DO THIS, NOT THAT…

A Guide to Intelligent Communications

version 2.0 communications

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This eBook is a compilation of Version 2.0 Communications' recent blog posts, demonstrating the best examples of the nasty consequences when things go wrong in the world of communications. Sometimes the best lessons in effective communications are found in the details and consequences of the most glaring public blunders.

This eBook is a chance to learn valuable lessons without having to deal with the repercussions (and the cleanup) we face when the mistakes are our own. And let's be honest – it provides an opportunity for that guilty pleasure known as schadenfreude that most of us experience when someone screws up and we get to observe the fallout, all the while thinking, "Thank God it wasn't me (this time)."

Sadly, the challenge is sifting through hundreds of examples of CEOs or corporate leaders, executives and spokespeople communicating, behaving or responding in inappropriate, ineffective or just plain dim-witted ways to identify the instances from which we can actually learn a lesson or two. These blunders can have enormous negative consequence, often outweighing the damage created by the initial incident.

Stuff happens, often unavoidably – what matters more, especially for business leaders, is how quickly and effectively the response is handled and what is done (and I mean proactively) to minimize the aftershock. Providing guidance for managing these communications crises is at the heart of what we do at V2, and an important part of what our clients value in our relationships.

While it would be unkind to take pleasure in the misfortunes of others, it is instructive to review what they might have done, could have done, should have done differently. CEOs and other executives have a special responsibility for brand stewardship that is sometimes not guarded as carefully or skillfully as it should be. So, in that spirit, we offer this eBook as it deconstructs the real world situations these companies faced and looks for the constructive lessons they offer.

Best,
Maura FitzGerald and the V2 team

WHAT NOT TO DO

INTRODUCTION

I have to admit that often when I'm reading a news story that contains ghastly examples of communications gone wrong, I want to blame an ego-driven response or the fear of a possible lawsuit or a general lack of sensitivity. But surely there have been enough examples over the years of companies who have done it right to convince strategists and decision makers that in the long term, a quick, honest and clear response (followed up by action when necessary) is by far the best way to go?

Sadly, the answer is no – and not by a long shot. Let's take a look at a handful of these horror stories, theorize about alternative strategies that might have produced better results, enjoy a bit of schadenfreude and at least vow to make our own mistakes rather than repeat these.

DON'T skip the preparation

Lessons Learned from the Twitter Earnings Leak

PR practitioners everywhere shuddered when it was revealed that Selerity, a financial data analytics firm, uncovered Twitter's quarterly results and tweeted them before Twitter officially announced them. Complicated by the fact that the earnings were less than stellar, Selerity's tweet caused shares of Twitter to plunge and wreaked havoc on the trading floor. It was neither a leak nor a hack, Selerity claimed, just a revelation of public information from Twitter's own investor relations (IR) web page. The investor relations team and the PR team simply did not align the timing of the new IR content with the press release or company tweet, and it cost them dearly.

While this is not the first time that financial news like funding has been leaked thanks in part to regulations requiring filings (which are technically public information), this recent instance felt different for many reasons. First, it signaled that PR professionals must deal with a new challenge. If information exists somewhere, there is a very real chance someone (not just journalists and investigative reporters) will find it and share it.

DON'T underestimate, misunderstand, or neglect your audience

How Good PR Could Have Softened the NYT Takedown of Amazon

The fallout for Amazon and CEO Jeff Bezos raged, following the front-page New York Sunday Times article by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld detailing what it's like to labor in the new workplace paradigm that is Bezos' Amazon. While the well-researched (more than 100 interviews conducted with current and former Amazonians) story focused on the horrors of being a white-collar employee at Amazon, the most shocking aspect of the article was how it could go so wrong when the story had been undertaken with the

> "You walk out of a conference room and you'll see a grown man covering his face," he said. "Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk."
>
> - Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, New York Times, August 15, 2015

full cooperation of Amazon. In fact, Amazon executives seemed to be completely taken by surprise at the negative slant of the article and were forced to react in a series of clumsily orchestrated television appearances and statements. The lesson here is that cooperation isn't enough. Every company, no matter the size, needs to manage interactions with journalists tightly and professionally – and do whatever they can to positively impact the final outcome.

> "A lot of people who work there feel this tension: It's the greatest place I hate to work."
>
> - Jodi Kantor and David Streitfield, New York Times, August 15, 2015

By refusing to be interviewed by the New York Times journalists, Bezos left himself and Amazon's workplace wide open to the scathing depiction that appeared on the front page of Sunday's newspaper. As the steward of the Amazon brand, this was the worst thing Bezos could have done.

Imagine how different the story might have sounded if Bezos' concern and reaction (as communicated in his letter to Amazon employees) had appeared in the original story, along with a commitment to work with Amazon HR, management and workplace culture experts to make the necessary changes. The story would probably not have been as favorable as Amazon had hoped, but at least it would have been more balanced. As it was, the story continued to dominate news cycles and likely, Amazon's recruiting efforts – the lifeblood of any tech business. The brand was wounded; tragically, it was self-inflicted.

YAHOO!

YAHOO!'s Mayer Reminds Us that Shareholders Aren't the Only PR Stakeholders

Yahoo! was widely praised when, in April 2013, the company made its benefits for new parents among the most generous – providing mothers up to 16 weeks and fathers up to 8 weeks of paid New Child Leave, with benefits, whenever and however they welcomed a new child to their families (through birth, adoption, foster child placement or surrogacy). The company would also provide up to $500 for support like laundry, house cleaning, groceries, take-out food and child care to employees bringing home new children. The swag-bag of Yahoo!-branded baby gifts was an added bonus.

When Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer announced in 2015 that she was expecting identical twin girls she shared the news via a blog post in which she announced she would be "taking limited time away and working throughout," owing at least in part to this being "a unique time in Yahoo!'s transformation."

Mayer's announcement certainly addressed the potential concerns of Yahoo! shareholders and Wall Street analysts – she wouldn't miss a beat running a company in the midst of an important phase in its evolution while dealing with her personal life. She neglected, however, to speak to her employees – a key audience of 12,500 worldwide stakeholders who are critical to the company's success – and to a broader constituency of customers and prospects who might be watching.

The news was picked up quickly worldwide by tech blogs, business press and broadcast outlets – and even a few celebrity tabloids. Though headlines initially focused on the news at hand (her pregnancy), the coverage soon took a noticeable turn. Journalists were quick to point out not only the unusual resources available to her as CEO (like a nursery in her office), but also the very stark

> "Once again, Mayer's critics are saying that her decision to take such a short leave sends the wrong message to women: Give up maternity leave for your career."
>
> - Samantha Allen, The Daily Beast, September 3, 2015

dichotomy between Mayer's aggressive postpartum work schedule and the company's very generous parental leave – and the message her decision was sending. If the CEO is only taking two weeks off to deliver and care for newborn twins (a week per child, some noted), is the average Yahoo! employee expected to follow suit? Is the policy on paper not acceptable for parents to put into practice?

Mayer's choice was, no doubt, very personal and arguably facing unnecessary intense public scrutiny. But the growing negative media dialogue could have been largely avoided had she not overlooked a very important element of the message for an absolutely critical group of stakeholders.

Nowhere in her announcement did she suggest that her personal choice could or should be treated as her "privileged" choice nor did she acknowledge the extraordinary resources at her disposal, making her choice possible for her (and likely impossible for others.) It might have been better for Yahoo! and its employees if she had celebrated the fact that she works for a company that enabled her to make a choice via a solid leave policy. And, all this transpiring despite similar concerns – and resulting negative media coverage – during her first pregnancy.

What became new fuel for the ongoing debate on parental leave is also an important reminder in PR and Communications: Understand – and speak to – your audiences. All of them.

Two Strikes for the Sox

Full disclosure: I am a die-hard hometown Boston Red Sox superfan, and a great admirer of the team's brand stewardship but…the Boston Red Sox set the bar at a new low in 2015. And I'm referring to their communications performance off the field, Red Sox Nation! The 2015 season on the field was not one that the fans of Red Sox baseball will want to remember including those of us who are fans of effective, well-managed communications. The Red Sox not only lost control of the team – they also lost control of their own narrative.

Two critical incidents illustrate my point:

Early in the season, Red Sox owner John Henry proclaimed that he was so confident in General Manager Ben Cherington that he expected Cherington to remain in his position "for years to come." A mere eighty days later, Cherington was on his way out of town in the waning days of a Red Sox season that was among the worst in the team's history. Highly paid executives who don't perform ought to be replaced, but savvy companies manage these transitions with more skill than what the Red Sox were able to muster.

After Red Sox owners John Henry and Tom Werner announced that they had hired Dave Dombrowski as president of baseball operations in August, Cherington promptly quit, and the sports world began buzzing with who said what to whom and when. The conversations and differing version of timelines were messier than the old Abbot and Costello routine of Who's On First. Cherington, who landed with the Red Sox after the team's disastrous 2011 season, said he was surprised to learn that Dombrowski had been hired (as his boss), although he'd made it clear to Werner and Henry that he wanted to be part of the hiring process. Werner and Henry claimed that Cherington was aware of their discussions with Dombrowski. When it was all over, the potentially good news that Dombrowski, a talented baseball strategist, was joining the Red Sox was lost in the furor of the conflicting stories of how it was handled.

Then, a few weeks later, news leaked out on radio station WEEI that popular Red Sox announcer Don Orsillo would no longer broadcast for New England Sports Network (NESN), which is 80 percent owned by the Boston Red Sox, once the season ended. The team, NESN officials and Orsillo did not respond until later, when NESN published a statement on its website confirming the rumor and identifying announcer Dave O'Brien as Orsillo's replacement. In the absence of an explanation from NESN officials and Red Sox owners, fans launched a vigorous campaign to save Orsillo, who had been with the team for 15 seasons. The controversy had plenty of time to gain momentum because the leak occurred more than a month before the end of the season when Orsillo would wrap up.

Footnotes: Even though he was a lame duck and the fans demonstrated their outrage at every game for the rest of the season, Orsillo was gracious and professional right up to his last day in the broadcast booth. He earned high marks for his performance during a very ugly time. The talent and accomplishments of O'Brien were all but lost in the noise of fan outrage. And the Red Sox owners? They, of course, blamed the Boston Globe for stoking the flames of fan anger. I guess it never occurred to them that they could have saved themselves, their fans and their employees a lot of angst (and embarrassment) if they had controlled the narrative and managed communications more thoughtfully and proactively.

While the ownership made a few mistakes, beloved player David Ortiz, or Big Papi, managed communications more gracefully. Ortiz announced that he would retire after the 2016 season in a touching video where he recounted his experience with the team and in the city of Boston and thanked fans for their support. Another home run for Big Papi.

A Lesson in What Not to Do

There are a few basic, common-sense rules to follow in crisis communications, and HubSpot recently violated just about all of them.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the situation, Mike Volpe, who was not only CMO but a very public evangelist for HubSpot, was fired when an independent investigation by HubSpot's Board and outside counsel determined that Volpe had violated HubSpot's code of business conduct and ethics when he attempted to get his hands on a draft manuscript of a book about the company. HubSpot Chairman, CEO and Co-founder Brian Halligan was sanctioned by the Board because he reportedly knew what Volpe was up to and didn't report it promptly enough, and a third employee, Vice President Joe Chernov, quit before his role in the debacle, if he had one, could be clarified.

All the gory details were offered up in a news release issued by HubSpot, a publicly traded company, on July 29, 2015, after the stock market closed. The lead in the release was the appointment of Kipp Bodnar as CMO, "effective immediately." The news about Halligan, Volpe and Chernov was reported in a few paragraphs that vaguely referenced Volpe's attempt to get a draft manuscript of a book about HubSpot, Halligan's failure to act when he became aware of what Volpe was up to and Chernov's resignation. The announcement wrapped up with a laudatory quote about Bodnar and a summary of his career. People were quick to recognize that the real news was Volpe's firing. The few facts HubSpot provided served only to raise additional questions. An investigation by "appropriate legal authorities" was underway, which limited what the company responsibly could say. However, the lack of facts in the news release made HubSpot look evasive and the clumsy attempt to make the Bodnar appointment the lead was ridiculous and didn't fool anyone.

The optimal time to create a crisis plan is well before you need one. HubSpot issued its announcement following an investigation so the company presumably had time to develop an effective strategy for letting its customers, partners, employees and other stakeholders know what had happened. However, the lack of quality and clarity around the execution of the announcement suggest that there was most likely no strategic plan in place.

The person quoted in HubSpot's release was Lorrie Norrington, a HubSpot Director. Responses afterwards came via Laura Moran in HubSpot's communications department – and the information was often confusing and contradictory. In an event affecting leadership, as this one did, it is critical to have the right person acting as the face of the company to the outside world. This is probably even more important for a company's employees who need reassurance if they are going to remain unified and focused during a crisis. Obviously, Halligan could not be a spokesperson since he had been sanctioned by the board and was part of the story. However, HubSpot has two founders and Dharmesh Shah, in his senior role, could have been a good candidate as spokesperson during the crisis.

> "…listening to pep talks that start to sound like the brainwashing you get when you join a cult. It's everything I ever imagined might take place inside a tech company, only even better."
>
> – Dan Lyons, excerpt from Disrupted featured in Fortune, March 25, 2016

Nothing generates more negative news coverage than a lack of transparency. Social channels lit up with speculation about the title of the book, Volpe's actions, what Halligan did and didn't know and what law enforcement agency was coming in to investigate. Journalists quickly figured out that the book was Dan Lyons' "Disrupted: My Misadventure in the Startup Bubble."

When HubSpot made its initial announcement on July 29, it refused to make Halligan or Shah available for comment. As rumors swirled during the next day or two, the company reversed its decision, and allowed Halligan and Shah to be interviewed by the Boston Globe. Unfortunately, rather than helping the company and its executives recover, the interview just made it worse.

Halligan and Shah refused to disclose what Volpe did but Halligan described it as "fishy". Halligan also refused to disclose details of his sanction but did say it was a "stinger to the pocketbook". These seemingly off-hand comments from the CEO responding to a crisis within a publicly traded company are not likely to squelch the rumors and speculation. The casual, perhaps careless remarks suggest that insufficient thought and preparation was given to what would be the best and most appropriate answers to very obvious questions.

The manner in which the crisis was handled reinforced the negatives and did little to halt damage to the brand. Of course, it is always dangerous to second guess, and it is possible that even when there is a plan, a spokesperson and a script, that things won't play out the way you would like. Sometimes, there is no way to avoid a spotlight created by bad choices and decisions. Over time, the way that HubSpot leadership responds and speaks for the company will determine whether they can successfully put this crisis in the rearview mirror. It will be important for the company to demonstrate that lessons have been learned.

The Communications Scorecard for FanDuel and DraftKings

> "Advertisements for both companies feature 20-somethings near tears after winning life-changing bounties, but the fine print on the television ads states that winnings actually average $22."
>
> – Joe Drape and Jacqueline Williams, New York Times, October 11, 2015

An October 2015 New York Times article revealed an evolving scandal engulfing the world of fantasy sports and its two market leaders, FanDuel and DraftKings. The scandal erupted when a DraftKings employee won $350,000 playing at rival site FanDuel. Circumstances called into question whether the employee's access (and the timing of that access) to information gave him an unfair advantage over other players. The controversy quickly escalated to include questions about which fantasy site employees have access to valuable data, what they are allowed to do with it and whether the industry can – or is willing to – police itself. As a result, various state and federal agencies, including the FBI, are investigating the industry and its key players to determine whether betting on fantasy sports is actually a form of gambling and, as such, must be federally regulated. A class-action lawsuit has been filed alleging fraud and the state of Nevada has ordered the fantasy sites out of the state until they get a gambling license.

Almost immediately, FanDuel CEO Nigel Eccles and DraftKings founder Jason Robins issued a joint statement defending the industry, the integrity of their games and their status as sites offering games of skill to fans (as opposed to gambling). Both sites immediately banned their employees from playing on other fantasy sites, a move originally described as "temporary" that quickly evolved into a permanent ban. While you might ask why this obvious safeguard was not already in place, it was a very smart move to present a public, unified front and try to reassure customers (and the concerned investors) – a good communications move.

In a follow-up interview that week with the Boston Globe, Robins defended his company and the industry, denied any need for outside regulation and said he was not going to fire the employee in question because an internal investigation had shown that he had done nothing wrong. While the interview was low on content and Robins was clearly on the defensive, it was smart to put him out there as a spokesperson for DraftKings during the crisis. As the leader of the organization, he is expected to take the heat and fix problems when things go wrong.

> "Neither company, however, has turned a profit."
>
> – Joe Drape and Jacqueline Williams, New York Times, October 11, 2015

During the Globe interview, Robins also revealed that DraftKings recently hired outside law firm Greenberg Traurig (Robins claimed they were hired before the issue arose) to do an examination and review of its controls. Greenberg Traurig concluded its investigation and DraftKings issued the findings that actually focused on the issue of whether the employee, in fact, did anything wrong. While the report concluded that he did not have access to information that gave him an unfair advantage when he placed his winning lineup, the optics would have been better if Greenberg Traurig issued the findings rather than DraftKings.

DON'T miss an opportunity

Amid a sea of 2015 holiday shopping offers, I received an email that caught my attention. The subject read, "Read Our SCATHING Yelp! Review, Take Survey, and We'll Donate 100 Toys," and I immediately opened it.

It was from The Fish and Bone, a high-end pet supply shop here in Boston.

Here's what it said:

Dear Katelyn,

Do you have a toy destroyer in your house? This is hot topic for us lately. Our Boston store was given a SCATHING review yesterday on Yelp! about a dog toy that fell to its demise a little too quickly, and I want to share it with you.

Why would anyone want to share a *bad* review??

Two reasons. One, dogs usually do tear apart their toys...in fact it is in their nature. That means that perhaps every single day of the year, a toy we sold could be making its last 'squeak', and we risk disappointing another customer. Serving customers is in our nature, that is what we do...so this is a problem that I'd really like to solve. Which toys are best for tough chewers, how long should they last...should every toy be guaranteed for every dog? I would love to learn from your experience. Can you give us your opinions in this brief (1-2 min) toy survey?

WE WILL DONATE up to 100 brand new squeaky toys to either Animal Rescue League of Boston or the Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland, one for EVERY survey completed.

The second reason is, we value your feed back, whether it's positive or not. We do listen, and even if it's negative, it can be informative & help us to be a better company. If you have had an experience at our stores that you think is worth sharing, please let us know, and by all means, post it on Facebook (Facebook Boston or Facebook Portland) or Yelp! (Yelp! Boston here, Yelp! Portland here).

Squeakily,

Kathy
ps...we want to deliver the toys on the day after Christmas, so please respond to the survey by 12/24!

Kathy Palmer | Chief Product Sniffer
The Fish & Bone

Though I hadn't shopped there in some time, I not only opened the email, but I also clicked through to read the negative Yelp! review (along with many positive, 5-star ones). And I took the two minutes to complete the online survey – partially because I, too, have been frustrated at expensive dog toys meeting their quick demise when given to my rambunctious German Shepherd, but mostly because I wanted to help get those poor pups at the Animal Rescue League get some new squeaky toys.

Companies of all sizes and in all industries encounter bad online reviews today – from local small business owners on Yelp! and Facebook, to the HR executive on GlassDoor, to tech companies in online forums, app review sites or mainstream media. Some get angry, some delete them when they're able (hint: that's a bad idea) and others ignore them. And some, like Kathy at The Fish and Bone, tackle them head on and turn them into a positive opportunity.

Here's why her approach worked so well:

It was surprising – My immediate reaction to her subject line was "wait, you want me to read a bad review?" Plenty of companies point us to the glowing words of raving fans, but few direct attention to the unhappy ones. I wanted to know more about this exception.

It was timely – Becky H. posted her one-star review on Sunday and The Fish and Bone team replied to her – and sent its email – the very next day. Rather than stewing for days over a response or hoping it would get buried amid more positive reviews, Kathy acted – fast.

It had a clear, simple call to action – Take the quick survey and help give shelter dogs some squeaky new toys for the holidays. Easy!

It was relevant to the audience – Most people don't care about a company's online review unless they're immediately in market for its product or service. But anyone who is on The Fish and Bone mailing list likely has pup at home, which means they've probably experienced bringing home a new toy to have it in tatters within minutes. By surveying their customers on this experience, they're looking to eliminate that pain point and improve their own performance by stocking toys that will better meet the needs of their customers – the key audience of the email. That same audience is also likely to have a soft spot for shelter dogs, making their offer to give away a toy for every survey completed that much more appealing. (And, the best part? It didn't try to sell me anything!)

It addressed the problem – Yes, Becky H. can get her $49.99 back, based on Kathy's direct response to her on Yelp!. But, more importantly, Kathy's clever survey is helping to ensure other customers don't fall victim to the same frustrating experience (or at the very least, those experiences are limited since dogs do, after all, often find great joy in tearing apart their toys).

Kudos to Kathy at The Fish and Bone for turning a scathing review into a positive for her company, her customers and, most importantly, the 100 dogs at the Animal Rescue League who got some new toys.

A FEW TIPS FROM THE V2 TEAM

Dear Friends,

At Version 2.0 Communications, it is our business to keep watch on the trends and best practices in Communications on behalf of our diverse client base. Watching events unfold over the past year, as highlighted in the posts that make up this eBook, we are struck by how quickly and dramatically the landscape changes yet how the fundamentals of strategic communications remain the same. The following are a few of our takeaways and some suggested best practices for protecting, leveraging and optimizing important business news.

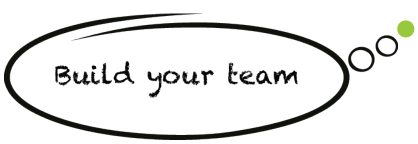
Above all, remember that getting it right pays dividends. For every example of what not to do, there are companies out there who manage through crises, sometimes even turning bad news into an opportunity à la the Fish and Bones story we included in this collection (page 13). A strong PR and communications team will be at the center of determining which way it goes.

Best,
Jean Serra and the V2 team

DO THIS

TIPS FOR HANDLING COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVELY

Bring your "A" game – build your team, invest in the right assets, know the key players and your "opponents," be prepared, have a plan, play by the rules.



- Assemble the right players and skill sets (internal and external), provide them with the right training and coaching, evaluate performance honestly and achieve right outcomes.

- Compelling, edgy and even controversial content is the basis of any robust communications strategy and thought leadership. Inventory your existing content assets, and develop a plan for content creation (and repurposing). Innovative agencies, professionals and brands seek and test new strategies, platforms and tactics to engage with key influencers, especially media. Mainstream media, trade press and social media are looking for new ways to engage readers and tell a story. Think about the themes, experts and key trends that your content addresses and engage relevant target publications reporters and editors on these topics. Whether it's video, graphics, guest columns or events – publishers and editors are on the hunt for compelling content.

Know the key players, audience(s) and influencers

Beware of social media and stay current. Identify the key platforms and media for your target audiences – customers, prospects, media and analysts, investors and shareholders. We see even more attention and strategic planning focused on Twitter and other social channels as an opportunity (and a threat) when it comes to news planning. There are so many new outlets to investigate, celebrate and target. Stay informed about these new formats, and think strategically and creatively.

Be prepared

Get far, far ahead of the news – keep an open dialogue between the operating department managing the "event" and the PR team, including the internal point of contact and the external agency. With sufficient advance notice and the right participants, the most effective PR strategy and protections can be developed and agreed to by all parties involved. No scrambling required!

- Executives and employees offered to journalists as interview subjects must be thoroughly prepped on the context of the story and their roles in shaping that story. It is always in a company's best interest to equip interviewees with the messages and tools to tell the story effectively.

- Timing matters. Align key milestones and announcements, down to the second. Plan to announce the news on the same day the information is filed/made public. Many journalists at leading business and technology industry publications regularly cull for information in hopes of leaking it. Now, with the addition of analytical engines culling the Internet for this kind of information, timing alignment is critical – or you'll end up not being able to control your story.

Maintain control of the narrative

Manage your media interaction – work it!

- When journalists are granted access to internal meetings and employees, it is critical to establish ground rules governing the interaction that are agreed to by both parties in advance.
- Of course, a good journalist will always seek out sources beyond those offered up by an organization. That is just good, solid journalistic practice. Manage what you can and be prepared to address negative issues or anecdotes that may be uncovered by research or interviews beyond your control. You owe it to your employees who are sources and spokespeople, and you owe it to your brand.

Bad things happen! In a crisis – expect the unexpected, control the message and the messengers, be “intelligently open” and follow the script. When the dust settles – get your ducks in a row, get educated and update often.

Have a plan

Designate (and train) senior spokespeople. The optimal time to create a crisis plan is well before you need one.

- Educating, prepping and making executives available for interviews is a good start. A responsible journalist will present a CEO or top-tier company executive with his/her findings and allow them an opportunity to react and comment on those findings. For example, a company’s PR representative should be present and taking notes during all interviews with company employees. The point is not to interfere with the interview process but to understand the underlying purpose of the line of questioning, to prepare the next interviewee in terms of what to expect, to adapt key messages when necessary and to take care of follow-up as needed. If the story starts going off the rails, the PR people will know because they are involved and can work to come up with strategies and ideas that could turn a negative trajectory around.
- Plan for a leak – expect the unexpected. Put a leak management plan into place, clearly outlining how to react if the news is leaked before you announce it yourself. Every situation is unique, but from a high level, it’s ideal to jump in to tell your side of the story once the cat is out of the bag, reaching out to all press you imagine would cover the news, so you can still insert your voice into their stories. Being silent won’t erase the

leak, so in this instance the best thing you can do is try to take some ownership of the story. Use blogs and social media, such as tweeting and posting your own statements and viewpoints, whenever possible. Ranging in severity from a minor hiccup to a major news leak moment, social media has become the de facto standard for “breaking news” and loose-lipped fingertips on twitter have burned many a PR practitioner.

Be forthright, transparent and clear.

It is important to have designated spokespeople addressing key audiences to ensure that the company has a single voice and delivers clear messages. It is imperative for a leader to be judicious and get good coaching while practicing a tough Q&A.

Be consistent

Rehearse and update often. When the dust settles – Plan for the worst – stuff happens – so get your ducks in a row during downtime, get educated and get ahead of it. Being mindful about pitch content, interviews (and ground rules for topics discussed) and even events where executives could accidentally spill important news before it breaks should all be considered, planned and managed.

QUIZ

If you score between 80-100%, you are a PR rock star. (Check out our careers page and come work with us!) If you score between 50-80%, you know the difference between what to do and what NOT to do when faced with a crisis. Keep an eye on the news for examples, good and bad. If you score under 50%, you should probably hire us. Thanks for playing!

1. What former corporate communications director got into hot water after tweeting about the potential of getting AIDS on a trip to South Africa?

    A. Jennifer Golden

    B. Ashley Manning

    C. Marie Robin

    D. Justine Sacco

2. Which fashion CEO tweeted “millions are in uproar in #Cairo…they heard our spring collection is now online” at the height of Egyptian protests?

   A. Karl Lagerfeld

   B. Giorgio Armani

   C. Vivienne Westwood

   D. Kenneth Cole

3. Which brand’s social media team had to issue an apology for inappropriately using the hashtag #WhyIStayed?

   A. Hot Pockets

   B. Breyers

   C. Stouffer

   D. DiGiorno

4. Which former White House intern was the center of one of the most notorious political sex scandals of all time?

   A. Monica Lewinsky

   B. Paris Hilton

   C. Taylor Swift

   D. Sophia Vergara

5. Which clothing retail CEO claimed to “go after the cool kids…with a lot of friends” and admitted to being “exclusionary”?

    A. H&M

    B. Abercrombie and Fitch

    C. Aeropostale

    D. J. Crew

6. What CEO stated: “I’m sorry, no one wants this over more than I do. I’d like my life back” while apologizing for a disaster caused by his company?

    A. Bank of America

    B. Salesforce

    C. British Petroleum (BP)

    D. Microsoft

7. Which organization created an uproar when it stopped funding Planned Parenthood, stating it did not fund organizations under federal investigation?

    A. Susan G. Komen

    B. Avon Foundation

    C. Jimmy Fund

    D. American Cancer Society

8. What company put customer safety first by taking $100 million worth of product off the shelves after seven people died using it?

   A. Pfizer

   B. Wal-Mart

   C. Johnson & Johnson

   D. Proctor & Gamble

9. What company's executives apologized in person to all employees after six African American employees sued for discrimination?

   A. Shell

   B. Texaco

   C. BP

   D. AmeriGas

10. When a 2007 ice storm stranded and upset flyers, which company refunded its customers and drafted a customer's bill of rights?

    A. JetBlue

    B. American Airlines

    C. Virgin America

    D. Delta

Answer Key: 1D; 2D; 3D; 4A; 5B; 6C; 7A; 8C; 9B; 10A.

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