

PR AGENCY CEO PRESENTS CRISIS PR PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE WHEN THE WORST HAPPENS

5W PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY

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White paper Crisis PR Preparedness And Response When The Worst Happens

The internet is one of the best, and worst, things to happen to public relations.

On the one hand, everyone- from individuals through to businesses and governments- has benefited from the limitless reach that the internet allows brands and organizations alike.

On the other, increased engagement brings with it an increased exposure to risk: errors are more visible, and the story of one wrong move can spread like wildfire. Bad press is more or less impossible to erase compared to the world of print media, and a single Tweet can lead to negative brand perception the world over.

Social media is particularly dry tinder for a PR disaster, with individuals quick to criticize and forthcoming with their opinions, many times to their own, broader, circles of engagement. As such, forward thinking managers developing crisis preparedness strategies in a bid to avoid panic, and further disaster, in the unlikely event of a PR disaster.

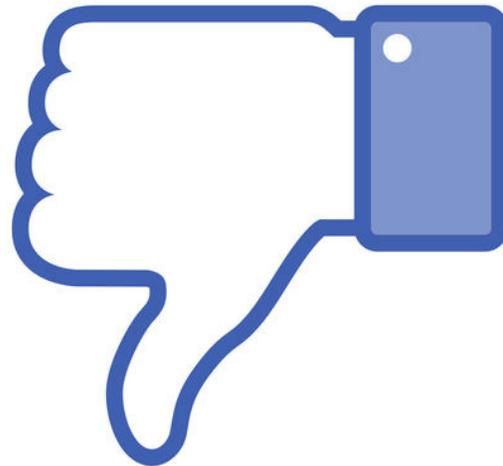
Here are five possible scenarios to keep tabs on:
INAPPROPRIATE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The modern workplace is a fast-paced environment, and it can be easy to make mistakes. In the realm of social media, these mistakes are broadcast instantly, and often to thousands, if not tens of thousands- of users.

No employee is immune to the mistake of posting inadvertently to a company account, and the risk of mistake amplifies each time a team member is given access to a corporate social media account. Sometimes, a single post can destroy a company's reputation- or, in the case of a well-managed crisis, enhance it.

One US Airways employee famously shared a pornographic image while trying to report it as inappropriate. The Twitter post was picked up as an international story almost immediately, but US Airways' response was prompt: it deleted the image, apologized publicly, and set about investigating the issue. Moreover, the firm was applauded for not firing the employee responsible for the misplaced image; many companies are quick to blame employees in a bid to detract negative attention from the corporate brand, but the response by US Airways was deemed a more reasonable management of the situation.

Not only should your firm have preventative measures in place to minimize the risk of human error, your teams must also be prepared to handle social media mishaps with calmness and clarity if they are to arise. As in the case of US Airways' response, the best way to handle situations such as these is to remain calm, respond appropriately, and lean on a transparent and apologetic tone.



HACKING

Investing in online security is crucial to any crisis preparedness plan. It can be hard to predict what hackers will go after, especially since their exploits are not always financially motivated. Social media passwords, photographs, customer information, medical records or even tax details can be targets.

Never underestimate hackers! Even the best technology will not deter them from trying; which is why having both preventive and reactive measures in place is highly recommended.

Depending on the hacker, being hacked can be disastrous, particularly without a plan in place. Last year, consumer credit reporting agency Equifax was on the receiving end of a hack which compromised the data of 143 million Americans.

The firm waited six weeks before announcing the breach, choosing not to notify people affected by the exposure and instead electing to set up a website to handle the crisis. Still, the website was not available to the public for days; people who entered their information to find out if they had been put at risk were told to come back later. Worse still, Equifax executives were found to have sold shares days after the company first discovered the hack- entire weeks before the public was even notified of the issue.

At the same time, Equifax offered free credit monitoring in the wake of the breach, requiring enrollees to waive their right to sue the company while doing so. Though it later backtracked on this requirement, Equifax failed to remove opt-out language from its general terms of service, and a customer service representative tweeted "Happy Friday!" from the firm's Twitter account not

long after news of the hack first broke. Through it all, CEO Rick Smith failed to speak publicly on the breach, failing wholeheartedly in his role in putting the public at ease.

FOOD QUALITY ISSUES

Recently, many food chains have faced PR crises when the quality of their food supplies has been called into question. Chipotle Mexican Grill's stock dropped in March of 2016 after a string of health violations and virus outbreaks. Chipotle was able to absorb the cost of shutting down and cleaning all of the involved restaurants, but is still working on regaining the trust of many customers by offering free meals and tinkering with their supply chain.

In the latest report by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), Chipotle's rating has barely regained ground after dropping 6%, with much of the change attributed to food quality concerns. Chipotle no doubt has an uphill battle ahead.

SUPPLY CHAIN CORRUPTION

In a similar vein, a company's supply chain can also be a headache in terms of product issues, and major companies are increasingly expected to maintain ethical and cost-effective production measures along their global supply chains.



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In 2014, UK fast-fashion department store Primark came under intense scrutiny after customers found letters sewn into their clothing by overseas workers and inmates, claiming to be forced to work under slave-like conditions. Only a year previous, a factory collapse in Bangladesh killed 1,100 workers and injured 2,500 workers; the factory was found to have been handling contracts for big name brands like Carrefour, Mango, Auchan, Loblaw and, devastatingly, Primark.

With back-to-back scandals, Primark has undertaken a meticulous PR campaign in the years since: paying compensation to the victims of the factory collapse, ensuring more comprehensive factory inspections, and improving the transparency of their supply chain and related ethical initiatives.

DISASTER

When it comes to marketing, sometimes less is more. In times of disaster, firms must be sensitive to the loss and tragedy endured by customers; a mourning period in the aftermath of an incident must be observed.

Increasingly, firms are becoming overzealous to plug their brand amid recovery efforts. This almost never goes down well, with savvy

consumers picking up on brands that attempt to piggyback on tragedies for their own benefit.

In the wake of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, a tragedy which had then-President Obama hold a tearful press conference, department store Kmart tweeted a message of prayer and well wishes for the families of those affected. In the same post, the company added a hashtag for their product "Fab15Toys", a move which was undoubtedly poorly received by the general public.



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That same year, department store GAP made a poor-taste joke on its Twitter account in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. "All impacted by #Sandy, stay safe!" it read, "We'll be doing lots of Gap.com shipping today. How about you?" With 24 states affected by the mega-storm, including power outages and flooding, jokes about online shopping could not have been more tone deaf.

Now that you have a view of PR crises to be prepared for, it's important to build an action list for your PR team. Here are some starters:

1. Pinpoint potential weak spots, and establish measures to protect against crises;
2. Develop a range of contingency plans to ensure you hit the ground running when a crisis arises;
3. Ensure your plan is well-documented and accessible, so that employees can follow prescribed procedures;
4. Train your team to respond effectively to crises;
5. Build a strong and positive brand perception. In the event of a disaster, you can lean on your reputation;
6. Set alerts on social media accounts and search engines. Be vigilant, and respond quickly and transparently to customer concerns;
7. Create template press releases and responses that can be used where necessary, using the templates as a guide to be modified to fit the situation;
8. Create a fund for emergencies so as to avoid budget pressures in the wake of a PR crisis; and
9. Build ties with the community and your customer base. Trust and goodwill are priceless in the event of a PR disaster.

The world is constantly changing, and technology along with it. The list of potential avenues for crises is ever-expanding, and companies must be forward thinking to ensure they stay in control of issues as they arise.

Remember: your customers are human. Trust, compassion and transparency are values which have not changed with the internet era, and companies that genuinely work to build these qualities into the customer relationship will be rewarded at times when these links are being tested the most.

