

DON'T TURN A PROBLEM INTO A CRISIS

by Neil Everton

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Even the best-run businesses sometimes hit snags that attract the attention of the media. How a company or individual handles the media under pressure can position them in the public perception as leaders - or losers.

Tiger Woods stumbled through his crisis in 2009, and was perceived as a loser; Maple Leaf Foods' listeriosis outbreak killed 22 people in 2008, and yet the company is hailed as the exemplar of crisis communications.

Bad news travels fast. And without a communications strategy, a problem can turn into a crisis in the blinking of an eye.

Case in point: for four days in October Blackberry users in Europe, the Middle East and North America lost service on their smartphones.

Frustration at the loss of service turned to global fury as Blackberry owners on three continents expressed disappointment at the lack of useful information from RIM headquarters in Waterloo, Ontario.

They turned to Twitter and Facebook to vent their anger at the lack of updates.

After four days, RIM co-CEO Jim Balsillie emerged to say their priority had been 'making sure the system was up and running and operating globally.'

That doesn't cut it. Someone smart enough to invent an iconic smartphone should be smart enough to do two things at once - fix the problem and simultaneously make sure consumers know the problem is being fixed as fast as possible.

Anyone facing a PR crisis has to do three things fast:

- acknowledge the problem
- take responsibility
- show that action is being taken

Tech analyst Alkesh Shah summed it up perfectly: "As soon as you know there's a problem, come out and say 'we have a problem and we're working on and it will be fixed soon'. You let the consumers know you are completely focused on this, and they're the most important thing in the world."

RIM are making a habit of turning a problem into a crisis.

In April, RIM organized a media blitz to roll out their Playbook tablet, their rival to Apple's iPad.

RIM's co-CEO Mike Lazardis sat down with a BBC technology correspondent for a long on-camera interview and demonstration of the new Playbook.

But towards the end of the interview, the reporter threw in a question Lazardis said was unfair. It was about difficulties RIM was having selling Blackberries into certain countries because some governments didn't like the ultra-secure communications system Blackberry uses.

Since the security issue had been in the news cycle, RIM should have had a position on it, and a message line prepared to explain their position. Lazardis needed to be on message.

Instead Lazardis complained about the 'unfairness' of the question, lost his composure, declared the interview over, pointed at the camera and ordered 'turn that thing off.'

RIM thought they had an agreement to talk only about the Playbook. Once a camera is rolling, those agreements often get 'forgotten'. The Blackberry question should have been anticipated.

Lazardis should have had a response ready. ('Blackberry is an iconic global device and we are working hard to make sure everyone who wants one of our phones is able to get one.')

Instead of having a media win with the Playbook, the image that went viral was the finger-pointing at the camera.

Being a successful company today is no guarantee of good headlines tomorrow; having an iconic product doesn't give a free pass to media prime time.

It's easy to bask in the spotlight of success. As entrepreneurs we plan for success. And we put effort into communicating our success stories.

But communicating good news is easy.

How you handle the not-so-good-news is when you prove your mettle as a communicator. (It might be a mill shut-down, when at least you have some time to prepare; it might be an industrial accident that no-one could foresee).

Do you withdraw into your bunker and hope the storm passes? Or do you face the cameras and tackle the issue head-on? Do you have a strategy? Does that strategy reflect the core values of your company?

Adverse publicity spirals out of control very quickly unless you have a communications strategy, genuinely built around your core values.

Tiger Woods may have been a media darling in his prime - but he struggled to protect his brand in a crisis. The perception, which is everything in crisis communications, was that he was hiding because he had something to hide.

On the other hand, Michael McCain showed in his handling of Maple Leaf Foods' listeriosis crisis how you can preserve your integrity and credibility in the face of a devastatingly bad-news story.

McCain has said he was driven by two considerations

- 1 - to do the right thing
- 2 - to act in accordance with his core values

His company's core values are posted on the web site. They include:

- Do what's right
- Transparency
- Humility

The website explains the Maple Leaf Foods communication strategy as: "...having the self confidence and courage to be completely candid and direct; willing to communicate openly in a trusting manner; acting with passion, conviction and personal humility."

Figuring out your core values will help when you are creating messages. And they'll really help when you have to have to face critical questioning from the media.

People generally don't run into trouble with the media because of ignorance. People run into trouble because they don't prepare properly. They don't always anticipate where the interview may go. Too often they hope for the best - and pray the tough question doesn't get asked.

Know where you are vulnerable. And when that vulnerability becomes public, have a communications strategy to deal with it. By trying to avoid the difficult issue, RIM showed us all too clearly how to turn a problem into a crisis.

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