere minutes. Damaging news may be circulating before you're even aware of it.

While social media's speed is a challenge, there are steps brands can take to be ready. The first is simply identifying potential problems. Social media listening and analysis can be a canary in the coal mine for PR. When you learn of a critical issue early, you can prepare for a more favorable outcome.

Monitoring on Owned Social Media

To understand social media monitoring for a crisis, it's necessary to differentiate between owned and non-owned social media. Owned social media includes your company's **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **LinkedIn**, **YouTube**, **Snapchat** and **Instagram** accounts. When someone engages with you on these accounts, you receive a notification.

There are many case studies wherein social media crises caught organizations off guard. Often these companies didn't respond quickly, or at all, and paid a steep reputational price.

Monitoring owned social media can be done via native platforms or third-party response tools. There are plenty available at varying prices. Small and large companies should procedurally require daily channel monitoring. This is critical not only for customer service, but crisis preparedness. Should conversations about your company heat up in a negative way, you likely will be tagged in a mention or tweet.

Scans for incoming engagements should be conducted several times daily for owned social media channels. For large companies, the volume of incoming engagements necessitates staff monitoring channels into the evening hours and on weekends. Staffing should be scaled to your company's average volume on owned channels.

Non-Owned Social Media

Now for the hard part: non-owned social media. It's a virtual jungle of disjointed conversations that defy easy monitoring. These conversations may take place on Twitter or Facebook and not include your company's official name. They may appear on **Reddit**, **4Chan**, blogs, comment sections under articles, special interest forums and more. There are no notifications when your company is mentioned in these places.

Since your company could be talked about in countless blogs, message boards, forums and other networks, there's no way to cast a net that catches all of those unstructured mentions in a coherent way. There is a host of free tools, though, and Google Alerts is among the most useful. There also are plenty of paid tools that track and analyze social media data.

Paid social media listening tools are necessary for a large company with high volumes of conversation. Popular brands average well more than a million social media mentions monthly. Fortunately, listening tools can analyze large amounts of social media data. Most also have alert systems that scan keywords and inform you as soon as the tool's web crawlers find them. Some tools also detect algorithmic changes and alert you to signals that something unusual is happening with conversations about your brand.

Influencer identification is another key to catching social media crisis early. Your company may be mentioned every few seconds on social media; you can't keep up with each mention. But if someone who has an unusually large following mentions your company, you'll want to know right away.

A key part of monitoring for crisis is notification as soon as a famous or influential person mentions the company. Most listening tools are capable of providing an immediate alert so you can decide quickly whether to engage with the influencer.

Monitoring Competitors and Customers

Situations may occur outside of social media monitoring alerts. When setting up your listening, be mindful of influential voices in your industry. Do you have customers with a high level of influence? They may be holding conversations not directly about you, but are relevant to you. The same goes for competitors. A competitor may get dragged into a situation that your company can use as an early warning.

It's a Crisis. Now What?

Once you've set up an effective monitoring program, you'll likely go through growing pains identifying what is and what is not a crisis. As you fine-tune your listening parameters, learn to filter out irrelevant noise.

Brands should have a crisis plan that includes protocols about who is alerted. Generally, this includes your organization's crisis team. Be careful not to cry wolf. If your crisis team is receiving calls every few days and the crises don't materialize, the importance of social media crisis monitoring will be diminished in your organization.

You may have minutes or days before a social media crisis breaks. For example, if you know there is a product recall or other negative company news that will be announced, you have time to prepare. Whether you have three days or three hours to prepare, there are similar steps that should be taken.

- **Black out your social media.** This means no publishing of unrelated content for the duration of the crisis. When a company is in the midst of a storm of negative conversation, publishing product-related content gives the public an impression of an unorganized and tone-deaf organization.
- Prepare your responses. In a crisis you likely will have many people engaging with your social media channels. Create a list of questions/comments you will most likely receive and prepare respons-

Do You Have a Social Media Crisis?

If "yes" is the answer to any of the below, it's probably worth consulting your crisis team.

- ☐ Could this cause long-term harm to our reputation?
- ☐ Could this have a negative financial impact on the company?
- ☐ Could this harm employee morale or recruiting efforts?
- ☐ Could this result in legal issues?
- ☐ Are there environmental, health or safety concerns stemming from this post?

Is someone with a high level of influence saying negative things about us?

es. Have the planned responses approved so you can avoid losing time to the approvals process during the crisis.

- **Extend responding capabilities.** For some companies, this means 24-hour coverage of social media channels. If you're a large, consumer-facing brand and your crisis is related to product safety, you will likely see a high volume of engagement from concerned consumers. With extended coverage, your team can quickly answer most concerns with pre-approved responses.
- **Measure your crisis.** It's easy in the fog of a crisis to forget about measurement, but it's a critical component. Measuring engagement volume, sentiment and demographics of those engaging and times of posts will help in benchmarking for your next crisis. Also, measure the most influential people talking about the crisis. This data can tell the story of the crisis from a unique vantage point and forecast when it will subside.

After the Storm

Eventually the social media conversation about your crisis will subside and you can return to normal social media operations. While there is no standard time to wait until resuming normal posts, it's worth noting that when United Airlines faced its well-documented crisis in 2017, it stopped publishing non-crisis-related content on Twitter for nearly one month. Similarly, it's important to establish and communicate a date when the crisis is over officially and social content publication can resume.

Within one week of the crisis, while it's still fresh, create a report that visually shows the impact on social media. This will help your organization better understand social media. It also will help you benchmark for the next time your company faces a crisis. ■

Phil Watson is director, consumer public relations for BFGoodrich/Michelin North America.

6

Case Studies

Crisis Plan | Internal Communications

Pandemic Propels New Jersey School Districts into Action

By Lori Perlow

In many parts of the country, the month of February yields sleepless nights for school district leaders who spend hours monitoring potential winter storms that can lead to school closures. The decision to close schools during or after a winter storm is agonizing for superintendents and chief school administrators who are frequently criticized publicly through social media and other channel for their decisions.

In February 2020, our entire country was monitoring a very different kind of public health storm.

As news of COVID-19 from around the world began to hit the United States, school district leaders looked toward their county, state and national leaders in education and public health for guidance. By early March, it was clear that widespread school closures were imminent.

With an initial two-week closure ordered by New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, brick and mortar schools transformed into virtual learning environments in a matter of days.

Schools are the core of every community and they provide more than reading, writing and arithmetic lessons to students; they provide sustenance and critical public health information. With a subsequent multi-week closure in place, educational leaders and teachers were forced to pivot. No amount of remote learning can ever replace the human connections that take place in classrooms each day.

Feed the Children

As remote learning plans were being implemented, so too were plans for distributing free and reduced-price meals to students. Concerned citizens all over the country questioned how schools would continue to #FeedTheChildren during a pandemic. For some young people, school meals are the only consistent meals they can rely on each day.

School leaders are keenly aware that food insecurity carries a stigma. To circumvent this, the **Burlington Township School District** arranged distribution sites at 10 strategic locations in order to ensure that students had access to meals throughout the community.

When meals weren't being picked up during the first week, the district responded promptly by translating their communications into additional languages. In some instances, school resource officers delivered meals directly to families who were unable to physically pick-up meals due to barriers like lack of transportation.

The **Sayreville Public School District** took an even more proactive approach by sending bus loads of meals and household supplies, including paper towels and toilet paper, into the communities they serve. Families placed their meal and supply orders via a **Google** form, available in both English and Spanish, on the district's website.

Bus drivers that normally shuttle students to and from school were transformed into frontline workers, bridging a critical gap in the food supply chain. Twice weekly, the buses unloaded their supplies at nearly 30 designated bus stops within the borough's 18 square miles.

Estimated arrival times were shared in advance, and updates were communicated on social media to ensure that recipients were at the bus stops. On average, volunteers prepared and delivered 3,000 meals per week.

Takeaway: Dig into the data and move mountains when you're not seeing results from a critical effort.

Feeding the Frontline

In Ramsey, the school district became an integral link between local food establishments and frontline healthcare workers.

"Ramsey Strong," a parent-led initiative, raised money to purchase meals from local establishments and deliver them to healthcare workers at hospitals in Bergen County.

Located in the northeast corner of New Jersey, Bergen County had the highest number of positive COVID-19 cases and deaths (as of April 20, 2020) in the state. In collaboration with Superintendent Matthew Murphy, volunteers leveraged district communication channels, including the website, email lists and social media platforms, to solicit donations for Ramsey Strong. Over a period of three weeks, more than $70,000 was raised to feed critical healthcare workers while boosting the local economy.

Takeaway: In times of crisis, it's worth extending your boundaries for the greater good of the community.

Distribution of Public Health Info

As with any crisis, consistent key messaging in important. With COVID-19, information changed rapidly, sometimes hourly, and it was increasing difficult for school districts to maintain the flow of information while simultaneously preparing to shift to remote learning. In Wayne Township, the school district created an information hub on its website. The hub contained everything from public health information and links to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC), FAQs for parents and wellness resources for all.

In any crisis, parents and staff often look to their schools for guidance, as there's an inherent trust factor. The website was continually enhanced with new tabs and information for users who may be overwhelmed with news and social media.

Takeaway: Be the source for distilled facts to help your stakeholders with exactly what they need to know. Promise to update as soon as new information becomes available.

Continuity of Learning

In the **Linden Public School District**, where more than half of the students are economically disadvantaged, every student receives a district-issued laptop or tablet. When virtual learning became a reality for all New Jersey students, key messaging to parents and the media underscored the existing technological proficiency.

For middle school and high school students who maintain possession of their devices, there was minimal disruption with the shift to remote learning. However, elementary students weren't accustomed to taking their tablets home. During the second week of remote learning, a tablet distribution process took place so elementary students could remain connected. The District used direct email, automated phone calls and social media to inform parents about the time and place for tablet distribution. As a result, nearly every student received a tablet.

A secondary concern was that some students did not have internet access at home. To address this, information about **Comcast**'s program for free internet was publicized. Links were posted on the district website, on social media channels and through direct email. These communications were sent in English, Spanish, Polish, and Haitian Creole.

In rural communities like Waterford Township, where devices aren't accessible to all, students were sent home with packets prior to the first closure. Parents were notified by email and through social media that packets could also be picked up at the local Post Office, as it would remain open during the pandemic. When subsequent extended closures were ordered, Waterford utilized its buses to deliver new packets to students at their homes.

Takeaway: Recognize and remove as many obstacles as you can to increase access to your service. In the short-term, the extra steps taken will provide needed reassurance for stakeholders that you're aware of the obstacles and it will inevitably build trust over the long-term.

A Mindful Approach to Remote Learning

As school districts across the country rolled out their remote learning plans, it became clear that remote teaching and learning were strikingly different than traditional teaching and learning in a classroom.

In the **Warren Township School District**, Superintendent Matthew Mingle addressed this inequality immediately with staff, parents and students. Every Friday, a check-in survey was sent to parents via email. The data was reviewed internally, and modifications were made to the flexible instruction plan when needed. The summary data was also shared externally via a community briefing in print and video formats. These briefings also included useful resources for flexible instruction as well as informational updates. To assist school district employees who may also be struggling, a daily check-in survey was sent by email. Responses provided the administration an opportunity to support their colleagues in a direct and meaningful way. ■

Takeaway: In good times and in bad, we must take care of our employees and our customers. In education, the customers are young people who rely on the staff. This is a win-win.

Takeaway: If you plan to send a survey to a key stakeholder group, be prepared to share the results and take appropriate action to improve or modify whatever you asked about in the first place.

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Crisis Plan | Media Relations

How Lessons from a Prison Break Can Help You Navigate Complex Crises

By Jeff Hallock

When the persistent ring of a cell phone pulls you from sleep, it's never good news. In law enforcement, however, it's unfortunately not so unusual.

The kinds of things a law enforcement public information officer (PIO) might respond to don't pay mind to traditional business hours. Any one of homicide, shooting or a horrific fatal crash might warrant a middle-of-the-night call to the PIO.

Then there are the not-so-everyday events that test the fortitude of your organization's communications plan and strategies. These are the crises.

Defining a crisis means different things for different organizations, but a well-thought-out approach to navigating the complexities of handling then extends across industries.

Once a crisis is determined, it's critical to immediately put a plan in motion: Delegate roles, prepare your organization's leader and commit to a consistent and thorough media outreach strategy. Designate a spokesperson, a government liaison, a scribe and a social media monitor.

For the **Orange County Sheriff's Department**, crisis struck on Jan 22, 2016. Three inmates had escaped from the Central Men's Jail—two men were in custody for attempted murder and another locked up for kidnapping and torture. The Public Affairs Office consisted of three executive aides and one public information officer. The PIO responsibilities were part of a sworn (Lieutenant) position. In a crisis, a well-organized team approach works best, and in our case, we already had the basic structure in place.

Even if your organization doesn't have a Public Affairs team, take some time to designate people who can step into various roles should a major incident strike.

In a large-scale event, fielding and responding to media inquiries can be overwhelming and difficult to manage. In a crisis, immediately let the media know you will be providing updates with new information at designated times. This ensures your messaging is delivered consistently and fairly across media platforms. It also allows your communications team time between updates to focus on strategy and next steps without a steady flow of interruptions.

Our crisis was unique in that we needed public and media assistance to help us resolve it. These inmates were on the run, and investigators had little information. We needed our community and press to be alert and aware of the situation. We needed the information to be disseminated in as widespread a manner as possible, and we needed to leverage media coverage to ensure our message was consistently broadcast both locally and nationally.

We needed to bring the escapees back quickly. This dynamic posed the added challenge of ensuring every media briefing revealed fresh and newsworthy information. In some cases, this meant withholding details we may have learned in the morning for the afternoon briefing in an attempt to guarantee media coverage later in the day. We called this a calculated release of information, and it was imperative for engagement.

Position Your Team

While the spokesperson or PIO will serve as the face of your organization in such an incident, it is important to position your leader to deliver the most impactful messages. During the escape, we wanted Sheriff Hutchens to be the one to deliver the news that the inmates had been captured and returned to our facility.

Our strategy: The PIO would deliver the bad news and the Sheriff would come in heralding the good.

Upon realizing this incident would likely span beyond a couple of days, our team recognized the importance of getting the sheriff in front of the community. She delivered a powerful message on Day 2, and vowed the escapees would be found and returned to prison. When crisis strikes, putting your leader at the forefront sets a tone of reassurance and control of the situation.

Often times, in major incidents, your leader won't be the only one who wants to comment publicly on the matter. Elected officials often will also want to make a statement or hold a press briefing to address their constituents. It is important that the officials and your organization are on the same page so key messaging remains consistent.

Tap someone to be the conduit between your organization and government officials. Our government affairs manager was tasked with keeping officials informed of the investigation's progress, next steps and strategies so they could better understand our crisis management process.

Two other roles that make running a large-scale incident run more smoothly are designating a scribe and social media monitor.

6 Damage-Control Actions to Undertake

- ☐ "**Load the gun**:" Plan ahead of time for a worst-case scenario situation for your organization. Decide what a crisis might look like and put a plan on paper for how to handle it.
- ☐ **Designate roles**: Decide who will play what role in a large-scale incident. Delegate a spokesperson, government relations liaison, social media monitor and scribe.
- ☐ **Media strategy**: Designate select times to keep the media informed during a crisis and stick to releasing information only on that schedule.
- ☐ **Leader out front**: Position the leader of your organization at the forefront of the crisis.
- ☐ **Monitor social media**: Designate one person to scan and filter all social media content, looking for important information and responding to inquiries.
- ☐ **Write it down**: Tap one person to keep a log of how and when information was released to the public.

Come Prepared

True crises are rarely a one-day affair. They are complex and drawn out—sometimes lasting days or weeks. In many cases, significant events will continue to be reported on, or at least casually referenced in, the media for years to come.

As days pass, press conferences meld together and what was said at Monday's strategy planning session becomes a hazy memory.

Having a dedicated person to document who said what at which press conference, and what was released and when, is an invaluable reference guide as you move through the crisis management process.

The value of this role didn't become clear to our team until days into the incident when we began to recount what and when information was released. We didn't delegate a scribe, but now we know that we should have.

Equally important is dedicating someone to monitor social media. This provide the chance for unfiltered communication and provide unfettered access and transparency.

But taking to social media platforms means being prepared to handle the likely tidal wave of comments, tips and questions from the public. Someone needs to be there, eyes on the screen, to respond if some potentially important information comes in that needs to be shared with your organization.

All of these steps and every tool boils down to one overarching theme in handling a crisis: preparation.

Our team called this "loading the gun."

Every facet of the Sheriff's Department, from patrol to SWAT, diligently trains for the "what ifs," the worst-case scenarios and the seemingly impossible. They are the things we never wish to happen but are grateful to call on our training when they do. A communications team should be no different. Talk about how to best prepare for your worst-case scenario. Plan ahead. Put it on paper.

Preparation will make that middle-of-the-night phone call less jarring and the days that will follow less daunting. ■

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Crisis Plan | Internal Communications | Social Media

Proactivity, (Toilet) Paper and a Pandemic: Fighting on the Frontlines as a Grocer

By Emily Mastroianni

In a matter of days, the grocery industry joined the front lines of the COVID-19 global pandemic, faced with an unprecedented level of demand as customers prepared for the government-mandated quarantine.

Grocers quickly began responding to this spike and it soon became clear that this was not just a race against surges in demand – this was the beginning of an entirely new grocery ecosystem. An ecosystem that prioritized:

- The safety and protection of its essential workers and customers
- A shift to online shopping and e-commerce
- Delivery and pick up services
- High standards of in-store operations and sanitation

With time of the essence, **Gatesman** and its client **SHOP 'n SAVE**, an independently owned and operated grocery chain with more than 80 stores in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, New York and West Virginia, found themselves navigating a never-before-seen crisis that brought new challenges that required nimble communications.

Three areas of focus contributed to a smooth navigation of the COVID-19 crisis: adaptation and anticipation; increased cadence of communication and transparency; and commitment and action.

Adaptation & Anticipation

First and foremost was the ability and willingness to adapt, and to do so quickly. One of the first internal changes Gatesman initiated was pivoting the team's existing long-term crisis strategy into a day-to-day strategy.

The company developed a "Thank You" video that encouraged the community to show appreciation for the dedication of all employees through social media sharing and broadcast media.

With the state of the crisis shifting day-to-day and sometimes even hour-by-hour, the team implemented daily (rather than weekly) internal status calls. Each call included key representatives across teams and focused on discussing government mandates and industry trends, community needs and safety, and operational demands to inform both internal and external messages.

SHOP 'n SAVE developed messaging to communicate with shoppers about what it was doing to protect their health and provided these answers through social media, email and in-store enhancements and signage.

One of the first actions, and an important component of the strategy shift, was the evaluation of all current in-market messages. For SHOP 'n SAVE, it was vital to remove anything that lacked sensitivity in response to the pandemic.

With customers now confined at home, more eyes were focused on what grocers were and were not saying, with every piece of communication having the potential to make or break the brand. With this in mind, SHOP 'n SAVE removed all of its in-market commercials and focused its communication efforts on its social channels. This allowed the brand to align with its new day-to-day strategy and, most importantly, maintain the flexibility needed to quickly shift or update messages.

The clear unknown that was brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic not only required adaptability and an adjusted strategy, but also a sense of proactivity and anticipation of what might be coming next. This was upheld through active monitoring of real-time news, social media and government briefings regarding all facets of the disease.

Equally important was the close consideration of feedback from customers and employees, which was maintained through heightened community management in order to ensure safety and maintain loyalty.

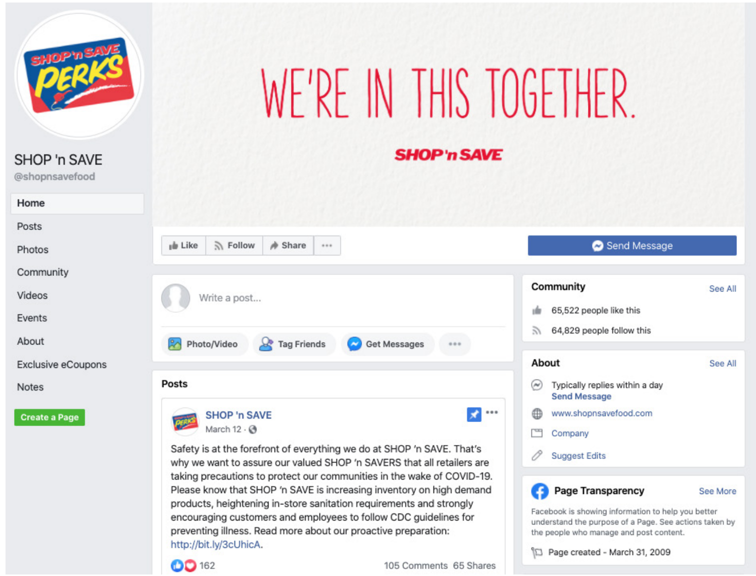
From internal discussions and external monitoring emerged an underlying message of hope, connectivity and appreciation. SHOP 'n SAVE harnessed this compassion and deployed a message that served as the driving force behind its communication and operational efforts: "We're in this together."

Increased Communication and Transparency

With this shift in strategy came the need for an increased cadence of communication and transparency with all parties.

This began with those integral to SHOP 'n SAVE, specifically, the independent owners, operators and employees, who ensured they had the resources needed to properly clean and manage stores according to CDC guidelines, which was pertinent to the protection of employees and customers alike.

SHOP 'n SAVE developed transparent external messaging to communicate openly and honestly with shoppers every step of the way because customers' lives depended on it. Customers needed to know what SHOP 'n SAVE was doing to protect their health and they needed to know what options were available so they could provide food for their families. SHOP 'n SAVE provided these answers through daily social media management, consistent email distribution updates and in-store enhancements and signage, in order to reach all audiences.



SHOP 'n SAVE deployed messing that served to say, "We're in this together."

Commitment and Action

Even more important than communicating the message was living the mantra "we're in this together" through action. SHOP 'n Save donated $10,000 to local food banks (the equivalent of 50,000 meals) and offered a 10% discount off store gift cards for all food banks, pantries and kitchens. Details about this charitable initiative, along with other actions such as adjusting store hours for seniors, were shared with media and picked up across major local outlets.

Just as important was the message of appreciation toward SHOP 'n SAVE employees, who had showed up each day for the well-being of others in the community. The company acted upon this through the development of a "Thank You" video that encouraged the community to show appreciation for the dedication of all employees through social media sharing and broadcast media.

As this case was written, Gatesman and SHOP 'n SAVE were still fighting on the frontlines. While there is no way in knowing when another wave of the pandemic might surge, tracking every move made and every message developed along the way has been a critical step in SHOP 'n SAVE's crisis response. ■

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Crisis Plan **Media Relations**

How to Use Teamwork and Technology to Effectively Manage a Crisis Situation

By Dana Berchman & Jennifer Alvarez

Has your organization been hit with a crisis? As a PR professional, it's not a matter of "if" a crisis will happen; rather, it's a question of "when" it will happen. Since it's unclear when a crisis will arise, preparedness is key and having a crisis communications plan is essential to ensure a timely response.

When a massive five-alarm fire broke out on a Saturday evening in busy Gilbert, Arizona—a Phoenix suburb home to nearly 250,000 residents—the **Gilbert Fire and Rescue Department** partnered with **Gilbert's Digital Communications Department** to take a "teamwork and technology" approach to communication and community outreach.

This fire is a prime example of how an incident can continue to grow with time and how your response should as well.

What started out as a small fire at an apartment complex under construction, quickly turned into an enormous fire that was threatening nearby homes, a 120-unit apartment complex, several businesses and Gilbert's municipal buildings. The fire caused evacuations, road closures, panic and curiosity, as it could be seen for miles across the entire Phoenix valley. Nearly 140 firefighters from multiple city agencies battled the blaze for more than five hours to protect it from spreading and potentially burning down the city block.

During this time our team was challenged with managing the news media, social media and community outreach. As mentioned above, preparedness is key in situations like this and with our crisis communications plan in place we were effectively able to become our own news agency to communicate the most up-to-date information to residents and the media. In fact, we had nearly 30,000 people following along as "Gilbert" and the fire was trending with Beyoncé on **Twitter**.

Here are four key things that Gilbert's crisis communications plan considers.

- **Be your own news agency.** It's no secret that the media continues to shrink and are running with minimal staff. With this in mind, it's more important than ever to be your own news agency and tell your own story. You are the source and your residents will come directly to you for the most up-to-date and factual information. And let's be honest, who can tell your story better than you?

The fire occurred at 6:00 p.m. on a Saturday night, not exactly a prime time for news. This gave us the opportunity to be the source of information for residents and those looking for any information on the fire. We got ahead of the news stations and told our story live on social media before they went on-air for the regular 10:00 p.m. news broadcast.

It's vital to build your following before a crisis hits so that when you need to distribute important information, your customers are already engaged. Plus, by consistently telling your story—the good and the bad—you build trust and credibility with your customers. And the best part is that technology is mak-

3 Lessons Learned About Using Live Video in a Crisis

Live video is an amazing resource, especially during a crisis situation. This tool not only allows you to show a scene but it also gives an organization the opportunity to put a face at the forefront. Before you go live, here are three things you need to know:

1. It's the ultimate multitasking challenge. This is something you won't necessarily understand until you try it. This is why practicing prior to going live, especially during a crisis, is imperative. While you're live, not only should you be speaking and giving information or conducting an interview, but you also need to make sure you monitor questions and comments. Engaging in a two-way conversation with your viewers is the best way to connect with your viewers. Bonus tip: Turn off all other notifications while you go live to prevent them from interrupting your live feed.
2. "Haters gonna hate." Just like with any other social media platform, live video gives your viewers the freedom to say what they want to say. Depending on your organization's policies, you can block them or, if you can't block them, encourage appropriate comments throughout your broadcast. More often than not, your other viewers will end up policing the naysayers.
3. Technology is draining. The great thing about technology is that you're now able to do everything you need directly from your smartphone. When you're managing crisis communications from your phone it's going to be working overtime and it's important to make sure you not only have a full battery when you start, but that you also have a charger as well. This is especially important when you go live as the live broadcast tends to drain smartphone batteries even faster and you will not know how long your emergency situation will last. The worst thing you can do is run out of battery in the middle of a livestream.

Live video is an easy way to incorporate video into your crisis situation or your marketing mix in general. Find a topic and try it out if you haven't already. Practice makes perfect!

ing it easier than ever to tell your own story, which brings us to our next point.

- **Embrace technology.** Technology is rapidly changing and is giving PR and marketing professionals new outlets to reach and engage with their customers. Embracing these new tools and incorporating them into your communications plan—and more importantly, your crisis communications plan—is critical. Find out where your customers are and use that platform, whether it is **Twitter**, **Facebook** Live, **Instagram** or **Snapchat**, to share information before, during and after crisis situations.

Make sure your customers know where to find you and the information they are looking for. Gilbert has more than 25 social media channels, but during emergencies like the fire, we utilize Twitter as our primary social media platform to distribute the most up-to-date information. In addition to Twitter, we also use live video (see sidebar), and in this case, Persicope, to give the community an opportunity to see the scene and hear from and engage in a two-way conversation with Gilbert Fire's Public Information Officer. We went live from the fire twice; the first time was before any mass media coverage began and the second live segment competed with the 10:00 p.m. news

During the fire, our social media updates included information on evacuations, road closures, media staging areas and status updates on the fire. Twitter also gave us an opportunity to show a behind-the-scenes look at the incident. We were able to tell the full story of the fire—from the firefighters actually fighting the blaze to the rehab they went

Gilbert Fire and Rescue used Twitter and live video to share a behind-the-scenes look at the fire. Credit: Gilbert Fire and Rescue

through after they returned from the front lines. Twitter also gave us the opportunity to thank local businesses that provided food for first responders and evacuees as well as our neighboring cities that provided additional resources. This storytelling power allowed us to engage our audience and put a human perspective beyond the fire. It also gave citizens an opportunity to connect with first responders and thank them for their efforts.

- **You can't do it alone.** During a major incident, like the five-alarm fire, there are a lot of moving parts from managing onsite media, phone and email media inquiries, gathering the latest information, sharing that information, monitoring the media and social listening, just to name a few. The point is, you can't do it alone and it's important to build your crisis communications SWAT team before you need it.

Here are four things that Gilbert, Arizona's crisis communications plan considers that yours should too. Credit: Gilbert, Arizona

During the fire we had four personnel assisting with crisis communications and outreach. Three team members were onsite—one handling all onsite media interviews, another assisting with phone interview requests and the third onsite team member was handling social media while also gathering the latest details. The fourth team member was offsite monitoring the news coverage and assisting with social listening. The social listening factor is important because it clues you into what your messaging currently isn't addressing.

Had the fire worsened, our crisis communications plan outlines additional resources as an incident grows. By planning ahead and having your team in place, it makes coordinating communications during a crisis as seamless as possible.

- **Nobody expects perfection, but they do expect information.** In a crisis situation, timing is everything. It is important to get ahead of the incident and establish yourself as the source of information. Crisis situations are constantly evolving and changing, sometimes by the minute. Your audience does not expect perfection, but they do expect information.

As soon as we are aware of a crisis situation, we make it a priority to post about it immediately on social media, specifically Twitter. If we don't have many details, we at minimum recognize that we know that there is an incident and let our followers know more information will be posted as soon as it is available. The fact that we at least recognize that there is an incident helps to build our credibility with our citizens.

Gilbert, Arizona's crisis communications plan has become a model for government communicators. There were more than 16,000 tweets posted about "Gilbert" and the Gilbert Fire which led to the topic trending with Beyoncé and the UFC on Twitter. People near and far were talking about the fire and we were leading that global conversation. Gilbert's tweets had more than 30,000 impressions and Gilbert Fire and Rescue's Twitter account gained an additional 700 followers. Citizens used social media as a way to thank first responders and it was an incredible way to bring the community together during a tragedy. All of this was made possible by embracing technology and teamwork during a crisis situation. ■

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Crisis Plan | Internal Communications

How Leadership Drives Crisis Communications Success

By Gary Kimball

Let's put aside talking points, media statements and other crisis communications tools for a minute. There is a fundamental leadership skill that drives a good crisis communications response. That is the ability, when faced with a crisis, to accept the reality of what is happening and, at the same time, see down the road to what it will look like at the end. Unfortunately, some leaders react like the proverbial deer in headlights: They take too long to move forward and get too tangled up in the near-term impact to chart a course that will lead them out of harm's way.

We saw this ability (or inability) play out in public and private sector responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes in very positive ways and sometimes in strange and tragic ways. And when an organization's strategy and response are flawed, there is only so much communication professionals can do.

When we examine responses to this crisis, it's easy to point to failures. Instead, let's look at what one company did right.

One Communication Success Story

The company is a global services provider serving U.S. insurance operations. It has nearly 4,500 employees in China. A full month before the impact of the coronavirus was felt in the U.S., this company's China offices were shut down, its staff spread out on a national holiday and their ability to serve their clients was in jeopardy.

Like many, their business continuity plan (BCP) was pushed to the limit by the scope of the coronavirus. However, having this plan in place benefited its continued operations and communications. A plan creates the structure that makes it easier to put one foot in front of the other, move through details methodically and intelligently, and organizes a communications team that is ready to go.

The company was able to move quickly, adapting to remote operations that restored 85 percent of its capacity within three days. And it communicated early and often with its two main audiences: its employees and clients. Balancing speed and accuracy in its communications was critical, as the outbreak proved to be ever-changing with rules often determined by the local government.

The company communicated proactively from day one with candid messages, backed by facts, that put employee safety first as it brought operations back to full capacity as quickly as possible. For example, when the company returned to its offices using a phased-in approach, it provided private transportation for employees — a significant safety step in a culture where public transport is used heavily.

Company leaders and the business development team implemented routine, multichannel client communications, including daily and weekly email updates on staffing, global messaging from executives and one-on-one calls to address specific concerns. The company listened to clients and adapted along the way. Employees on the front line were prepared with FAQs so they could respond to questions and concerns accurately and consistently. This proactive and candid approach resonated with clients.

This approach also reflected the company culture, as the CEO told me emphatically one day: "We over-communicate; that's who we are." In a crisis of this scale, it served the company well. Moreover, when the executives communicated, it was with meaningful, practical information. There were messages of hope and tributes to staff, but the focus remained on staying safe and serving clients.

Lessons Learned

Even in a pandemic, the basics of crisis communications remain the same. Speak openly and honestly to your audiences, communicate quickly but strategically, voice empathy and compassion when appropriate and take control of all messaging around your specific company.

Today, tragedy and fear are embedded in daily life, and timetables are moving targets. Leaders should take steps early on to address employee and client concerns, implement emergency plans and lay out a flexible and adaptive course of action. Communications flow naturally from such an approach.

Those who did it right in the COVID-19 pandemic were front and center with their clients and staff from the onset. Their calm voices didn't minimize the impact but did inspire confidence in the thoughtful course they charted and care taken for everyone's well-being. That's what inspires people to find solutions and energizes morale.

On the other hand, those who let short-term profits guide them may have lost perspective of where they will be when the crisis is over. They probably found communicating with employees, clients and others more challenging — as did those who were overwhelmed, had no plan or waited too long to respond. Those who simply stayed silent lost an opportunity to create a hopeful story, allowing other narratives to take hold.

Finally, how much is too much? How do we stay connected in a crisis without overwhelming people with too many messages? I think it starts with knowing our employees, knowing our clients and setting expectations from the start about when and how they will hear from us. Then, as communication professionals, we should be able to tell if the message is sincere, timely, helpful — and not self-serving. People need information that helps them, not generalities and trite overused phrases.

There's nothing easy about communicating in a crisis, but it's a lot easier with strong leaders who recognize when a storm is coming, have a plan and move forward quickly, honestly and with good intentions. ■

Gary Kimball is president and founder of Kimball Hughes Public Relations. gkimball@kimballpr.com.

Internal Communications

Communicating in Crisis: Using Multiple Channels to Confront Coronavirus Concerns

By Christina Kuhl

When we issued our first company-wide email communication about the coronavirus on March 4, 2020, it was to let our associates know that we were monitoring the situation and to share some helpful tips from the **CDC** on how to stay healthy.

As the crisis began to escalate, we encouraged associates to stop attending large industry events before we outright canceled all non-essential travel on March 13. Just four days later, we told all associates who could work from home to do so immediately.

Distribution International faces a number of communications challenges in "normal" times. Not only are the company's 1,300 associates scattered across the United States and Canada in nearly 100 different locations, but the vast majority of the workforce spends their days either on the warehouse or fabrication shop floor or as part of our fleet of professional delivery drivers bringing orders directly to customers.

They're not sitting at desks reading emails, and they're not doing jobs that can be performed remotely. In addition to having to overcome the perception issue of whose safety was being prioritizing by transitioning most of our corporate staff to work remotely, we had to rise to a number of challenges: demonstrating how we would remain true to our core purpose to "Enhance the Life of Every Member of the DI Family"; conveying genuine empathy for our workforce given the unprecedented level of economic uncertainty;

Business Update Recorded Message from CEO Steve Margolius

<u>Business Update – April 17, 2020</u>

Hello Everyone. Today's message is about **gratitude**. I know every member of the DI Family is working tirelessly each day to make sure that we are the <u>strongest</u> company in our industry during the crisis, and the <u>first</u> and <u>strongest</u> to emerge <u>after</u> the crisis. I am so impressed by your support of one another and your dedication to the company, and I want to sincerely thank you for hustling and keeping the faith in our future.

By focusing on the fundamentals of **Safety**, **Service**, and **Sales**, we will not be outworked. These are tough times, but we will get through them together as a team.

Please take a moment to listen to this week's Business Update. Spanish and French versions will be available soon.

Finally, please keep your feedback coming. I value and appreciate your thoughts on these messages and will always respond to you.

Stay safe and remember – we will get through this together. Thank you for making DI a truly great company.

All the best,

Steve

DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL

Business Update – March 24, 2020

There is a lot of information to share today, so instead of an email, I've decided to do an audio recording. It's attached to this note.

Please take time to listen to it. It's 14 minutes long and is offered to you in the honest, straight-talk style you deserve and expect. My message is about dealing with our reality and keeping faith in our future. Please stay well.

All the best,

Steve

A message from Steve Margolius: Please listen to my audio message about dealing with our reality and keeping faith in our future. Stay well. https://youtu.be/ [redacted]

and creating and distributing messages that would reach and resonate with all associates.

Email: Good for Facts, Not Feelings

As soon we made the decision to close our three corporate offices, we began issuing daily emails to all associates. These emails focused on the actions we were taking to keep our business running, such as expanding our leave policies to provide additional flexibility, issuing detailed cleaning protocols for our warehouses and providing clarification about why we were considered an "essential business" and could continue to operate during the crisis.

This cadence was critical to demonstrating our commitment to keeping our workforce safe while still running our business. But as our orders began to slow and the construction industry outlook continued to deteriorate, we knew we had to start making tough decisions—the kind of decisions that require empathy and explanation, the kind of communication that doesn't translate well via email.

Audio: Embrace Honesty and Empathy

Our CEO Steve Margolius had kicked off 2020 with a candid, straight-forward, buzzword-free podcast to discuss the company's latest business developments. The second episode was issued via email with a **SharePoint** link to the audio file on February 27, just a week before the first coronavirus email. We recorded his third podcast on March 24, and he spoke for 14 minutes about adjusting to our new reality.

We knew difficult decisions were on the immediate horizon. Rather than trying to soften the blow or make false assurances, we told the truth. Workforce reductions were coming. Feedback from this message was that it made associates nervous, but they appreciated the honesty.

When this podcast was sent by email, we included it as an attachment rather than a SharePoint link to provide easier and faster access to the file. We continued to use audio every week because it captured the tone and human aspect of the decisions that were being made in a way email never could. Associates consistently commented that they could hear the weight of these decisions and genuine empathy in our CEO's voice, lending credibility to both the message and the messenger.

Text Messages: Reach Your Audience Anywhere

We knew that most of our associates did not have regular access to email, which was our primary method of podcast distribution.

To ensure all associates had easy and immediate access to the latest information from our CEO, we used a text message platform offered by our phone service provider to deliver the audio messages directly to associates' cell phones. The text message included a link to the recording on **YouTube**.

Translation: Inclusion in Crisis

While emails can easily be translated into other languages using Google Translate, audio files for non-native English speakers present a challenge. We had been providing written translations of podcasts in Spanish and French, but recognizing the impact of audio vs. the written word, we knew we needed to take the translation further. We contracted translators for Spanish and French that could more quickly and affordably translate our podcast transcripts. We then used two internal resources to produce Spanish and French audio versions and sent them along with the English audio file to all associates.

Commitment to Communicating

Our communications approach was driven by the belief that honesty is the best policy. No matter how difficult the message, honesty is how you demonstrate genuine respect for others. And during the coronavirus outbreak, we never compromised. Whether working remotely or on the warehouse floor, our associates saw us consistently demonstrating our respect for them by delivering the latest information via multiple channels and multiple languages. Consistent, honest communications served as a bright spot in an otherwise dark time.

Christina Kuhl is director of executive communications at Distribution International.
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Crisis Plan | Executive and Spokesperson Training

Better Understand Organizational Trust Through a Consumer's Perspective

By Christie Kleinmann

The "nearly new" car smell still lingered in the 2014 F-150's interior when the uniformed officer delivered the court summons one Saturday morning. According to the courts, the black truck sitting in our driveway was not legally ours. We had bought the truck three months earlier at a local car dealership. The truck was loaded and at a good price; it had seemed too good to be true.

We christened the truck the B.A.T. Its dark tinted windows, black rims and red accents truly made it a Bad A(ttitude) Truck. For the next three months, the B.A.T. was a prominent figure in our family plans. We bought a camper for the truck and commenced planning for the long-discussed trip across the United States. Dreams of adventures, tailgates and getaways infused our conversations, and the B.A.T. played the leading role.

Dreams were shattered with a single knock on the front door. The court order granted legal ownership to another, and we had 30 days to respond.

Details were flimsy, but based on conversations with the plaintiff's lawyer, the B.A.T. had been taken by a car transport company and deposited at our car dealer, where we then purchased it. The lawyer stated that our dealer had been notified that the B.A.T.'s title was questionable. The car dealer's response was equivocal, but the state of Georgia's ruling was clear, placing a levy on the B.A.T. that legally returned rightful ownership to its previous owner. We were caught in the middle of pointing fingers, and a court order that voided our rights of ownership.

We visited the local dealership that same day, but received limited assistance. The manager on duty was more concerned with removing us than hearing our concern.

Apparently, the person who could handle this matter was unavailable until Monday.

We didn't wait until Monday. We called another manager who routed us to "Bill" who would handle our concern. That was our last phone conversation with the dealership for the next seven days. Bill preferred short, "we're working on it" texts and was unavailable for phone conversations. Later, Bill would proudly note that he contacted us every day, which is technically true. For the next seven days, we received short texts of assurance, but no substantive information.

By this time, we had been counseled by friends and coworkers to seek legal assistance. After all, we only had 30 days to respond to the summons, and the clock was ticking. Yet, we waited, albeit impatiently. The dealership was a good community supporter, and the owner's son attended the same school as our children. We wanted to give them the chance to do the right thing.

Seven days later, the local dealership told us that they wanted to "make it right" and buy the B.A.T. from us. We arranged our first face-to-face meeting.

When we arrived, Bill met us at the front door and ushered us toward a salesperson to show us different trucks.

What? We didn't come to buy another truck; we came to get rid of the one we had supposedly "bought."

The last thing we wanted was another transaction with this dealership. Make it right, then part ways. Continuing to do business with them was not part of our plan.

It seemed we had misunderstood Bill's text. The dealership was offering to accept the B.A.T. at our previous sales price IF we bought another truck from them. The alternative was to see what would happen in court, but Bill insinuated that a court answer could take some time.

We felt trapped. Either decision was fraught with uncertainty.

"How do we know that a second truck will not bring another summons to our door?"

"This has never happened before," Bill assured us. "We move nearly 4,000 vehicles each month, and this has never happened."

"But it did happen, and it happened to us."

Bill leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment.

"It's like when you go eat at **Cracker Barrel**. You can go there and have lots of good meals. But one day, you go, and the food is not good. Maybe it's a bit burned. The cook was having a bad day . . . "

I shook my head in response.

"What, do you work at Cracker Barrel?"

"If I have a bad meal at Cracker Barrel, a police officer doesn't show up at my door the next day."

"Well, this has never happened before, and technically our name is not on the summons."

We would hear that a lot that day. The dealership was not listed on the summons; the dealership would lose lots of money by making this right; the dealership was doing us a favor. The more we heard it, the less we trusted the dealership, Bill, the salesperson, and their "spirit" of customer service. It was a long day.

Integrity is words with feet. Without action, integrity is simply window dressing.

Trust and the Organization

Bill followed crisis communication protocol. He accepted responsibility without assuming fault, and he communicated the organization's desire to "make it right" and "to earn your trust." Yet, the interaction failed to deliver either of Bill's promises.

The first promise "to make it right" should have been followed with the question, "right for whom?" It certainly was not right for us. The reminders (the organization is losing money; the organization is doing us a favor), the behaviors (the deal is only good today; another truck must be purchased through our dealership), were organizational-centric focused. The customer satisfaction poster on the wall was mere corporate speak.

Bill often recited the second promise, "to earn your trust." Yet, he never did. "To earn" is *to acquire as a result of effort or action.* Trust begins as a gift, and it is the power of the trustee to offer it. The phrase "earn your trust" was misleading, as it assumed that the organization had power in our decision to trust them. Granted, the organization could seek to become more *trustworthy*, or deserving of trust, but trust was ours to give or withhold. The decision was ours.

Trust Footers

Once trust is rescinded, can it be re-extended? Certainly. Is it possible? Maybe, but trust is predicated on three tenets. The presence or omission of these tenets does not require a consumer to trust the organization. Trust is given or taken by the trustee. Yet these three "trust footers" enhance the likelihood that trust will be planted, or replanted, in the organization.

Stewards of Trust: Characteristics of a Stewardship Organization

If an organization cannot earn trust, can it regain the trust lost during a crisis? Is the consumer relationship over? Not exactly. Organizations can become more trustworthy by enhancing their competence, dependability and integrity. More importantly, organizations can recognize trust as a valuable gift. To do so requires an organizational paradigm shift from *earning* someone's trust to *caring* for someone's trust. From this perspective, organizations are stewards of consumer trust. They do not own a consumer's trust, but they are commissioned to care for the trust. Here are four characteristics of the stewardship organization:

The stewardship organization wears glasses. The stewardship organization seeks the consumer's point of view. A self-centered organization gambles a consumer's trust for organizational gain. A stewardship organization puts on another's glasses and seeks to understand the world from the consumer's perspective.

The stewardship organization bears a sword. The stewardship organization protects a consumer's trust. It recognizes that trust is not transactional. It cannot be calculated through a system of debts and credits. Trust is relational and requires a long-term commitment to the consumer.

The stewardship organization carries a flashlight. The stewardship organization searches the organization's dark corners and illuminates any organizational aberrations. It recognizes that proper stewardship requires both words and action and seeks to ensure organizational integrity.

The stewardship organization opens its windows. The stewardship organization never needs curtains. Often, organizational integrity is displayed as window dressing. Good efforts, such as community service, are a ploy to avert attention from the mess inside. The stewardship organization, however, scours organizational behavior and communication down to its intent to ascertain if the organization is honoring, protecting and caring for the consumer's trust.

■ **Trust Footer #1: Competency**

Consumers expect organizations to meet basic competencies. These expectations form the foundation of trust for consumers who interact with an organization. We expected the car dealership to sell us a truck with a clear title. We expected our transaction to be legally binding. We expected the organization to be honest and fair. When these basic expectations were broken, our trust in the organization evaporated. Despite the organization's insistence to earn our trust, they were unable to assure us that they could meet these basic competencies.

■ **Trust Footer #2: Dependability**

Throughout our exchange, the dealership recited its organizational pedigree numerous times. They noted their years in business, the volume of their sales and the anomaly of this incident. Bill provided a personal repertoire to support his ability to "make it right." Yet, despite their extensive history and assurances of dependability, we were unconvinced.

Our questions were often met with "I'll have to check on that," and no one was quite able to explain how this anomaly occurred. Our situation was framed as an abnormality in an otherwise reliable organization. Their intent to earn our trust was met with our skepticism on why we should.

■ **Trust Footer #3: Integrity**

Integrity is words with feet. Without action, integrity is simply window dressing, and we found plenty of curtains. The flagrant sale of a stolen vehicle was masked by a dealer's promise to rectify the situation, immersed in a deal with plenty of strings attached. While the dealer sought restoration, the plan required us to purchase another truck from a select lot on that day.

Further, we were treated as modern-day lepers, sequestered to a lot 45 minutes removed from their public showroom. If we wanted to see a truck from that lot, we could look at it online, and if necessary, the truck would be driven to our location. The continual reminder that the dealership was voluntarily assisting us did little to enhance their integrity. Their posture as organizational martyrs who would lose substantial money in the deal shattered the remaining illusion. The tattered curtains could not hide the mendacity of the organization.

At some point in the day, Bill recognized the improbability of earning our trust. The rhetoric transitioned from earning our trust to earning our business. At one point late in the negotiations, the salesperson said, "We don't want to lose your future business."

We both smirked as the statement hung between us. There would be no future business. This exercise was simply an arduous exchange. Without the basic footers of trust in place, a future relationship with the dealership was implausible. We both knew it.

The Not So Proud Owners

Fifty trucks and five hours later, we were the not-so-proud owners of another **Ford** F-150. The new car glow had long since vanished, and the process was more troublesome than initially promised. It took nearly an hour of negotiation for the dealership to sell us a truck with more miles and a smaller engine for the same price as the B.A.T. And through it all, we were reminded that the dealership was doing us a favor. Ironically, when we finally left the dealership, we drove on fumes to the closest gas station. It seemed the dealer's favors didn't extend to providing a tank of gas. We could do without their favors.

The new black truck now sits in our driveway. We haven't named it yet. Truth be told, we are waiting for the knock on the door. Incidentally, the B.A.T. is for sale again. Two days after our trade, it appeared on the local dealer's website. So if you wish to purchase a black F-150 with black rims and red trim, be careful. It is listed at a good price, but as Bill so wisely pointed out, "now we know why." ■

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Executive and Spokesperson Training | Media Relations

The Houston Astros Offer Lessons in How Not to Apologize

By Dave Dykes

Most PR pros know the fundamentals of apologizing during a crisis. Perhaps the biggest challenge as an industry is communicating that this formula is the only way out of a bad situation. Evidence: **The Houston Astros.**

Losing the 2019 World Series was the first chapter in a nightmare cheating scandal that spanned much of the baseball off-season for the Astros. This led, albeit slowly, to a February 2020 presser, which destroyed what little brand equity that remained in the franchise.

By now you probably know the Astros cheated, using high-tech cameras and buzzers to steal signs. This helped it to a 2017 World Series win and an American League Championship, in 2019. The cheating also contributed to the destruction of several prospective **Major League Baseball (MLB)** careers.

The team accepted MLB internal investigation of its cheating, which was issued early in January. Not one active player was named in the nine-page report. The team kept its wins and championship. Team owner Jim Crane was hit with a relatively small fine, but was able to maintain ownership of the team. Let's move on, no story here, was the message.

Houston Astros
@astros

The #Astros have avoided arbitration with four players.

2020 HOUSTON ASTROS
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FRIDAY, JAN. 10, 2020

ASTROS AGREE TO TERMS WITH FOUR PLAYERS

Correa, Devenski, Osuna, Peacock agree to one-year deals and avoid arbitration

HOUSTON, TX — The Houston Astros have agreed to terms on one-year contracts with four of their arbitration-eligible players: **SS Carlos Correa**, **RHP Chris Devenski**, **RHP Roberto Osuna** and **RHP Brad Peacock**. The announcement was made by Astros President of Baseball Operations and General Manager **Jeff Luhnow**. All four players were arbitration-eligible. Terms of the deals were not disclosed.

The deadline for clubs and arbitration-eligible players to exchange filing numbers was earlier today. Infielder **Aledmys Díaz** and outfielder **George Springer** are the remaining unsigned, arbitration-eligible players on the Astros roster.

-ASTROS-

Contrast this with the penalty soccer club **Manchester City** received.

Delay Tactics

Instead of addressing the situation, the Astros denied requests for comment across sports media. Its players and owner did not speak publicly, other than impromptu interviews. Crane said he was "not worried." This lack of a cohesive, sincere response led *The Wall Street Journal* to publish an article demanding answers.

The Press Conference

On Feb. 13, 2020, the team held a press conference, finally. Among a litany of cringe-worthy highlights was owner Crane saying sign stealing didn't impact the game, then immediately denying he'd said that. Two of the Astros' top players, and users of sign-stealing technology, Alex Bregman and José Altuve, read statements. They lasted a combined 90 seconds; the two left without answering questions from the press.

The difference between 'sorry for my actions' and 'sorry I got caught' was displayed for all. No one at the press conference communicated steps the organization would take to prevent future cheating.

Sports media immediately vilified this overwhelming lack of remorse. Sports Illustrated labeled it a "public relations meltdown."

A New Version of a Classic Mistake

Organizations often get a chance to come clean and emerge from a crisis scenario with integrity. Often they choose not to do so. Despite countless PR case studies detailing situations where organizations were caught red-handed in nefarious activity, the Astros took a classic ill-advised approach. They denied accountability. Let's move on.

The PR Apology Formula

As legendary basketball coach Dean Smith said, the right way to make a mistake is "recognize it, admit it, learn from it, forget it." These principles are the core of how organizations should publicly apologize.

- **Outline What Happened**

The purpose of disclosing all the details about what happened in an apology is to make sure you and the public are on the same page. Do not withhold or massage messaging. It will come across as withholding truth and disrespecting the public's intelligence. Disclose what happened and where things went wrong. Admit that whatever happened was the result of a bad decision. Show that you understand, with perspective, why what you did was wrong.

- **Accept Responsibility**

Showing accountability is the most important part of an apology. The Astros did the exact opposite. Quoting owner Crane: "I don't think I should be held accountable."

He needed to apologize for what happened. CEOs rarely want to apologize. Most of the time they categorically deny admitting to any wrongdoing. They believe it could lead to self-incrimination if the matter goes to court.

Thing is, if you schedule a press conference to apologize, apologize. The evidence already is severely stacked against you. It's going to be difficult to deny in court anyhow.

Second, there are ways to sincerely apologize without submitting a guilty plea to legal charges. CEOs can show that as a leader, the buck stops with you to rid the organization of bad actors.

- **Communicate a Plan**

This is where the Astros failed most directly. The plan for winning back public trust was to move ahead and focus on the 2020 baseball season. Unfortunately, the team skipped over internal disciplinary action and policies to prevent another cheating scandal. To win back the public, you need to illustrate through action that you are sorry for what you did.

The Astros had their chance to admit remorse and accept responsibility. The team passed on it. In the court of public opinion, the Astros must accept whatever penalties they receive. ■

Dave Dykes is a senior account executive at Bluetext.

Media Relations | Social Media

How a National Celebrity Navigated an Arguably Career-Ending Mistake

By Casey Adams Jones

The lines between controversial comedy and offensive banter often blur, but when they're crossed–you'd better have a plan in place. Failure to recover from a crisis where marginalized groups are chagrined could impact jobs and reputations.

Celebrity comedian and local radio personality Charlie Brady hired **C. Adams Agency** after posting tweets intended as jest, but that came across as homophobic.

The team acted quickly, yet not impetuously, while partnering with senior leaders at a Fortune 500 company and the second-largest radio company in the nation.

Trust Your Gut

Each spring, Charlie Brady's alma mater hosts a competition in which students compete for the title of 'Mr./Ms. University' and serve as an ambassador for the following academic year. This particular spring would be the first time a candidate vying for the 'Mr.' title publicly identified as homosexual.

Brady posted tweets referencing the student's sexual orientation and quickly realized that jokes on a stage are received differently in online communities. A mix of responses ensued, and he suddenly had the attention of not only his followers but also the school's students and alumni, media and LGBTQ advocacy organizations like **Human Rights Campaign.**

I advised that he remove the posts, go dark on social media and release a statement immediately. As PR professionals, we must trust our gut that tells us when a situation will blow over without being addressed and when it's escalating and critical to be vocal.

Understanding the severity of the situation, Brady requested we partner on a crisis communication plan.

Act Quickly, But Not Impetuously

Crises are a matter of when, not if and require swift, but not impetuous action. Having a templated plan that covers a myriad of scenarios is efficient and effective. Instead of having to create a plan from scratch, your team will be equipped with a plug-and-play approach to guide next steps.

Our crisis template, inclusive of reputation management components, allowed us to

> I understand the ramification of my actions and have offered a public apology through the same social media platform in which my original commentary ensued. Going forward, I will be more proactive in exercising better judgment and social responsibility when expressing my opinions in an open forum. I am also committed to conducting myself in a way more exemplary and becoming of the personal, local, and national brands that I represent.
>
> My tweets were not, and are not, in any way a representation of Viacom nor Entercom Communications Company and I have expressed my deepest regret to them and take full responsibility for my actions.

A sample of the message that Charlie Brady posted to apologize for his previous indiscretion.

promptly draft a plan and delegate tasks as appropriate to partners.

Because Brady was an employee of Fortune 500 company **Viacom**, and the second-largest radio company in the U.S., **Entercom Communications Company**, all statements required final approval by a senior leader of each organization. Communication by email was the most efficient way to keep all appropriate parties in the loop at each stage of the crisis plan, especially as we sought review and approval of external statements.

#SincereStatementsMatter

Personalization of a statement is critical. Sincere statements will always matter.

During our initial meeting, we asked our client how he felt about his offense. This pulse check was to gauge the level of remorse Charlie Brady had so that it could be infused into the formal statement. We also included sound bites from Brady's apology directly to the student via phone.

In addition to ensuring a genuine tone and an admission of wrongdoing, our agency included a high-level overview of Charlie Brady's plan to rectify the situation. The statement also removed from the situation all local and national brands with which he was affiliated.

Within an hour, the statement was unanimously approved by Viacom and Entercom, and we distributed it to media and on all of Brady's social media platforms. Though several activist groups continued to express their infuriation, a resounding number of responses–including one from the student–centered around forgiveness and compassion for a human who made a mistake.

Be Open and Honest with Media

Depending on the gravity of a crisis situation, it may or may not be expedient for a client to engage in media interviews. We received multiple interview requests and inquiries about whether Charlie Brady's radio or television contracts would be impacted by this infraction. Having him speak with media was not advised.

For each call, we noted the reporter's contact information and deadline, then provided a reasonable deadline to deliver an official statement. It's critical to confirm media deadlines because a lack of any response leads to the use of "couldn't be reached for comment" or "no comment" being noted in an article. Such phrases further damage one's reputation.

Swiftness and Sincerity

After releasing the official statement, we entered the final phase of crisis management: recovery and rebuilding. We conducted frequent social listening and monitored media coverage to ensure news articles were factually accurate. Overall tone and sentiment are not arguable, but any incorrect recount of events should always be corrected.

We also created a safe space for Brady and the student to connect for a heartfelt conversation. Post-discussion, we updated media and invited them to cover local service projects and community events Brady participated in over the next several months. These components of the plan created positive press coverage.

It goes without saying that the rebuilding process took many months. Initially, there were positive news articles about Brady that would still reference the crisis. In time, the references were finally omitted.

Acting swiftly and sincerely not only set a foundation on which to rebuild Charlie Brady's brand, but it also salvaged his positions with Viacom and Entercom. ■

Casey Adams Jones is founder and owner of C. Adams Agency and communications director of the American Heart Association (Philadelphia chapter).

Crisis Averted: Avoiding Reputational Damage During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Dayne Stern

Over the last 21 years, Cape Town International Jazz Festival (CTIJF) has grown to become one of South Africa's most popular cultural events, and the 2020 iteration promised to be a highlight on the social calendar.

The event was scheduled to start on March 27, and up until the beginning of the month the project was running according to plan. However, during the first two weeks of March, the global narrative shifted suddenly to the possibility of COVID-19 becoming a pandemic.

Africa's Grandest Gathering presents the 20th installment of the Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

Questions of the possibility of the event being cancelled started to arise in the first week of March. With just over three weeks to go before the event, cancelling was the last thing on the event organizers' minds . Every year, CTJIF is a significant contributor to Cape Town's wider economy; most hotels are fully booked, and local business reap tremendous benefit from an influx of local and international visitors.

A Difficult Decision

Positive Dialogue (PD) had been tracking the COVID-19 narrative closely and saw that general public sentiment had started to adopt a much more cautious outlook. We started planning and defining communication objectives around possible postponement or cancellation scenarios for CTIJF 2020. We created a detailed report showing that the growing concern had led many countries and event organizers around the world to cancel upcoming public gatherings on an unprecedented scale.

On March 11, **espAfrikaEXCO**, the event organizers, was still agonizing over whether to cancel the event, and it was only late that night that consensus was finally reached. Pre-empting the expected instruction from government over the upcoming weekend, the EXCO team announced the cancellation of CTIJF 2020 as a precautionary health measure.

There was still much public uncertainty and scepticism at the time, and it was still 12 days until President Cyril Ramaphosa would announce the start of the national lockdown on March 28, incidentally one day after the CTIJF was originally due to start.

Announcing the cancellation would draw close attention from media, the industry and the public. We needed separate communication strategies for media, staff and stakeholders that showed CTIJF had adopted a sensitive approach and was acting in a responsible manner with the best interests of the artists, staff and South African public at heart.

The Strategy

We devised a crisis communications plan to empower the CTIJF team to take a degree of ownership of the news, in order for the company to project an air of professionalism and protect its reputation and commercial imperatives. The plan included:

- Guidelines for establishing a crisis team, including the appointment of a team leader and spokesperson.
- Communications schedule, including what information would be communicated to whom, and when.
- Postponement announcement content for staff, artists, media and CTIJF social media channels.
- Content for FAQs on the CTIJF website.
- Suggested target media for proactive interviews with spokesperson.
- Spokesperson media briefing document and interview coaching.

Implementation Overview

The official announcement to cancel the event was scheduled for March 13 and was communicated to staff, stakeholders and artists, at the same time as the press release was distributed and the announcement was made on the event website and social channels.

During this crisis communication period, PD analyzed the coverage to ensure key brand message penetration KPIs appeared in the editorial coverage across online, print and broadcast media channels. Based on the postponement announcement, key messages conveyed through the media relations efforts included:

- The Festival's management is aware of the Coronavirus concerns.
- The Festival is postponed for the foreseeable future, as a public health precautionary measure.
- The Festival management is committed to acting in the best interest of its loyal Festinos (attendees), performing artists, service providers, employees and the public at large.

CTIJF's reputation is its most valuable asset. The fast and effective roll-out and management of the crisis communications strategy helped in overcoming this crisis quickly, with few negative consequences in terms of stakeholder relations, media relations, consumer engagement and brand trust.

Although this strategy required the Festival's management to adapt operational, commercial and financial-related decisions, good communication management played a vital role in ensuring that the company's image remained intact and avoided irreversible reputational damage. ■

Dayne Stern is account director at Positive Dialogue. dayne@positivedialogue.co.za

Crisis Plan | Media Relations | Executive and Spokesperson Training

Lessons From Samsung's PR Fiasco: 6 Tips to Protect Your Reputation

By Yvonne Maher

Weeks after the first reports of exploding batteries in **Samsung**'s Galaxy Note 7 phone started in fall 2016, the negative headlines remained.

The company has been criticized by the public and commentators about its lackluster response to the issue, with some media complaining that statements were vague.

Brands can learn some valuable lessons about protecting brand and reputation in a time of crisis.

1. Be Prepared

Every brand or company should be prepared for a potential issue or crisis to hit. This can be anything from a data breach, to a product recall, to a customer complaint, to an internal fraud investigation. The advances in technology, high penetration of social media and rise in cyber-crime makes this all the more likely. Work with your communications team and PR agency to identify potential issues that could hit your company, draft relevant scenarios and responses, establish roles and responsibilities and finally set protocols on how to handle media requests. Then test it with a group of stakeholders across your organization on a regular basis.

2. Establish the Facts, Apologize and Take Action

When the real issue hits, work quickly to establish the facts, identify the issue and work on the solution. If you are in the wrong, say you're sorry, show empathy and provide evidence and detail on what you are doing to resolve the situation.

Technical issues and product recalls happen, but how you handle them is what is important. For example, the **Royal Bank of Scotland Group** has suffered a string of IT glitches and meltdowns during the past few years, which in some instances meant customers could not withdraw cash from ATMs. Each time it was proactive in apologizing to customers, communicated with all stakeholders through media or social channels and outlined what action was being taken.

In the case of Samsung, the company should have been honest about the problem from the beginning. In its first statement it claimed to have "identified the affected inventory and stopped sales and shipments of those devices," but when it transpired that the replacement devices were also exploding, it was clearly more than a supplier issue. At this point customers began to lose trust and started to question whether Samsung had a clear grip on what was happening.

A clearer use of language would have been better and more honest. For example, rather than the term "replacement program," the term "product recall" would have been more apt. More detail on the specifics of what went wrong and the technical issues, rather than a vague statement about the importance of customer safety, would have helped to manage the bad press better.

3. Appoint the Right Spokesperson

One of the big learnings from the **BP** Horizon oil spill, another PR crisis, is that the person leading the response cannot be the spokesperson. Tony Hayward, BP's CEO at the time, learned this at his peril, famously saying in an interview "I want my life back," when 11 people died in the disaster and more than 200 million gallons of crude oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico.

Put forward a spokesperson who understands the issues, is comfortable talking to media and comes across as empathic. It doesn't have to be your head of PR; it can be the HR director or head of customer service.

In the case of Samsung, Dong-jin Koh, president of mobile communications business, Samsung Electronics, issued a heartfelt apology at a press conference in South Korea to all involved in the situation and vowed to "find the exact cause [of the faulty Galaxy Note 7] to restore trust of consumers so that they can use Samsung products without any safety concerns."

While it was good to see him talking to the press and facing the situation, issuing this statement and holding interviews at the beginning stages of the crisis or giving an apology in a video would have almost certainly avoided some of the negative press.

4. Listen and Monitor

Most companies have media and social listening tools in place, which help them understand not only the type of conversations people are having about them online but also where and when they are happening.

Carefully analyze what is being said and who is saying it. Is it all negative? Are there some influencers who are supporting you and acknowledging the action you are taking, thus giving you a third-party endorsement? This is where the advantages of having solid media relationships come into place. Understanding the sentiment and conversations will help you get the tone and wording of your communications right.

5. Keep Communicating; Be Proactive

After you press send, tweet and share your first media statement with your community, don't curl up under your desk and hope the issue will go away. It's vital that you keep your community updated on what is happening on a regular basis.

For the record @SamsungMobile, the official Twitter handle, issued only one tweet on Oct. 13 and put one message on Facebook for the duration of the issue, while the spoof Twitter handle @GalaxyNote_7 was tweeting on a regular basis. Twitter would have been a good customer channel to provide updates to loyal customers on a regular basis.

Once the issue has died down, communicate what else is happening in the business: client wins, people hires, new products or thought leadership. Depending on the severity of the issue, try to get back to a business-as-usual approach, and over time the positive headlines generated will help to counterbalance the negativity.

6. Learn From Mistakes

Although it might not seem like it at the time, crises do eventually die down. Have an open discussion with all your stakeholders on what worked and what didn't and take action. What could you have done differently? What will you implement as a result? Train and educate staff? Put a better plan in place? Install security software?

Never waste the opportunity of a good crisis. Use it to learn, improve, build trust and win back loyalty. ■

Yvonne Maher is a deputy managing director at Cognito EMEA.

Internal Communications | Media Relations

Communication Strategies for University Recruitment Amidst a Global Pandemic

By Aurora Meyer

In mid-March 2020, **Mizzou Law** went entirely online to comply with state and local shelter-in-place orders in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to shifting classes and day-to-day responsibilities for running the law school online, this also meant recruitment efforts pivoted after the LSAC announced the cancellations of the March and April 2020 LSAT administrations.

Mizzou Law had to change tactics and focus on nurturing those students who had already made a seat deposit to enroll in the August 2020 semester. This coincided with a renewed focus on the audience identification model to continue to overcome the potential trend of separateness while working outside of the building. Using the theoretical lens of framing and reputation management, this case study examines how Mizzou Law continued to engage stakeholders and began a campaign to convince admitted students to attend in fall 2020.

Unlike other institutions, the Mizzou Law admissions team held the annual admitted students' day prior to the campus closure. In addition, Mizzou Law had an existing relationship with **BarkleyREI** that was dedicated to developing and implementing automated email campaigns.

Delivering Promises

Mizzou Law needed to resolve both a pragmatic challenge and make good on the promises to current and future law students. Facing budget decreases, Mizzou Law had to strengthen existing relationships with current students and all faculty and staff and reinforce new relationships with incoming students without allocating additional funds. More importantly, Mizzou Law had to find ways to communicate updates without making additional promises that could easily be broken.

Mizzou Law effectively developed and began delivering messages to target audiences between March 20, 2020 and April 25, 2020. Using a model of transparency, combined with an emphasis on empathetical communication, the team worked to calm overall fears and respond quickly to identified needs.

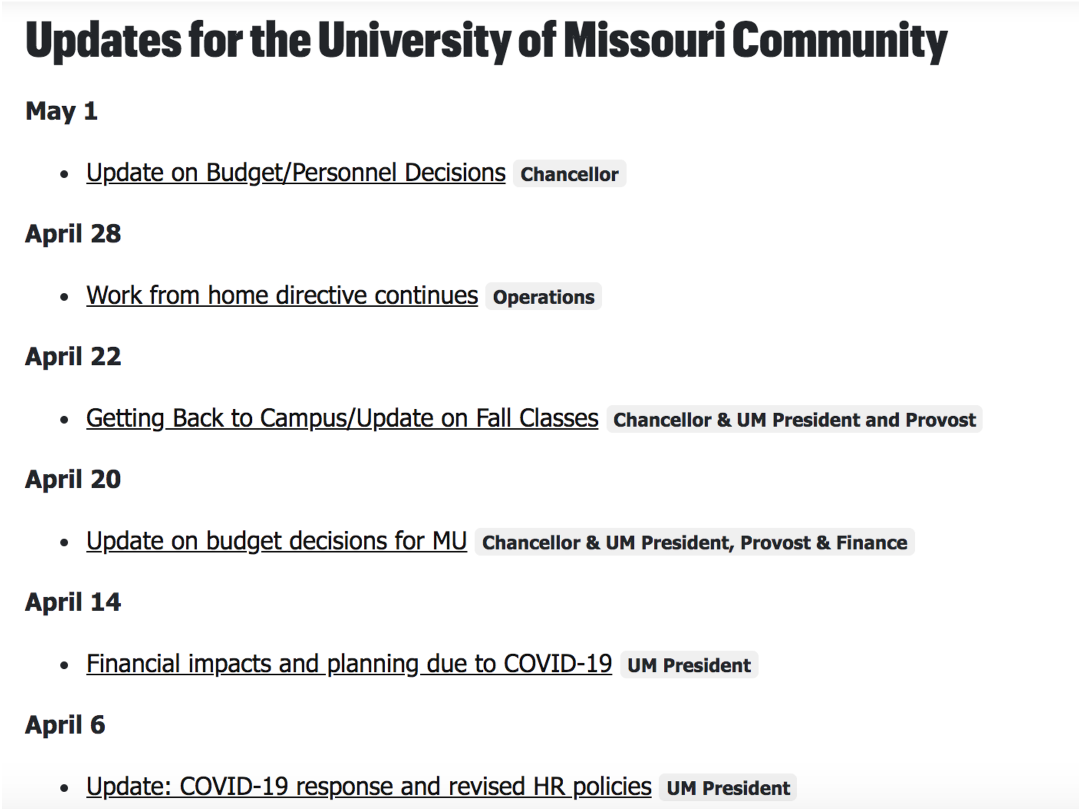
Mizzou Law set a goal of hosting town hall-style online meetings with faculty, staff, current students and admitted students to engage at least 50 percent of each audience segmentation to listen to one another share personal experiences during the pandemic, creating relationships and building a sense of community.

Mizzou Law also changed the focus from a traditional email-based recruitment campaign to an email-based nurture campaign for admitted students.

During that time, the **University of Missouri** took the lead on communicating campus information related to the pandemic on its website. Campus leadership also held town hall-style webinars for audiences to share messages.

Planning

With a need to pivot from planned in-person meetings and in person recruitment



Updates for the University of Missouri Community

May 1

- Update on Budget/Personnel Decisions **Chancellor**

April 28

- Work from home directive continues **Operations**

April 22

- Getting Back to Campus/Update on Fall Classes **Chancellor & UM President and Provost**

April 20

- Update on budget decisions for MU **Chancellor & UM President, Provost & Finance**

April 14

- Financial impacts and planning due to COVID-19 **UM President**

April 6

- Update: COVID-19 response and revised HR policies **UM President**

Updates to the Missouri University community are regularly posted on the school's website.

strategies, Mizzou Law immediately moved to host open forums with the Mizzou Law Dean to gather feedback to inform future decisions and provide immediate assistance as needed to current faculty, staff and students.

In total, the Mizzou Law Dean held 10 open forums between March 30 and April 24. In addition to a desire for connection and a continued emphasis on community-building, Mizzou Law was able to specifically identify and provide assistance for more than 15 immediate needs.

Simultaneously, Mizzou Law created a seven-email series to continue to recruit the students admitted for the 2021 Fall semester. Initial audience research on potential and admitted students was completed with BarkleyREI between October 2019 and January 2020.

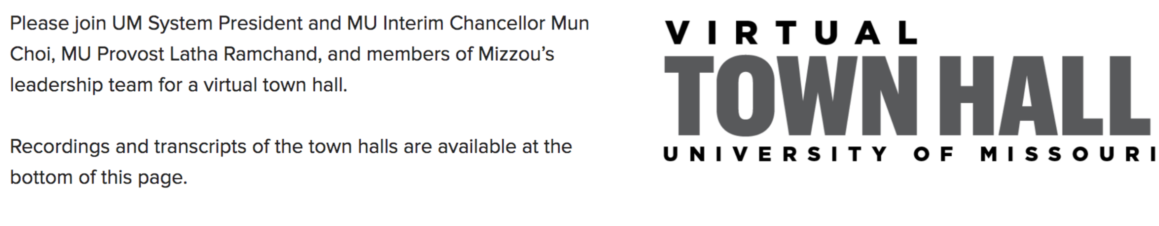
Strategy

Mizzou Law implemented the communication strategies of education, explanation, earning trust and highlighting benefits with the objectives of increasing awareness, maintaining support and maintaining or increasing levels of satisfaction.

Mizzou Law used open communication models on multiple channels, including webinars, scheduled emails and phone calls to connect with faculty, staff and current and prospective students. In each interaction, the school provided reassurance and reiterated that Mizzou Law is attempting to fulfill all promises, particularly providing an excellent legal education, regardless of circumstances.

Mizzou Law worked to create an email campaign to systematically reach out to admitted students to guide them through the beginning of May through orientation in

Virtual Town Hall



The school hosted a number of town hall sessions to engage with its audiences

August to give incoming students the information they need. The school took a proactive approach to let all students know the faculty and staff are dedicated to their success.

Mizzou Law is also aware that the uncertainty of the local and global situation causes stress and uncertainty for faculty, staff and both current and admitted students.

In every communication, Mizzou Law underscored the promise it will provide all students with the high-value legal education they were promised.

In every email, automated and individually generated, in every webinar and open forum hosted and in every question the Mizzou Law faculty and staff answer, the goal is to reassure each student that they matter and are welcome at Mizzou law.

On April 22, 2020, Mizzou Law hosted a webinar for admitted students to discuss the transition from the spring semester to matriculating at Mizzou in the fall. The messaging revolved around the plan to begin in-person classes starting with an in-person August orientation. During this webinar, Mizzou Law unequivocally told the attendees if there is a change to this plan dictated by the university or some combination of local, state or federal authorities, Mizzou Law will reach out to admitted students with an updated plan of action as quickly as possible.

Mizzou Law also used an active social media presence to share messages of resilience, community and dedication to the continuation of the school's mission.

Evaluation

As of April 25, 2020, Mizzou Law has 123 seat deposits (admitted students who have put a deposit down, indicating they intend to begin classes in the fall of 2020) compared to 85 seat deposits on the same date in 2019 and 91 seat deposits on the same date in 2018. This number is an early indication that the purposeful method of communication and providing information to admitted students is having the desired effect. ■

Aurora Meyer, APR, is director of communication and marketing at University of Missouri, School of Law. meyerad@missouri.edu.

Internal Communications | Media Relations

Navigating the Unknown: Implementing a Chapter 11 Comms Program during COVID-19

By Jennifer E. Mercer

The global spread of novel coronavirus marked an unprecedented time in our history. Businesses in every industry had to act quickly and responsibly to respond to the rapid changes taking place to survive the global pandemic. With mandated lockdowns and stay-at-home orders in place, gone were social gatherings, concerts, and with summer just around the corner, the ever-popular amusement parks.

Businesses that make most of their money during the summer season were particularly vulnerable. Amusement parks and arcades often add roughly 20,000 jobs nationwide in May and approximately 30,000 again in June, according to data from the **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)**.

In March 2020, **Apex Parks Group**, a California-based company with 10 family entertainment centers and two water parks located in California, Florida and New Jersey, temporarily closed its parks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Soon after, on April 4, the Company filed for chapter 11 to facilitate the sale of the company. With so much change taking place, having a communications strategy and a crisis response team in place was vital for Apex.

Navigating the Unknown

The crisis response team included members of Apex's leadership team, human resources, legal advisors, corporate communications specialists and other advisors as needed. With so much unknown, the crisis response team determined that Apex's communications strategy would stand upon three key pillars: communicate early and often, be open and honest, and express empathy.

Apex's employees are the foundation of the business and communicating with them is a priority. Transparency with this group was critical. On the heels of operations shutting down due to the pandemic, Apex's employees were operating with heightened anxiety; now they were faced with the chapter 11.

It was important when communicating with this group that information be provided timely. Because everything changed daily, there was no waiting until we had all the answers. The impact on the business and result to the employee were explained to the best of our ability at every given moment.

When severance or sick pay became unfeasible financial options, the crisis response team took the opportunity to provide other resources, including contact information for unemployment offices and changes in state and

Upon resumption of regular business operations, the Company intends to:

- Honor customer programs such as Season Passes and gift cards at its operating parks
- Pay employee wages and benefits in the ordinary course of business
- Pay vendors and suppliers in a timely fashion

Apex Parks posted outbound communications to alert stakeholders about what would happen during the Chapter 11.

Apex Vendor Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is Chapter 11?**
   For a business, Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code provides for the reorganization and/or sale of a company.

2. **Why did Apex file for Chapter 11?**
   Apex is pursuing a comprehensive financial restructuring aimed at reducing the Company's current debt and, ultimately, enhancing operations to continue to serve guests and communities for years to come.

Apex Parks Group sent an FAQ document to its vendors to ensure they were aware of the nature of the Chapter 11 and the implications.

federal laws. In this situation—and during any other crisis—the crisis response team must commit to keeping employees apprised as things unfold. Use social media groups, email or texts to communicate as often as possible.

Communicating with Apex's customers early and often was essential to keeping them connected during the closure. Providing information on the changes taking place, as well as how this would or would not impact them, is another chance to communicate with empathy. Feeling understood breeds loyalty. For Apex, keeping each of the park websites updated and responding to guest inquiries as quickly as possible was critical.

Understanding the Process

Vendors are an essential group to keep any business operating. In chapter 11, general vendors are unsecured creditors. Communicating with this group throughout the process is critical to their support for ongoing operations. The team must communicate that the "administrative priority" under which most vendors fall requires that the company pay timely and in full for any goods and services received following the chapter 11 filing. This gives vendors security that they will be paid.

Of critical importance when dealing with the media during a chapter 11 is an understanding of the process. While there are reporters who cover corporate bankruptcy, it is a small group that is far outweighed by the media who do not. A spokesperson should know the process and how to work with legal counsel and other advisors to gather information. Moreover, the company must decide how much they want to engage—or not—with the media before the chapter 11 filing announcement is released. Apex distributed a comprehensive press release and engaged with certain key reporters.

The use of specialized websites and hotlines are one of the most useful tools during a chapter 11. Providing a specific place where all constituents can access information allows the team to track the information that is being sought, so we can determine whether a change in the communications strategy is needed.

The Coronavirus pandemic created great swaths of uncertainty; adding a chapter 11 filing further exacerbated this. While many of these these communications were, and continue to be, uncomfortable, they are critical.

No one likes uncertainty and communicating effectively during change requires commitment. Commitment to sometimes being uncomfortable. Commitment to providing information that the recipient may not like. Commitment to the three key pillars: communicate early and often, be open and honest and express empathy. ■

Jennifer E. Mercer is a partner at Paladin Management Group. jmercer@paladinmgmt.com. Liz Gonzalez, Paladin Management Group, contributed to this article.

Internal Communications | Social Media

Breaking Through The COVID-19 Noise

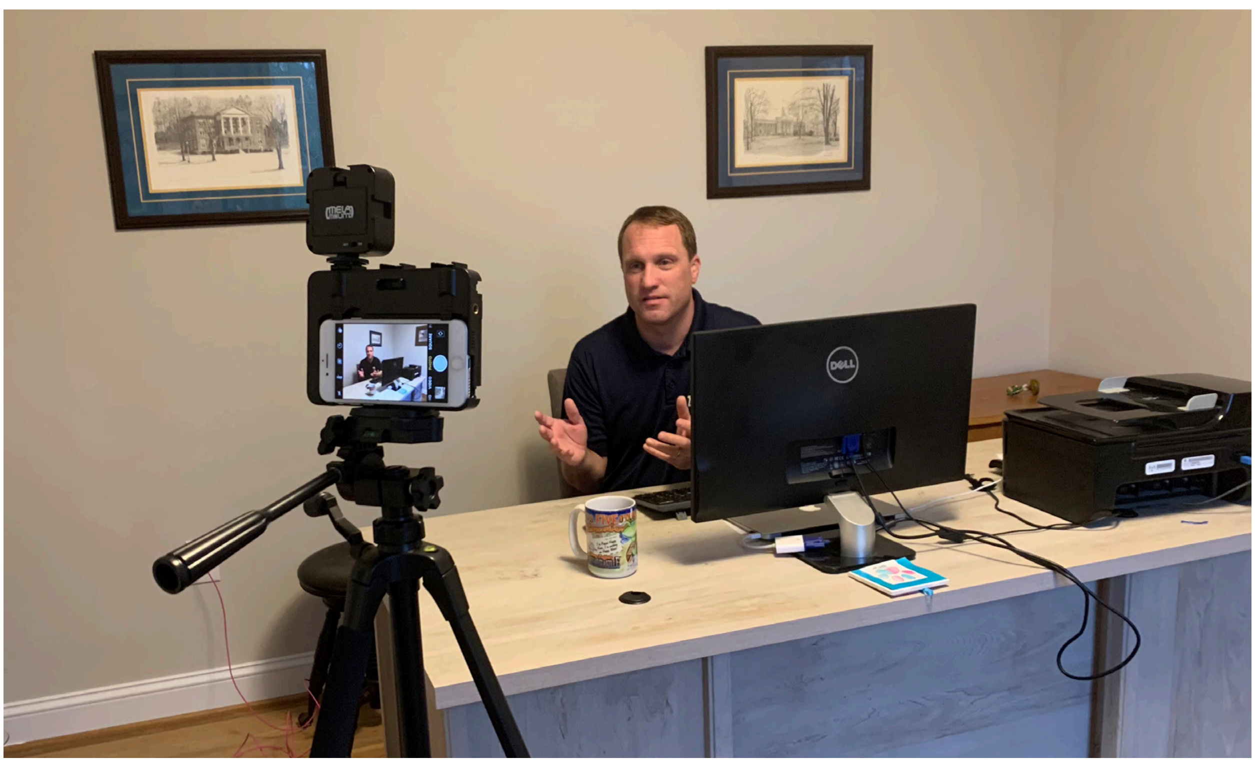
By Brian Chandler

Where there's a void in the market, fill it, especially during a pandemic. That was the attitude that Richmond, VA-based **Commonwealth Public Relations** took when COVID-19 hit. The virus was not only taking lives, but disrupting and shutting businesses.

The problem for the firm was how to break through the noise and stay in front of the business community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the goals for the firm was to provide to clients and the community relevant and helpful resources, innovative ideas and tactics to sustain business and build brand until the economy reopened.

Commonwealth reasoned that the market would be full of blogs and how-to articles using PR and marketing to remain relevant during this moment. Research, though, revealed an antidote that the firm put to use relatively quickly in an effort to rise above the noise.

During a call in mid-March, the first day agency staff worked from home, a discussion ensued about what strategies could be implemented to position Commonwealth as a resource. A **Google** search revealed that there are only a handful of vlogs (video blogs) from PR firms. None of the vlogs came from Commonwealth's home market of Virginia.



Video specifically focused for CEOs on employee or internal communications during COVID

The Plan:

- ☐ **Goal Creation**: Become a trusted and relevant source of PR and communications information during the time of COVID-19.
- ☐ **Strategy**: Leverage an under-used medium to offer relevant information and content helpful to the PR, marketing and business community.
- ☐ **Measurable Objectives**:
  - Create a minimum of at least three vlogs per week
  - Sustain a minimum of 100 views per video, per month, for three months
  - Grow YouTube subscribers by 5% per month
  - Increase website traffic 5% per month
- ☐ **Tactics**: While the video series creates inbound marketing opportunities, several outbound marketing tactics were implemented to help build awareness, drive engagement and reach, essentially helping to build the firm's brand.
  - Create an editorial calendar that includes interviews with community members who are being innovative; urge interviewees to share completed vlog content with their networks
  - Share vlog content on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram
  - Share vlog content via employees' personal social media accounts
  - Leverage outbound marketing by emailing links to clients and potential clients
  - Ask organizations in the community to share vlog content with their audiences via social media
  - Leverage Adobe After Effects to create the vlog intro
  - Utilize Canva as a tool to create YouTube thumbnail images
- ☐ **Evaluation:**
  - Monitor the number of views on YouTube
  - Track the number of views, shares, likes and comments on all social media channels
  - Track inbound comments

Research also brought up the prediction from **Cisco** that video will encompass 82 percent of all social traffic in 2020. That day, the firm's staff decided to start a COVID PR & Communications vlog series. The idea was that it would be a tool for several months to not only offer helpful and relevant materials during the crisis, but to allow the firm to continue its branding.

Hurdles

While the firm had produced a handful of videos for clients and had a **YouTube** channel, doing a vlog series required more daily discipline. The team need to create a strategy and an editorial calendar. It also had to factor in resources for scripting, filming, editing and producing videos. In addition, all this had to be done from the homes of staffers, using limited equipment.

For the videos to look at least somewhat professional, the firm's staff needed equipment such as tripods, microphones and lighting. Not being able to access this equipment easily, staff turned to makeshift lighting, having a spouse or significant other hold the camera and film the interview. They also had to think about different locations and backgrounds. Creative thought and consultation as a team helped to uncover several interesting ideas to make the videos unique.

Outcome

During the first 30 days, the vlog series generated 1,500+ views of its COVID-related content. The total number of subscribers to the firm's YouTube channel grew 10%+. For the first time, the firm received an email from YouTube about the increase in activity.

Via word of mouth and email shares, people saw the vlog series. The result was that individuals are reaching out to the firm asking to be involved in future videos. This anecdot-

Firm president Brian Chandler filming a vlog from his home office.

al evidence shows the vlog is considered an important resource in the community.Media is picking up some of the firm's vlog content and running it in traditional channels.

Lessons Learned

For 11 years, Commonwealth was focused on written content. Creating a series of videos weekly wasn't easy. It applied tactics that used for typical PR programs to remain on track, generate content and share it.

For example, without a strategy, goals, measurement and an editorial calendar, Commonwealth likely would be like a ship without a rudder. In other words, stick to what you know works, no matter what the medium.

When without, improvise. Without all the proper equipment to create videos, the firm worked to do the best job it could with what it had on hand. Professionally shot and produced videos on social media might not get the attention they typically would, especially during the time of COVID, when a large number of individuals are often on their mobile devices.

The vlog series has become a tool that likely will last beyond COVID. It's an information vehicle to share information consistently and help brand and market the firm, as well as separate it from the competition. ■

Brian Chandler is the founder of Commonwealth Public Relations & Marketing, headquartered in Richmond, VA.

Media Relations | Social Media

Changing the Conversation on Gun Violence: A Public Health Crisis

With physicians from every state and specialty gathered in Chicago for the **American Medical Association** (AMA) Annual Meeting in June of 2016, news of the shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando rocked the conference.

In the immediate wake of the shooting, the AMA House of Delegates passed emergency policy declaring gun violence in America a "public health crisis." Dozens of physicians lined up to address the issue and recount their stories of confronting gun violence. Physicians talked about how shootings impacted communities, mental health and emergency department physicians, as well as the evolution of gun violence and how assault weapons and more lethal ammunition made their mission of saving lives significantly more challenging.

As gun violence continued to plague the country – killing more than 30,000 Americans each year – for years the immediate aftermath of each mass shooting followed the same pattern: politicians would send thoughts and prayers, some would call for measures to curb gun violence, and others would call any steps toward legislative fixes an attack on the 2nd Amendment. The visibility of the shooting would decrease until it disappeared.

Rinse, Repeat

The conversation needed to change, so the AMA took a leading role in communicating with reporters, activists and Americans who favor measures to rein in gun violence to focus on solutions to a public health crisis.

Communications + Science

The primary goal was simple: use strategic communications and science to change the conversation on guns and create a new playing field where enacting change is possible.

As physicians – and a majority of Americans – increasingly called for an effort to rein in gun violence, the AMA communications team regrouped on how to change the conversation from focused on the 2nd Amendment to focused on the public health impact. How can we tie the cumulative toll of gun violence together – rather than treating every tragedy separately – and how do we attain the policy goals of resuming epidemiological research of gun violence and enacting legislation that will save lives?

The planning and strategies were executed in careful coordination with AMA leaders in Washington and Chicago, physician leaders on gun violence and in careful consideration of inflection points.

The AMA launched its effort immediately after the Parkland shooting on February 14, 2018. A self-published op-ed by AMA President David O. Barbe, M.D., was shared directly with media, emailed to a list of physicians and subscribers and shared widely on owned social media channels reaching millions.

The primary call to action was: "Today, more than ever before, America's physicians

AMA
@AmerMedicalAssn

As physicians, we see first-hand the devastating consequences of gun violence to victims and their families and friends. #Congress: Consider the following common-sense proposals to prevent future tragedies. We implore you to act now. #NationalWalkoutDay

AMA AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

JAMES L. MADARA, MD
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, CEO

ama-assn.org
t (312) 464-5000

March 12, 2018

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Ryan and Leader Pelosi:

On behalf of the American Medical Association (AMA), I am writing to urge you to take immediate action on common sense solutions to reduce the epidemic of gun violence in America. The U.S. House of Representatives plans to vote on the STOP School Violence Act of 2018, H.R. 4909, this week, a bill that reauthorizes a Department of Justice program created in 2001 to prevent threats to schools. While this is an important program, the AMA believes that taking action on this bill alone is not enough. Gun violence in America today is clearly a public health crisis that needs comprehensive, multi-faceted public health solutions.

It has been over five years since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. After Sandy Hook, a commonly expressed sentiment was "never again," and many stakeholders strongly urged Congress to take action to prevent similar events. Since then, there have been at least 1,607 mass shootings (e.g., 4 or more people shot), with at least 1,846 people killed and 6,459 wounded in communities across the country, including recent ones in Parkland and Las Vegas, not to mention the daily toll of suicides and homicides due to firearms. Last month's massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida was the 30th mass shooting of 2018. With the addition of Parkland, three of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history have occurred in the past six months. The frequency of mass shootings has tripled since 2011. As physicians, we see first-hand the devastating consequences of gun violence to victims and their families and friends. In addition to the direct impact of gun violence on individuals and their families and friends, gun-related violence has broader societal and economic impacts on medical and mental health care systems, communities, workplaces, schools, police, and the criminal justice system.

The AMA believes that Congress must take action now to reduce the threat of injury or death from firearms. We urge you to consider the following common-sense proposals.

- Provide specific funding for gun violence research within the U.S. Department of Health

The Honorable Paul Ryan
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
March 12, 2018
Page 2

violence, the risk factors associated with gun violence, and interventions that might work. Determining the root causes—through federally-funded research—of this epidemic is critical to solving it. The AMA believes a specific funding allocation for federal gun violence research, including for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is a necessary first step to reversing the course on gun violence.
- Improve the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) for firearms by passing the bipartisan Fix NICS Act of 2017, H.R. 4477/S. 2135, which the AMA supports.
- Expand background checks and waiting periods to all commercial firearm sales, including purchases at gun shows and over the Internet, by passing the bipartisan Public Safety and Second Amendment Rights Protection Act of 2017, H.R. 4240.
- Reinstate a ban on military-style assault weapons, including a ban on high-capacity magazines.

The AMA stands ready to work with Congress to make progress in protecting our communities, especially our children, from this epidemic of violence. We must make a real and lasting commitment to work together on meaningful solutions to prevent future tragedies, and we implore you to act now.

Sincerely,

James L. Madara, MD

11:12 AM · Mar 14, 2018 · Sprinklr

must lend their voice and their considerable political muscle to force lawmakers to examine this urgent health crisis—through federally funded research—and take appropriate steps to address it."

On February 15, we issued a statement applauding HHS Sec. Azar for saying **CDC** research on gun violence should resume. At our Annual Meeting in June, we highlighted a section of AMA President David Barbe's speech in which he again called on physicians to lead on gun violence, and we touted new policies passed by the AMA House of Delegates, crafting a larger narrative in advance with an AP reporter, whose story, "Frustrated AMA adopts sweeping policies to cut gun violence," was picked up across the country.

Throughout the year, AMA leaders fanned out across the country to speak with other physician leaders and broader audiences. At more than 20 speaking venues in 11 states and the District of Columbia, AMA leaders spoke out on the issue of gun violence.

In July, AFFIRM Research announced the AMA as its newest partner in its push for gun violence research, which was pushed aggressively to physicians, again empowering them to play a leading role in confronting this public health crisis. Over the course of the year, physician leadership – and demonstrations that guns are a larger crisis – picked up dramatically. Op-eds and LTEs from physicians increased, online participation rose, and the hashtag #ThisIsMyLane, in response to the NRA, took off. The playing field in the gun debate changed dramatically in a year, and in 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed background check legislation.

Despite long odds, decades of inaction from Congress, and a history of success by the NRA at stifling debate, the gun debate changed in 2018. Physicians spoke out more often, engaged more prominently online, took on the NRA, shared images of gun violence as a public health crisis, and helped move the needle.

Immediately after the Parkland shooting, the AMA work on gun violence generated more than 1,000 media placements in February. For the year, we earned nearly 3,000 news clips that mentioned AMA and gun violence. ■

This case study received an honorable mention for the 2019 PRNEWS Platinum Awards. It has been edited for clarity.

Media Relations | Social Media | Internal Communications

Toyota Motor North America Drives Takata Air Bag Repairs

Recalls of the Takata airbags began in 2013 due to a faulty part in the airbag that can explode, shooting sharp, metal fragments into the vehicle. More than 16 deaths in the U.S. occurred, and hundreds have allegedly been injured. Despite dozens of letters, calls and emails to each vehicle owner, millions of vehicles remained unrepaired.

The problem that triggers airbag malfunctions is more severe in hot, humid areas, so **Toyota** made Puerto Rico a priority market for completing repairs. Toyota's Product Quality (PQ) division enlisted **Jackson Spalding** to launch a series of marketing initiatives, including large-scale events, marketing campaigns and dealer marketing, to help ensure drivers of its vehicles in Puerto Rico were aware of the life-threatening nature of the defective part and to urge Toyota owners to schedule the free repair.

Jackson Spalding conducted extensive research on drivers in Puerto Rico, working closely with Toyota's local corporate entity, Toyota de Puerto Rico (TdPR), to develop a campaign to reach locals and spur repairs.

Knowing that most of the impacted airbags are on the front passenger side of the vehicle, the team narrowed its focus to a single, persuasive concept for all communications: You're not just fixing your car — You're protecting your passengers.

Additionally, the team ensured that all materials adhered to the Toyota brand standards and were translated from English to Spanish with attention to cultural nuances.

Large-Scale Event

The team identified Pabellón del Tiempo – a free, full-day educational event focused on hurricane and earthquake preparedness that was attended by 5,000+ – as an ideal setting for connecting with Puerto Rico residents. Toyota sponsored a booth and the Earthquake Simulator, a main feature of the event. The brand's :30 video on the Takata airbag recall was shown before each simulation to create additional awareness.

Dealer Events and Advertising Campaign

The team created a Takata Recall Events Toolkit to allow Toyota's dealerships on the island to host their own awareness events at their locations or at larger community gatherings. The team also developed four separate dealer-marketing campaigns – offering print mailers, emails, social media posts and more – for dealers to reach out directly to their impacted customers.

The "Hidden Dangers" campaign emphasized the dangerous nature of this recall and used Hollywood-style special effects and a latex monster to create the visuals. The messaging asked: "Hay un asesino en tu auto?" (Or: "Is there a killer in your car?")

Despite millions of touchpoints since the 2013 recall began, Toyota and other auto makers have been challenged by the **National Highway Traffic Safety Authority** to reach owners and persuade them to have the repair performed.

The Harm's Way and Hidden Danger campaigns delivered more than 250 million combined impressions in Puerto Rico. This included digital banner ads that performed 5 times better than industry average, digital billboards running in 46 locations, and 1,270 radio spots aired.

The airbag recall repair completion rate jumped from 61 percent to nearly 70 percent from January to December 2019. ■

This case study received an honorable mention at the 2020 PRNEWS Digital PR Awards. The entry was edited for clarity.

Media Relations

A Conversation about Consumer Privacy: A Crisis that Moved the Industry Forward

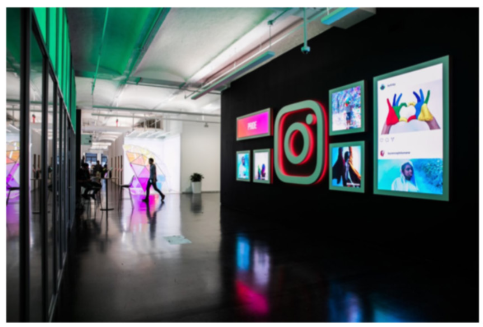
The inquiry from Kirsten Grind, investigative reporter, was innocuous: "Hi, I'm trying to reach someone there who can speak to the media. I'm working on deadline on a story about **Crimson Hexagon** and its work with the U.S. government, and internationally, also related to its **Facebook** partnership announced last week."

Crimson's relationship with Facebook was critical to the online public data that fed its consumer insights. Government agencies, like **FEMA**, leveraged Crimson to gain insights from posts to its Facebook page from people impacted by weather.

TECH

Facebook Suspends Analytics Firm on Concerns About Sharing of Public User-Data

Facebook says it was probing whether data-analytics firm Crimson Hexagon's government contracts comply with Facebook policies



Signage and photographs at the office of Facebook's Instagram in New York. **PHOTO:** JEENAH MOON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Kirsten Grind

Updated July 20, 2018 2:07 p.m. ET

From Opportunity to Crisis

Grind was working on a different angle.

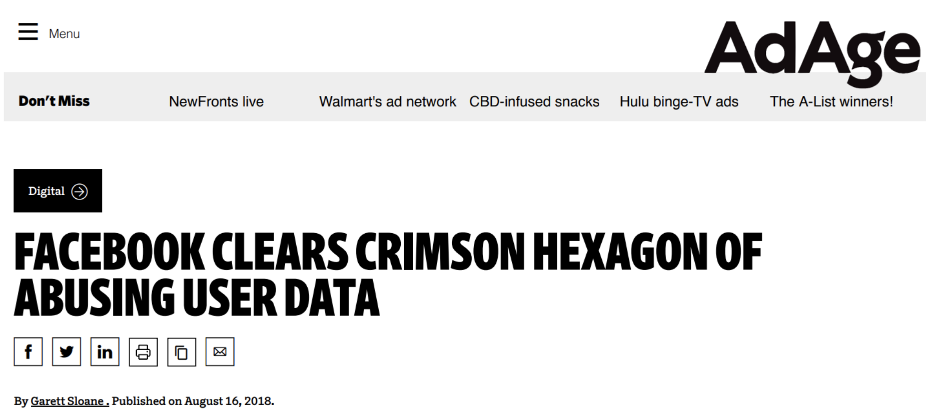
After a review of previous work, **PAN** realized Grind was positioning Crimson as the next **Cambridge Analytica**, a digital agency with inappropriate access to private data. The tone of counsel pivoted from opportunity to crisis. The goal was to minimize damage, and ensure our messaging around the ethical use of data and consumer privacy was heard loud and clear.

After exhaustive due diligence with Crimson, Grind's narrative was factually wrong. Understanding truth was on our side, PAN recommended a 2-prong approach. First, answer questions in writing to avoid a live conversation. Second, take a stance. There was an opportunity to have a courageous conversation on the ethical use of data and consumer privacy.

Putting a Stake in the Ground

The goal was to communicate our truth while putting a leadership stake in the ground. Media was primed to cover the next scandal, and this story was going to re-start the conversation. PAN counseled Crimson to leverage the blog as the ideal location for its public-facing communication. This would allow Crimsom to provide a perspective, with a call to action to be conscious stewards of protecting consumer's private data.

Central to achieving our goal was to define


Menu

AdAge

Don't Miss NewFronts live Walmart's ad network CBD-infused snacks Hulu binge-TV ads The A-List winners!

Digital

FACEBOOK CLEARS CRIMSON HEXAGON OF ABUSING USER DATA

By Garett Sloane , Published on August 16, 2018.

terms to create a common understanding of the language used in conversations. This messaging carried to an internal Q&A created with the understanding that any message made public could be seen by media, customers, partners and competitors – all with different motivations.

Grind's investigation prompted Facebook to suspend Crimson's access and investigate the claims. Experiencing a maelstrom of discontent around consumer privacy, Facebook reacted hours before the story was published. Crimson was not only facing reputational impact, but its access to Facebook was in peril.

Looping in the executive team, the legal team, outside counsel, etc., as one unit, we developed an agreed-upon strategy, talking points, messaging, ownership and next steps.

Once the story published, PAN fielded 30+ media inquiries that resulted in 140+ pieces of coverage. Every inquiry received a reply from PAN with a link to the blog. From a communication perspective, having the statement about the ethical use of consumer data represented in coverage was of critical importance. More than 70% of coverage included a link to the blog, meaning media valued the conversation on privacy. While Facebook reinstated Crimson, they were not willing to participate in an announcement. Therefore, Crimson updated its blog accordingly, to little fanfare.

Media Coverage

After the initial Wall Street Journal story went live, we received over 30 in-bound media inquiries looking for commentary or updates. There were an additional 140+ stories published after the WSJ story went live. The coverage related to the Facebook investigation spanned verticals and linked back to the blog we drafted and heavily encouraged media to reference over 70% of the time. There were eight stories covered that discussed Facebook reinstating Crimson Hexagon to its platform due to our proactive and aggressive media outreach. Post-crisis, we forged new relationships with top tier media that have resulted in continued positive coverage in the months after the initial article ran. ■

This case study received an honorable mention for the 2019 PRNEWS Platinum Awards. It has been edited for clarity.

Media Relations | Executive and Spokesperson Training | Internal Communications

Cruise Lines, Care Facilities Fail After COVID-19 Media Attention Arrives

By Katie Paine

The coronavirus pandemic is a perfect example of why increasing awareness is a terrible PR objective. I've been aware of cruise ships since I was a child. My father decided to celebrate retirement by taking me, his only offspring, around the world. The first leg of the journey was aboard the QE2, from New York to LeHavre. I was 16 and found the cruise dull, but was fascinated by the extent to which my father was the center of attention for so many attractive, elderly (in my eyes) ladies.

But when news and photos began to appear about COVID-19 infections on board several vessels, my awareness quickly turned to horror. The thought of thousands of people stuck at sea on ships in which a highly contagious and frequently deadly disease ran rampant made my skin crawl.

My thoughts also turned to friends in places like Sitka, Alaska and Fort Lauderdale, and all the other ports of call who would be unwitting recipients of the disease, courtesy of ships that were even then continuing to sail. The more aware I was of what was happening in the industry, the more certain I was that I would never again set foot on a cruise ship.

Awareness Turns to Outrage

Like most, I am aware of the importance and necessity of long-term care facilities. I have family members in them. But once again, that awareness turned to outrage and fear when news broke that most of the deaths in many states, including my own, were happening in those same places.

The reality is that COVID-19 has raised the visibility of many industries that we probably didn't give much thought to before: meatpacking, supply-chain, food pantries, prisons, janitorial services. The list goes on. What happens to those industries now that they've had their visibility raised to levels previously reserved for sports teams and presidential candidates?

Some may return to relative obscurity when we finally realize we have enough toilet paper, thermometers and flour. Others will see their reputations and recognition enhanced by their philanthropic efforts – S**teak-Umms** and **Dean Kamen** come to mind – the latter a name some may remember as the inventor of the **Segway**, but who has more recently been credited with orchestrating delivery of badly needed PPE, among other important contributions. Others may go down in history as bad actors whose words and deeds helped prolong the COVID-19 nightmare.

Below we will examine how two of those now highly visible industries are responding: cruise lines and nursing homes.

The Cruise Line Industry

When news of infected cruise ships began to surface, the volume of cases, and even deaths, seemed staggering. Since then, those numbers pale next to death tolls and infection rates elsewhere in the US.

The Miami Herald has been tracking the numbers. To date, there have been 2,787 cases

Cruise Line Industry

Criteria	Grade	Comments	Advice
Extent of coverage	F	Because the cruise industry was one of the first hot spots, and images and video interviews with stranded passengers filled the media, the sector received more than its fair share of attention.	When you're one of the first to become a victim of a natural disaster or global pandemic, try to do everything right, since all eyes will be on you. Later, there may be others to distract the media.
Effectiveness of spokespeople	F	Passengers and industry spokespeople were contradicting each other daily, and the passengers made much better copy, so whatever industry spokespeople said had less credibility than the social media posts of suffering passengers.	Don't forget that the media is constantly beseeching anyone affected by a tragedy to tell his or her story, and it's easy to respond to their pleas on social media. Visuals of victims make for a much better story than a stiff spokesperson standing at a podium.
Communication of key messages	D-	The industry began explaining how it was planning to change its practices, but only after lawmakers started calling for stricter legislation. This industry response was far too late.	Getting ahead of a crisis means taking swift and bold action before you it's mandated, before lawyers start filing lawsuits and victims call their representatives in congress.
Management of negative messages	F	No amount of corporate speak could drown out the torrent of complaints and photos from passengers on board.	Assume that anyone hurt by your actions, or actions that touch your brand, will have a mobile phone and a camera. They will broadcast the negative messages you don't want people to know about.
Impact on customers	C	Bookings for 2021 are looking strong, according to the industry, which is offering generous discounts. So, for the true cruising fan, there seems to be little damage.	If you don't have data such as future bookings, survey your target audiences and existing customers ASAP to find out how bad the damage really is.
Impact on stock price	F	As the COVID-19 era continues, everyone wants to predict winners and losers, and most people seem to think the cruise industry will be at least a short-term loser since almost all the publicly traded companies have lost about 75% of their stock value in the last four months.	When a crisis hits a country, or the world, and your industry is at the forefront, and you are a public company, the best thing to do is take financial losses early, act quickly to stop the problem, make sure employees and customers are on the same page as you are, and then worry about your stock price.
Impact on employees	F	Weeks after passengers were brought home, thousands (possibly tens of thousands) of crew members remained stranded at sea because cruise lines didn't want to be held responsible for the cost of bringing them home. As a result, the attractiveness of working for a cruise line has been severely diminished.	Prioritize employees over profits, or you will find it very difficult to attract good talent when you need it.
Overall score	F	Learn from your mistakes. This wasn't the first time that the cruise industry has been hit with negative news. Yet its focus continues to be on profits over trust, credibility and reputation.	Just because your current crisis seems different from all others should not preclude you from going back to earlier crises and doing a thorough data analysis to determine what works, and what doesn't, to salvage your reputation.

Nursing Homes

Criteria	Grade	Comments	Advice
Extent of coverage	F	After being relatively under-covered by the media, the nursing home COVID-19 crisis now is an issue on nearly every newscast. Many governors are including nursing home numbers in their daily briefings. As the numbers climb, attention will grow.	There's nothing like a good crisis to make an industry that frequently runs below most radar screens top of the news. No matter how low visibility you may be, at least make sure you have a crisis and disaster plan ready. Dust it off at least once a year.
Effectiveness of spokes-people	F	If the thought was that somehow industry association presidents, who frequently are seen and described as lobbyists, would be effective spokespeople, then the industry was mistaken.	Credibility of spokespeople is critical. Having an industry lobbyist as your official spokesperson is not likely to engender credibility.
Communication of key messages	D	The key message should have been care and concern for patients, residents and families of those who died. Instead, the industry is asking for immunity from liability for what happened in their facilities, which is precisely the wrong message in any crisis.	In the scrum of a crisis, the media will, at best, take away one message from your statement, if any. So, when there are victims, it is best that your main message convey sympathy, empathy and apologies, or else you are doomed.
Management of negative messages	F	The moment the industry started talking about liability, most people assumed that there was some. The stories that were filling the news about hidden bodies and families left in the dark, sadly, made for excellent TV. There was no way that negative messages wouldn't dominate the headlines.	Bringing up legal issues and potential lawsuits in the middle of a crisis implies that you know you did something wrong. Lawyers generally are less interested in protecting your reputation than they are in avoiding lawsuits. Both are equally costly.
Impact on employees	F	Most nursing facilities already are understaffed and staff is notoriously underpaid. The fact that you want immunity and aren't providing PPE or compensation commensurate with the risks the staff is taking will ensure that it will be harder than ever to find talent going forward.	Communicating with employees, whether you are conveying concern or instructions as to how to fix a problem, has to be your number-one priority in any crisis.
Impact on citizens	F	There are millions of family members who now are frantic about their loved ones since the media has portrayed nursing homes as the source of a majority of COVID-19 fatalities. It could be years before confidence is restored. In addition, many voters will be petitioning their legislators for more oversight of the industry	Your first message has to be one of compassion for those hurt in any crisis. If not, you will end up with a reputation as an organization or an industry that doesn't care and won't listen. It is essentially an entity with which no one will willingly do business.
Impact on investors	F	Hedge funds and other for-profit public companies own many of the infected facilities. There is no doubt shareholders will be thrilled to see that states are granting immunity when asked.	The fact that of all your stakeholder audiences, your shareholders are the only ones who did well, will not enable you to succeed in a populist, or, frankly, in any, post-crisis environment.
Overall score	D-	We have yet to see a facility manage communications well to any audience, except perhaps to shareholders. If such facilities weren't a necessity for so many families, the resident population would decrease dramatically. Immunity or not, we predict more legislation and regulation in their future.	Don't leave communications to lawyers or lobbyists. Your response to a crisis, especially one involving the health and safety of staff as well as customers, has to begin with compassion and empathy, not protection from lawsuits.

and 74 deaths associated with cruise ships.

What truly tarred the industry was its insistence that ships were safe and its persistence in continuing to launch cruises and visit ports even after the initial cases and death were reported in early February.

The **CDC** issued warnings against boarding cruise ships on March 8, yet cruises continued to launch through mid-March. As of April 7, there were 6,000 passengers at sea. In late, **Carnival Cruise Line** said it had 10,000 healthy crew members aboard 18 of its ships.

The industry's lobbying group, **Cruise Lines International Association**, issued a statement saying, "Upon declaration by the **WHO** of a pandemic, (March 11, 2020) CLIA-member cruise lines voluntarily suspended operations worldwide – making the cruise industry one of the first to do so."

Daily headlines refuted this, of course. In addition, it didn't help the industry's credibility that President Trump weighed in on its behalf. Carnival Corp. chairman Micky Arison is a close friend of the president's and a former sponsor of "The Apprentice."

The industry also didn't win friends when it lobbied for CARES act relief funds, despite avoiding paying US taxes, as most of its vessels are registered overseas.

Yet Carnival unveiled plans on May 4 to resume cruising from US ports, on a limited basis, by August 1. The resumption is subject to CDC approval and likely will include daily temperature checks, distancing and containment procedures. Still, Carnival says people are booking.

Nursing Homes

Relative to the cruise line industry, COVID-19 has dealt a far bigger blow to nursing homes. All over the US, once the media or health care officials started tracking data by source, the numbers of cases and deaths from nursing homes skyrocketed to more than 11,000, according to the AP. Sadly, there has been such limited testing in these facilities that there is widespread acknowledgement that those numbers are under-reporting cases and fatalities.

Unfortunately, the industry's message focuses more on being granted immunity from liability and lawsuits than concern for the sick and families of those who have died.

The **American Health Care Association**, which represents more than 14,000 for-profit nursing homes, issued a statement that said: "Long-term care workers and centers are on the frontline of this pandemic response and it is critical that states provide the necessary liability protection staff and providers need to provide care during this difficult time without fear of reprisal."

There's no sign of empathy in those 39 words. Media reports as of press time say at least 11 states issued executive orders shielding health care providers from some form of liability during COVID-19. In addition, states like Kentucky, New York and Wisconsin have passed legislation to protect health care providers from liability during the global pandemic.

Advocates for occupants in these facilitates argue that granting immunity without requiring reporting and adherence to certain standards is an even bigger disaster waiting to happen. In many cases, family members, advocates and inspectors have been barred from entering the facilities.

"The rule waivers, diminished inspections, reduced oversight, and chronic understaffing in long-term care facilities may be a toxic combination," says Toby Edelman, senior policy attorney at the **Center for Medicare Advocacy**. "There's a lot of neglect in nursing homes in the best of times," she adds, "and these are not the best of times." ■

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Index

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