



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS WHITEPAPER

Insight into PR preparedness and best practices for businesses and organizations facing a threat to their public image

Numerous brands have been caught in the center of a public crisis while others watched, thankful it wasn't happening to them. But what if it was? In a perfect world, a crisis will never unfold around you. Unfortunately, the world is unpredictable, so it's a smart idea to have a plan in place should a disaster hit.

THE BASICS

A crisis is any event or situation that threatens the continued operation of your company. It might be a product mishap, poorly thought out messaging, personnel scandal, or financial issues, just to highlight a few. It can come in any shape or form, and it can come when you're least expecting it.

Assembling an internal crisis team composed of team members who are familiar with the mission and values of the brand is the best place to start. These individuals will be the select few to help put together a crisis plan, and most likely will be the ones to execute it, as well.

Before you can plan your action strategy, you must identify what you're reacting to. Start by brainstorming potential crises that would be relevant to your brand and industry. In each of those situations: who would be the most affected by your actions, and how do you plan to respond and communicate to them? Prepare statements that can be tailored and customized based on the situation, which will help guide you, and keep you calm, as pressure intensifies.



Drafting materials, including press releases and social media posts, will save you time later on.

When you're confident the crisis plan is finalized, transition into monitoring for any signs a crisis may unfold. This requires being in-tune with internal affairs, current events, and external perception of the brand. Monitoring mentions of the brand in the media provides valuable insights. If there are any signs that attitudes towards the brand, or its actions, are swaying towards the negative, this is your chance to take charge of the narrative before it gets out of control. Take cues from those mentions to reevaluate your campaign, company mission, or brand choices, and swiftly implement any necessary changes.

THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

The internet is one of the best, and worst, things to happen to public relations. On the one hand, everyone - from individuals to businesses to governments - has benefited from the limitless reach that the internet allows. On the other, increased engagement brings with it an increased

exposure to risk - errors are more visible, consumers have an equal platform to share their opinions, and the story of one wrong move can spread like wildfire.

Furthermore, the speed at which information is created and shared means less time for a brand to prepare, analyze, and react.

Bad press can be impossible to erase from the internet compared to the world of print media. A single tweet can affect a brand's entire reputation. Social media is particularly dry tinder for a PR disaster, with individuals quick to criticize and be forthcoming with their opinions to their own broader circles of engagement. With this new landscape that brings with it less control on behalf of the brand, forward-thinking managers must develop crisis preparedness strategies unique to the scenarios the internet supports. Preparedness will help to avoid panic and further disaster in the event of an online PR disaster.

The following section outlines six scenarios to keep tabs on.

PANDEMICS

For almost every organization dealing with a pandemic such as coronavirus, it's uncharted territory. Many clients reached out for assistance in navigating internal and external communication strategies both in preparation for potential COVID-19 impact, or in response to an incident.

A general principle when dealing with a matter of public health and safety is to be proactive. You never want a situation where potential harm could have been avoided, if only you had been more proactive and forthcoming with what you knew. Anyone during a pandemic will understand and accept an employee that could be

potentially infected with the virus, and that might have come into contact with others. What the public will not accept is if you knew this information, and did not share it, or if you weren't fully prepared.

No one saw coronavirus coming, and it's still too early to tell what impact it will have on business and the economy in the years to come. However, if there is one lesson you can learn from this catastrophe, it's that a crisis can strike at any time, in any form, and catch you unprepared. Industries far removed from the health and the public sector are being impacted, large and small. It's one of the greatest lessons in crisis response our generation has ever seen, and a perfect opportunity to sharpen your skills.





INAPPROPRIATE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The modern workplace is a fast-paced environment, and it can be easy to make mistakes. Social media enhances these mishaps, broadcasting them instantly, and often to thousands, if not tens of thousands, of users. No one is immune to the mistake of posting inadvertently to a company account, and the risk of mistake amplifies each time an individual is given access to a corporate social media account.

A single post has the potential to destroy a company's reputation, or in the case of the well-managed crisis, enhance it. In 2014, one US Airways employee famously shared a pornographic image while trying to report it as inappropriate. The tweet 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 brand was applauded for not firing the employee responsible for the misplaced image. Many companies are quick to blame individual employees to detract negative attention from the corporate brand, but the response by US Airways was deemed a more reasonable management of the situation.

In another example, rushing to post a campaign that will break through the noise, or respond to a consumer in the fast-paced environment of social media, could lead to oversights in copy or messaging that have the potential to be detrimental to the brand. At the height of the 2018 holiday season, the UPS Store released a tweet, stating,

"If your child addresses a letter to the North Pole, you can leave it with us. We do shredding." The tweet quickly drew attention from consumers who criticized the brand, who benefits from the busy holiday season, for being unreasonably cruel. In response to their backlash, the tweet was removed, and a spokeswoman released an apology acknowledging they missed the mark in an attempt to bring awareness to their shredding service.

Social media doesn't slow down. Not only should your brand 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. It's important to never underestimate hackers, or think that they won't target your company. Social media passwords, photographs, customer information, medical records or even tax details can be targets. Even the best technology will not deter them from trying; which is why having both preventative and reactive measures in place is highly recommended.

Being hacked can be disastrous, particularly without a plan in place. In 2019, Capital One found themselves on the receiving end of a hack which compromised the data of more than 100 million



DAILY SOCIAL MEDIA USE:

76% CHECK FACEBOOK
67% CHECK INSTAGRAM
62% CHECK TWITTER

Statistics are from 5WPR's 2020 Consumer Culture Report and are representative of those surveyed who use each individual platform.

customers, including names, addresses, dates of birth, and social security numbers, making it one of the largest thefts of personal information from a bank. After learning of the hack, Capital One took nearly two weeks to inform their customers, some not even learning the information from Capital One themselves, rather through news stations reporting on the incident, or from Twitter, where many customers turned to voice their frustrations. And when the bank did make mention of the hack, they had no additional information to offer, no portal for customers to check if their information had been compromised, or when consumers could expect to hear next steps. It is clear Capital One lacked a crisis plan prior to the hack that detailed a timeline with necessary steps should they ever find themselves in this situation.

FOOD QUALITY ISSUES

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 had a difficult time suppressing the social media backfire. Chipotle saw themselves struggling well into 2018 to regain the trust of their consumers, who were still tweeting their skepticism on the safety of eating at a Chipotle, regardless of if the location had been initially impacted. A TIME 2019 article cites new leadership still attempting to devise a plan that will shift the narrative away from their E. coli outbreak.

SUPPLY CHAIN DISRUPTION

In a similar vein, a company's supply chain can also be a headache in terms of product issues, or in this case, delivering the product. In 2018, UK locations of KFC found themselves out of chicken after an unforeseen circumstance kept their delivery partner from their one centralized warehouse. The result - at its peak, 750 KFC locations in the UK temporarily closed for business. This sent consumers themselves into full-on crisis-mode as they took to Twitter with the trending hashtag #KFCCrisis.



The uproar was so exigent police forces issued statements, including Tower Hamlets Police, who tweeted, “Please do not contact us about the #KFC Crisis – it is not a police matter if your favorite eatery is not serving the menu that you desire.” KFC knew all the attention would turn to be on their response, and as a brand, they knew they would have to stay true to their brand voice. So rather than a traditional, formal statement, they reacted with light-hearted, honest, and self-deprecating responses in which they admitted to screwing up, and made no attempt to deflect blame onto anyone else. Their timely and honest apology has been admired by many, even winning them awards.

DISASTER

When it comes to marketing, sometimes less is more. In times of disaster, companies must be sensitive to the situation and have a general awareness of where they fit into the bigger picture. Brands have shown a tendency to be overzealous in plugging themselves into the news cycle amid disasters and recovery efforts. This should be done with care and with the guidance of a professional team as the public easily recognizes self-serving attempts to capitalize on moments of tragedy simply because they tend to spark widespread attention.

In the wake of the 2012 Sandy Hook School shooting, a tragedy that had then-President Obama holding a tearful press conference, national department store chain, 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 poorly received by the general public and rightfully so. Social media managers must be aware of current events at all times to avoid releasing ill-timed posts. There are myriad examples of companies, many times innocently, publishing social media posts that demonstrate they are oblivious to what is happening around them or elsewhere in the world. It is a lesson to managers to stay on top of current events and how their content might relate to it. Brands need to review their scheduled content and cancel the automated release of social media posts in times of tragedy.

There is one big caveat to this advice. In times of universal crisis, much like we are experiencing now with COVID-19, many organizations have a responsibility to communicate and oftentimes have a lot to offer in the way of public service. A well-informed public is critical for response and recovery efforts and that often relies on organizations communicating how they are responding, what they are doing for people, free services they may be offering, how they're supporting their employees and their ability to continue serving the public.

NEW AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

While we all want to be the first to embrace new technologies, little can be known about them, or what can go wrong with them.

Adidas learned this the hard way when their social media campaign, using artificial intelligence (AI), backfired. Adidas UK launched a Twitter campaign in 2019 to celebrate the launch of their new Arsenal soccer team gear, encouraging users to tweet #DareToCreate. Using artificial intelligence, users would receive a reply from the Adidas account with photos of virtual Arsenal jerseys embellished with the user's Twitter handle. Users with obscene and offensive handles took advantage of the #DareToCreate hashtag, in turn having Adidas create and post jerseys with obscene messages on the back. Once the brand became aware of the issue, they automatically suspended the campaign and deleted the tweets. This wasn't the first time an AI campaign backfired on a brand - a similar incident happened on Microsoft's Twitter feed in 2016. Adidas could have done more research and been better prepared for the launch of the campaign using a new technology, and in return could have avoided being caught in the middle of a crisis.

THE AFTERMATH

How you continuously handle your brand perception post-crisis speaks to what you've learned as a brand, and how you've grown. It's extremely important to re-assess the reputation of the brand coming out of a crisis - this will be key to creating the brand's strategy moving forward. Messaging should be readjusted to highlight new company goals, and what has changed to avoid ending up in the same or

similar situation in the future. Create a crisis plan if you didn't already have one in place, or assess how well your plan worked and make any necessary changes. Remember, you can never fully put your crisis in the past, it will always be a part of your brand's identity.

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. On the next page you'll find some checklists to get started.



CRISIS PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST:

1. Pinpoint potential weak spots in your industry, and how your brand functions as a part of it, and establish measures to protect against crises
2. Develop a range of contingency plans to ensure you hit the ground running when any 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 trustworthy brand prior to a crisis. In the event of a disaster, you can lean on your reputation
6. Set alerts on social media accounts and search engines
7. Be vigilant, and respond quickly and transparently to customer concerns
8. 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
9. Create a fund for emergencies so as to avoid budget pressures in the wake of a PR crisis
10. Build ties with the community and your customer base. Trust and goodwill are priceless in the event of a PR disaster.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN CHECKLIST:

1. Develop relevant internal & external messaging pre-crisis and templates for post-crisis
2. Identify your crisis team's assignments and roles
3. Compile a list of key team member contacts
4. Perform a media audit and update the contact list
5. Decide on a preferred vendor list
6. Outline a digital communications plan comprehensive of best practices and guidelines

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS INTERNAL PLAN CHECKLIST:

1. Set guidelines and rules for engaging with media during a crisis
2. Define staff responsibilities in a crisis
3. Develop internal protocol
4. Identify the crisis team
5. Choose your preferred communication channels

CLOSING THOUGHTS

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.



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