In the Midst of Adversity:

Business Solutions Found in PR

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Conflicts often get ugly. Everyone can recall awkward memories of when family interactions turned sour. In those altercations (particularly) with an audience, people shout, scream, and lie just to cover what's left of their reputation. But what ends up happening is a lose-lose situation. While at odds, disagreeing parties **lose** their respect for each other and **lose** any chance of mending past partnerships. Disputes are intensified by two main factors: history and finances. Two parties that have a background of closely working together, will feel more emotionally charged as struggle arises. Likewise, companies that have invested money into a circumstance feel a greater pressure. Nobody wants to lose money, or their reputation, because of a crisis. To avoid this, spokespeople pass the blame onto other organizations hoping to abandon the negative connotations of the scenario.

It is so unfortunate when products result in the death of their purchasers. In reality, no company seeks to kill its target market. At its core, successful business is built on solving needs…not creating problems. But unfortunately, sometimes products don't always function properly. Ford Motor Company is no stranger to mishaps. The 1971 pinto was a notorious blunder, and to a lesser degree, so was the Bronco II. Ford knows firsthand that producing transportation products, parts, and vehicles comes with great risks. Yes, there are hundreds of billions of dollars to be made in the industry, but quite a few headaches as well.

Who's to Blame?

In the instance of the Ford Explorer model, all kinds of processes went awry. Honestly, it didn't have to go this way, but negligence, from both of the brands involved, led to terrible disaster. As far as the distribution of guilt goes, Ford must bear the majority of responsibility. *They* decided to cut costs by fitting an oversized body on a pre-existing frame. *They* "demanded that the tire be produced less expensively". And *they* rushed the car onto the market (even when it did not perform well in testing). Ford is certainly to blame here – but that excuse the behavior displayed by Firestone. The tire company did not do their part in maintaining an ethical production. Ford was wrong to ask Firestone to compromise the makeup of the rubber, but Firestone should have denied the request. The Bible communicates a principle in James 4:17, which says: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Firestone knew that the industry standard for tires required a certain amount of rubber in the right orientation, yet they still shaved down the material by 10% to please Ford. However, Firestone should only receive 30% of the blame. By and large, they were following orders from a big customer, and while that doesn't justify their actions, it is more of an indictment against Ford. Ford gets 70% of the blame for initiating this mishandling of responsibility.

A Look at Some Relevant Data

In 2001, there were 190.6 million licensed drivers in the U.S. In that same year, over forty-two thousand fatal car crashes occurred (0.02% of all drivers). It was reported that "1 in every 2,700 Explorers on the road would eventually roll over and kill someone inside." If every vehicle was a Ford Explorer, 70,593 deaths would have occurred — a 40% increase on the actual number of fatalities. Put simply, Ford had a glaring problem on their hands.

A Possible Solution

The most complete answer to this hefty problem is one with many steps. First, the two companies must **get on the same page**. Then, both companies must **release truthful but optimistic statements to reassure the core publics**. Finally, the management at each organization must **implement barriers and systems that guard against future failures**.

The importance of establishing unity of mind is indisputable. Interestingly enough, the Apostle Peter urged the Church to "…have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." (1 Peter 3:8) This principle helped the early Church get off to strong start. But the necessity of reaching an agreement goes far beyond a biblical ideal. The truth is, "a shared company culture can bring employees together and boost productivity" (O'Leary, 2018) Obviously,

every business would love to be more productive – especially in crisis

management. Therefore, unity is a prerequisite to developing any further plans.

Going Public

The next step is to display this unity to the public in an announcement. Keep

in mind that the goal of a PSA is not to "pull the wool" over the publics' eyes.

Honesty is key. Conveniently, telling the truth is the right thing *and* the best thing

to do. "Being ethical in communicating messages to the public can be beneficial to

an organization" (Bradley, 2004) Presenting your organization with transparency will

boost public trust and eventually help the bottom line. Introductory statements will

announce the company's dedication to discovering a preventative solution that

values corporate honesty and customer safety.

Finally, Ford and Firestone must begin to incorporate operational security

devices, essentially a system of checks and balances, that will keep manufacturing

processes on the straight and narrow. For instance, when testing new tires or

vehicles for safety rating, a ground-floor or minimum performance level could

prevent faulty parts from passing through the production line. Building cheap cars

and tires, and then selling them at a high cost, can certainly lead to a larger profit

margin. But are the long-term effects worth it? Each blunder, that a company

causes, chips away at the chance for an overall good rapport. Every large company

can endure the occasional mishap, but building a culture of cutting-corners and

playing games with customer safety leads to destruction. It is much better for all company messages, processes, and operations to be open and honest.

After the initial public announcements are made, and the new company procedures in place, a follow up statement must follow. This message will be less informative and more persuasive in nature. Spokespeople must communicate the reasons why the new company behavior will be effective. One reason to do this is through secondary research. Thousands of companies have managed issues and instituted new programs as a result. Communicating through real-world data can go a long way. Statistics can convince resisters and prevent sources of doubt. "In the absence of communication, people will fill the vacuum with inaccurate information and often start talking with each other and creating assumptions that are not true…[and] data is incredibly powerful" (Gesme and Wiseman, 2010) For this reason, practitioners for each company must search for success stories in the issues management process, and frame the announcement around: "it worked for them, it'll work for us."

When Bad Goes to Worse…

In the event that the two firms could not reach a consensus, it would be best for Firestone to distance themselves from Ford Motors. If Firestone is planning to recommit their business practice to safe and ethical means, how could they coexist with a car manufacturer that is continuing in their recklessness? However, Firestone

must avoid throwing Ford under the bus. Consumers have negative attitudes when the involved organizations start to publicly blame each other for tragedies. (Schwarz, 2012) Instead, Firestone should clearly state that they fully intend to implement better programs and systems regardless of the immediate impact on profits. Stressing a dedication to the security and needs of their core publics will turn into a smart business decision.

The Company's Duty

Corporations owe it to their customers when unexpected calamity occurs. After all, companies owe their entire existence to the dollar votes provided by consumers. Leadership must make efforts to appease any emotions, uneasiness, or anxiety among their publics. This can be done through charitable events and other benevolent community endeavors. One form of reimbursement, that is sure to get people talking, is a financial gift. "Supply grants to community projects, local initiatives and programs that support your charitable mission. Match contributions to funds raised by the local franchise." (Funk, 2013)

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, community relations can be a long, expensive, and exhausting process – especially when it follows crisis conflicts. In most cases, executives will have to bite the bullet and do the right thing. In public relations, some things are constant. Having unity of mind is a must. Effectively communicating an honest

message is essential. And for the marketing or PR department, it is imperative to spearhead organizational change when it is needed. Following this guideline will ease the corporate disaster recovery process. Firms must keep true to a God-given biblical framework for proper company ethics. One verse in particular is Proverbs 27:23 which says: "Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds." PR practitioners must hear the outcries of company publics and do everything ethically possible to solve their needs.

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