

Practical Advice to a Company in Crisis

Noah Eskew

Regent University

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Takenya Fulks

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It is essential for every company to establish a solid public relations strategy.

This becomes especially important when products or services involve an element of danger for the consumer. All organizations with these types of implications should be well-informed on the best steps to take and prepared for the possibility of a crisis. This paper will focus on a scenario where an amusement park safety restraint manufacturer is mid-crisis. The company has done their research, and they have a PR goal. The CEO is seeking further coaching and guidance from a PR consultant.

As a public relations consultant to the CEO, I would make 9 major suggestions for company action. From the start, I would commend the team's research that discovered the cause of the problem. The restraints are not defective, but they were improperly installed by a different organization.

Now, the company needs to **get everyone on the same page**. Ideally, the CEO would muster up all employees and personnel in a meeting. If the company has thousands of employees, it would be more efficient to gather only the head of each department. Thanks to new technology, companies could even schedule a virtual meeting (using computer software) for an urgent situation. At this meeting, all perceivable talking points should be covered, as well as the organization's stance on each matter. It is important to make sure that everyone understands the crisis from

the same point of view. It would be damaging to company reputation to have multiple employees making dozens of different statements to the press. Handling this situation poorly could cause an almost permanent disadvantage in your company's reputation. Unity of mind will help the group make it through this crisis. This leads to the next step:

During the discussion, **a spokesperson should be appointed**. This role is not reserved for the CEO exclusively. Instead, the team member who feels most comfortable answering tough interview questions will make the best candidate. Instructions should be given for employees to direct most press questions to the chosen spokesperson.

After choosing the spokesperson, he or she should **be trained in handling press relations** with a professional and ethical approach. Here is an overview of appropriate conduct:

“The spokesperson must give straight answers, without exaggerations, without aggression or haste. The spokesperson must not answer the questions, to which he does not have a clear answer, but must take up the task of quickly finding the information and putting them at the journalist's disposal. It is not recommended that the spokesperson uses a formula like NO COMMENT, but to

honestly explain why he cannot answer a certain question. No comment *is* a comment! The spokesperson must not be aggressive, must keep his calm and must not argue with the journalists, even when their questions seem aggressive. The spokesperson must avoid expressing personal opinions...so that he does not risk being quoted by the journalists as expressing a public opinion.” (Neamțu, 2015, 167-176)

Here are the tips that I would re-emphasize: First, never answer a question with “no comment”. At first, finding the right answer could be a challenge, but there is still a correct way to address **every** inquiry. Tough questions will be hurled in your direction. Try your best to remain calm even when questions become emotionally charged. You cannot afford to cause yet another crisis with a poorly worded or angry response. This statement magnifies the weight of words: “Damage to an organization's reputation can so easily be caused by a flippant remark.” (Ashcroft, 1997)

If you genuinely do not have the right answer to a tough question, take an opportunity to **spearhead organizational change** – align the company with the needs of the public. Great alternatives for “no comment” are: “We are working to implement a new, better system” or “our first concern is for the victims.” These words show that your company cares and is actively trying to improve the situation. Note

that future organizational actions must line-up with these public statements. Our goal is not to be deceitful to the public, but to create a win-win scenario for everyone who was impacted by the crisis.

Next, the spokesperson must remember to **never treat the press as an adversary**. There are two reasons for this. The first being: Making enemies with the media, in an outspoken way (such as a snide remark or sarcastic comment), could become a second story. If your behavior is considered newsworthy by the journalist, they *will* publish some sort of coverage. Present yourself in a commendable, ethical, and impressive way. Making thoughtless statements can add fuel to the fire against your corporation. Never assume that any conversation is “off the record”:

...officials stating beforehand what cannot be discussed still may be asked to state **on the record** or before the camera those issues on which they will not comment and why. This is a reasonable request and should be accommodated. Spokespersons should remember that the public has a strong sense of fairness and will accept reasonable explanations. (Vance, 1997)

Furthermore, requesting an “off the record” discourse can be perceived as dishonest by a portion of the public.

Luckily, this *is* a two-way street. *Proper* public relations practice can be the focus of additional coverage as well. The second reason against making enemies with the press is: They are people, just like you, who have a job to complete. **Establishing sincere relationships with the press** can go a long way in running your business.

Rick Markley (2004) urges:

Because we tend to treat acquaintances and friends better than we treat strangers, I advise getting to know editors and program managers in your community. Invite them for one-on-one plant tours, meetings, lunch or after-work drinks. Then, stay in touch. (p. 2)

The spokesperson should be firm on the company's stance *and* as friendly as possible during media relations.

Another important task is to **identify your publics and to estimate how different paths of action would impact them**. In a study on university communications, David Gregory (2008) highlights universal methods that *any* organization can follow: "implement immediate actions to identify those who should be informed, communicate facts about the crisis, minimize rumors and restore order and confidence."(p. 35) Craft your messages with your most obvious audiences in mind. Focus on the needs and patterns of your employees, customers, and investors.

A company that primarily functions as business-to-business (such as the restraint manufacturer), should be mindful of their customer's customers. Even more important than the concerns of the park management or the ride assembly team, are the thoughts of the amusement park members/patrons. If their worries remain unaddressed, they are likely to feel uneasy about spending more money at the park. Therefore, the primary publics for the CEO and his company are the amusement park riders, owners, and installers along with the general public.

There are many ways to get in touch with these groups; **plan on using multiple avenues of communication.** You can use methods such as: websites, text-messages, e-mails, phone calls, bulletin boards, and face-to-face meetings. Each has its own pros, cons, and price range. (Gregory, 2008, p.35) Choosing between which methods to emphasize should be rather simple. If your website has good performance and is a popular hub for your publics, then post important messages there. If your YouTube page is the go-to for outreach, a video message could be a smart move.

As far as the content of the announcements go, the CEO's initial thought was to pass the blame onto a different group. However, this is not always the wisest decision to make. There are some situational overtones to consider before taking this specific action. In the past, companies have opted for playing the "blame game" and it doesn't

always work. Andreas Schwarz (2012) wrote about the effects that public display of blame-shifting can have on consumers.

...users increasingly felt they had to blame someone for the crisis but they were undecided who in particular was most responsible in the first days. When the involved persons and organizations started to publicly blame each other for the tragedy, they increasingly fueled the public's attribution of responsibility to more specific organizations. (p. 430-437)

It may be in your company's best interest to **hesitate on finger-pointing**. Blatantly passing the responsibility onto others might cause distrust among your audience.

Instead, I would suggest focusing on the positives: new sure-fire programs, charitable acts, community outreach, supporting the victims, and backing your employees.

Announce these new projects with enthusiasm and briefly map out the plans for execution. It *is* appropriate to include a statement about the discovery of the incorrect installations. But, by no means should this be the main thesis of a company statement.

Afterwards, mention your plans to ensure that the process is carried out properly in the future.

In summation, the CEO and his fellow executives must remember the 9 steps. First, get everyone on the same page, appoint a spokesperson, and receive training in

press relations. Remember to change organizational methods if needed. Next, establish good connections with the press, and never treat them as your adversary. Then, identify your publics, their favorite modes of communication, and the messages that will garner a positive reaction from them. Following these steps will put your company well on its way to a successfully managed crisis.

References

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