A PUBLIC RELATIONS' PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE TO CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Dr. P. Yarram Reddy
Faculty, Department of Business Management
Royal School of Information and Management Sciences
Chandragiri, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract: *The online world's insatiable appetite for controversy and scandal can quickly turn an isolated incident into a full-blown PR nightmare. One ill-advised tweet or a misinterpreted post can ignite a blaze of negative sentiment, leaving a trail of damaged reputations, dwindling customer trust, and financial repercussions. But despite the perils, social media can also be a powerful tool for addressing challenging crises. With careful management and a strategic approach, social media can serve as a beacon of hope amidst the chaos. It can be the platform where crises are transformed into catalysts for growth, where authenticity and transparency prevail, and where brands can prove their mettle in the face of adversity.*
Keywords : *Public Relations, Business, Communications, Management, Social Media*

INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-moving market, it's more critical than ever for brands to be agile and resilient in the face of unfavorable public opinion. To that end, we've rounded up a handful of successful crisis communication examples and synthesized them into a list of lessons marketers can learn from them. Why is it important to learn from the work of others? Well, because the odds of something similar happening to your company are pretty high. And the majority of businesses are not prepared to respond effectively. 80% of executives said they felt it has never been more important to build resilience in their organizations. Yet, fewer than half said their companies were prepared to respond quickly to a crisis. Your brand's best bet is to get ahead of any future problems by proactively creating and testing a comprehensive crisis management plan that includes robust guidance around communication.

What is crisis communication?

Before we go any further, let's level set on what "crisis communication" means. Simply, crisis communication is a method of sharing information intended to improve public brand perception in the face of a scandal or other negative event. It is one arm of an effective crisis management strategy, and typically involves multiple internal teams (corporate communications, public relations, social media, and legal to start) collaborating across various channels including the business' social, web and email properties.

The importance of strong crisis communication

Few established businesses have escaped the unwanted attention that comes from a brand crisis. The real differentiator between brands that rebound from these events and those that don't boils down to the effectiveness of their crisis communication and how well it is received by the public. In fact, 41% of consumers say they would return to a

brand that makes an apology and admits its own wrongdoing. If (and, more likely, when) a breach of customer trust occurs, it is critical to address it appropriately to stave off the worst possible consequences, which might include negative impacts to:

➢ Short- and long-term brand reputation
➢ Stock prices (for public companies)
➢ Customer loyalty and attrition
➢ Sales and revenue
➢ Employee satisfaction and turnover

The role of social media in crisis communication

Social media plays an important role in crisis communication, but it should not be the only channel in which businesses are sharing their messages. As is true in most cases, social media should be used to amplify key information, monitor brand sentiment and increase customer access to the company during times of crisis. In fact, social media itself is a common source of brand crises, so it's important to make sure that your business' communications
strategy includes details specific to handling these events and their aftermath.

Crisis communication examples

❖ The last several years have seen brands grappling with a number of external crises outside of their control (the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest, geopolitical tensions, etc.). Yet, a host of brands have also dealt with the ramifications of misconduct or negligence inside their own organizations which, in many cases, can be even more detrimental.
❖ We've all seen the headlines about brand scandals and businesses' attempts to reclaim their reputations. In some cases, these stories even tell tales of ill-conceived crisis communication strategies that failed to improve the situation or even exacerbated it.

❖ While there are certainly lessons to learn from these public relations debacles, there is perhaps even more to take away from successful responses. Below, we're sharing some relevant crisis communication examples from the last five years and offering key takeaways for brands.
❖ Prefer to listen to insight? Don't miss Get Baked's unique approach to managing a social media crisis on Sprout Social's own Podcast Social Creatures.

Key features

- Individually tailored training scenarios based on your formal and subject matter specifications

- Realistic injects and content (text, image, video, live phone calls and interviews)
- Simulation of social media, websites, news, multimedia libraries and blogs as well as closed communication channels and emails
- Automated simulation of communication traffic by AI
- Evaluation of the training and corresponding optimization potentials
- Determination of your individual Crisis Readiness Score (CRS)
- Ideal for crisis teams and entire organizations
- Can be performed remotely, hybrid or on-site as required

Crisis Communication and New Technology

A growing trend in the field of crisis communication is the reliance on new media, of which the Internet is the most common, as a prominent public relations tool. With this growing relationship of public relations professionals and the Internet it is important to understand how the Internet impacts the field of crisis communication. Individuals and businesses began using the Internet for

sending and receiving electronic mail, contributing to discussion groups and gathering information. Business also began creating their own presence on the Web in the form of company web sites. Many of these first Web sites were simply an electronic version of a company's printed materials, such as brochures and annual reports. Now company web sites have evolved to include more detailed information, more sophisticated technologies, as well as incorporate graphics and animation throughout the site. Today the Internet is a tool of commercial services offering countless products and services to businesses and individuals. It is also an electronic meeting place, where people can tap into world news, entertainment, and communicate via e-mail with friends and family twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. E-mail, newsgroups, chat rooms, and the World Wide Web are all parts of the digital communication system that exists in "cyberspace." Communication moves much faster through cyberspace than through electronic media that rely on older technologies. It operates around the world, in various time zones at all times of the day, enabling instant two-way communication. Today, the World Wide Web is the fastest growing component of the Internet. With the rapid growth in popularity over the 18 past decade, the Internet attracts a wide variety of users.

Potential Crisis Situations

A crisis can stem from any number of sources, including the following:

- ❖ Natural disasters
- ❖ Workplace violence
- ❖ Product recalls
- ❖ Customer injuries
- ❖ Employee misconduct
- ❖ Cyber attacks

Crisis Impact Risks

A crisis creates various impact risks for companies. Top concerns for companies facing an emergency include public welfare and customer safety. Beyond that, companies face potential damage to product sales, customer satisfaction, reputation, employee sentiment, and ultimately their financial health. A company could face legal action if one of its products or services causes harm to customers, either physically or through a breach of customer data systems. In the case of a cyber crime, companies could face the loss of proprietary business data, such as product designs. How a company communicates with customers, employees, and the public during a crisis can make a big difference in how much damage it absorbs.

PLANNING FOR A CRISIS

- ❖ **Find your weakness:** Companies need to identify strengths and weaknesses. This helps them understand what kinds of crisis situations could impact their operations. An audit should be performed to detect vulnerabilities, including an inspection of sites and infrastructure systems. Companies may also conduct crisis simulations to test how events may unfold and how different responses may work.

- ❖ **Make a plan:** A crisis communication plan is a reference tool for companies to use during an emergency. The plan establishes guidelines for how to communicate with the public, employees, and other

stakeholders. It specifies who'll craft the messaging and what tools will be used to distribute information. Companies may also have business continuity plans to provide details on how to keep operations running smoothly during a crisis.

During the Crisis

When an actual crisis occurs, companies can use their communication plan to launch a smooth response protocol. The following are a few crisis communication tips that PR professionals should follow:

1. **Assess the crisis:** The crisis management team must determine the intensity and reach of the situation before communicating with customers. This helps them determine the appropriate response level. While the assessment period will need to be brief, it allows the communication team to be on the same page about what information to release and to whom. It also helps the team avoid PR mistakes that can escalate the situation.

2. **Respond quickly:** Companies need to get ahead of any negative news stories or social media posts by issuing statements quickly. The official corporate response should be honest and empathetic, but not overly emotional. Accuracy and consistency are key to avoiding response backlash. A charismatic spokesperson should be designated in advance to provide the right tone and messaging to the public and media representatives. In addition to efficiency, responses should be proactive, transparent, and accountable.

3. **Prioritize actions:** Public safety is the No. 1 concern when a crisis occurs. This includes the safety of customers, employees, and anyone else impacted by the event. This may involve shutting down operations at a certain plant if an employee was injured or recalling certain products if customers are sick. A company must then consider its customers' needs and feelings, such as complaints about customer service quality or anger over a customer data breach. While business continuity is important, external parties' concerns must be addressed before a company can examine a crisis's impact on its reputation or finances.

4. **Enlist employees:** Company employees need to feel protected and supported during a crisis. Employees can be strong representatives for the company when they're informed about the situation and feel included in the response. Ideally, a crisis response system will target messaging toward specific employee groups, such as Information Technology (IT) or PR departments, so that individuals receive pertinent facts and aren't overwhelmed with irrelevant information, according to crisis management.

5. **Use technology tools:** A growing number of firms are adopting real-time crisis communication tools to aid them in crafting a rapid response strategy. The crisis management team needs to be able to give and receive real-time alerts with emerging details on the crisis.

6. **Monitor public sentiment:** Companies must constantly monitor news stories and

social media posts during a crisis. This includes major news outlets; local news channels; and social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. PR professionals need to have strategies in place for responding to negative social media posts or news reports, acting swiftly before posts become viral and cause irreparable damage to the firm's reputation.

AFTER THE CRISIS

The most important crisis communication tip in the aftermath of an event is this: Don't let your guard down. Conduct a post-crisis review to assess whether your response was effective. This should include gathering customer and employee feedback and ensuring that communication channels remain open long after the crisis ends. Determine what changes need to be made to the crisis communication plan to ensure success if a similar event occurs in the future.

Crisis Communication Examples

Despite the growing emphasis companies are placing on emergency response strategies, many companies seem unable to follow the basic tenets of crisis communication: getting ahead of the story, taking decisive action, providing frequent and honest updates, and not casting blame on other parties. Companies that have received heaping criticism in recent years due to poor crisis response strategies include the following:

- **Boeing:** Not long after Boeing's 737 Max airplanes were grounded in March 2019 following two fatal crashes, it came to light that the company had known about a related safety feature malfunction since 2017. Boeing didn't disclose the information

to airlines and regulators until after the first crash in late 2018 (while attributing the crash to "pilot error"), and the public wasn't told until weeks after the second crash. In the aftermath, the company lobbied for its planes not to be grounded and downplayed safety concerns.

- **Facebook:** When news of the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica data breach scandal broke in March 2018, top executives Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg took five days to respond to the reports. During this radio silence, many Facebook users abandoned or threatened to leave the platform, and Facebook's stock took a tumble. The lack of response caused vast speculation on reasons for the delay and whether management covered up or even cared about the data breach.

- **BP**: Crisis management professionals still discuss how BP's made the massive 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico even worse for the company. The company was criticized for lacking compassion, downplaying the severity of the crisis, and making overly optimistic promises for repair. Then-President Barack Obama criticized BP for spending money on expensive TV ads instead of cleanup and victim compensation funds, and the promises made in the ads were in direct violation of its federally filed oil spill plan. All these actions made the firm appear to be prioritizing its reputation over public health.

On the flip side, some companies have earned accolades for quickly turning

around events that could've turned into PR nightmares.

- ❖ **Tide:** Through no fault of its own, Tide was at the canter of a 2018 crisis in which teenagers posted videos of themselves ingesting Tide Pods. Tide responded quickly to the "Tide Pod challenge" by taking down social media videos and issuing rapid statements on health risks. By enlisting then-New England Patriots player and social media influencer Rob Gronkowski to spread the message, Tide was able to get the attention of its target audience (teens) and garner a positive public response.

- ❖ **Waffle House:** The 24-hour diner was hit with negative social media attention when a patron posted selfies of himself cooking his own food in a restaurant after finding all of the employees sleeping. Instead of issuing a somber public apology, Waffle House made a humorous statement acknowledging the mistake and offering the patron a job. The company's response resulted in positive media coverage for Waffle House and helped it avoid a major customer service crisis.

- ❖ **Kentucky Fried Chicken**: Nearly 700 KFC locations in the U.K. shut down when the chain ran out of chicken. Instead of blaming delivery contract issues, KFC responded to negative social media posts by taking out a humorous full-page advertisement apologizing for the mistake in the Evening Standard that garnered positive press from major news outlets. KFC successfully turned the situation around with a swift response that resonated with customers.

CONCLUSION

In today's interconnected world, the instantaneous nature of social media makes crisis planning all the more important. Chances are that when a crisis occurs, hundreds of social media posts may surface before your company is able to issue a statement. Some posts may even contain video or direct accounts of the event. Social media's influence on a crisis situation can be huge. A small customer service issue can turn into a full-blown crisis if a YouTube video, tweet, or Facebook post highlighting the problem goes viral. Companies need to craft a social media-specific crisis response strategy to help counteract potential harm from digital news or rumors that can spread like wildfire. Crisis communication on social media channels can even be used to a company's advantage when the right strategies are used.

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