



The PR Lifeline:

A step-by-step guide on how to manage a PR crisis

Summary

The industry maxim that “Every crisis is an opportunity in disguise” might rouse team morale and focus minds when a PR nightmare first appears on the radar, but the principle only applies if you have a crisis communications plan in place. Unfortunately, 20% of PR experts do not.

No brand is untouchable, and no organisation too established to be complacent. A single social media post or podium gaffe can quickly go viral, and a brand finds itself chasing a rapidly evolving story that has spread to unintended audiences.

In those circumstances, the priority for most brands will be to measure the scale of the crisis, and know if a response will deliver the desired outcome, whether the strategy is to quietly ride out the storm or to go on the offensive (as KFC did masterfully with the 2018 chicken shortage).

In truth, a crisis measurement plan supported by real-time monitoring and cross-channel alerts, along with a crisis communications plan that

incorporates the available insight, is the only way to restore business as usual. When a plan is in place, it’s easier to look after the mental health of your people too. Working the plan takes less of a toll than taking it personally.

This step-by-step guide from the Cision Global Insights team will explore how brands can set up and execute a Crisis Measurement Plan, from creating a data-led platform for monitoring brand mentions prior to an incident, to providing real time analysis, formulating a crisis plan, and refining strategy once the flames have been extinguished.

Learn how to delegate responsibilities within your PR team, automate tracking and monitoring, identify the stories that matter most among the noise, and craft messaging that addresses the most urgent issues. See how some of the world’s biggest brands did indeed manage to salvage an opportunity from a crisis, and what your PR team can do now to follow in their footsteps should the circumstances require.

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STEP 1

Rally your team for the challenge ahead

What does a crisis look like? Answers may vary.

Some blast their way instantly into the social media landscape, while others gradually gain momentum. Among the former are the technical glitch at the launch of Apple's new FaceID feature and the Tesla Cybertruck bulletproof glass that wasn't. Among the latter, Facebook's failure to address growing concern about online hate groups or Pepsi's hamfisted handling of a hoax relating to syringes in cans.

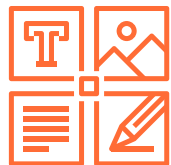
In the “best” worst-case scenario, it is quite apparent that a brand has gone off-message, and the effects are as sickening as they are sudden for PR teams handling the account. Just as challenging are those slow-burn crises that germinate out of eyesight, so that PR teams are playing catch up from the start. In either case, a calm, composed team will be more effective than one that rushes to panic stations before action stations. If each PR professional knows their role, when to delegate, and when to escalate a decision to managers, there's no crisis that can't be brought under control.

Your first four moves in a crisis



1. BRIEF ALL STAFF

Senior Management should bring the entire PR team together, and articulate their analysis of the situation. They should focus on the facts, and establish a calm tone and measured response from the outset.



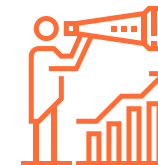
3. STRUCTURE OUT KEY MESSAGES

There are limited options for top-line messaging at this stage. Either your response will be silence, clear and unequivocal apology, or a more aggressive approach to assume control of the narrative. The biggest pitfall is mixed messaging, so ensure that your PR strategy is unified around a cogent, compelling initial response.



2. REFER TO YOUR CRISIS COMMS PLAN

If one is not in place, expect matters to become more fraught, but providing there is a crisis mitigation strategy ready to deploy, your leadership team can review the steps already defined and allocate specific tasks to the team members.



4. SPREAD THE MESSAGE

The honour of delivering key messages should go to media-trained executives within your response team, and their actions should be directed to areas where the flames are at their most ferocious. Now is not the time to become bogged down in detail or semantics.

STEP 2

Track the mood and mentions for your brand

A robust response is as much about your platform as your people. In fact, given the extent to which stories can spread rampantly across social media, the ability to automate tracking and monitor the landscape is essential for freeing up your PR professionals for the skills only they can bring.

You can't manage what you can't monitor or measure, so the second stage of your Crisis Communications Strategy should focus on taking the high technical ground to get clear visibility over the battlefield.

Case study: How KFC gained a huge boost from a poultry crisis

For a few weeks that must have felt like months in 2018, KFC found itself under the national spotlight as the chicken chain that didn't have any chicken. At one point, three quarters of its UK locations were closed. While a shortage of hot wings might not register as a crisis for some, the hiatus had some serious consequences for staff and suppliers, as well as holding a high profile business up for ridicule.

In fact, the crisis had nothing to do with farmers but with suppliers. KFC had switched to a new logistics partner sourcing ingredients from a single depot. When that system failed, there was no contingency plan in place.

With logistics gridlocked, it fell to the KFC marketing and PR team to come to the rescue, which they did with Cannes Lion Award-winning aplomb. Gauging the social media landscape and discovering that the story was generating not so much fury as a deluge of chicken-related puns, KFC took



immediate responsibility. Staying true to their brand voice with a serving of self-deprecation on the side, the PR team were able to take back control of the story and give their suppliers time to breathe.

At its peak, the chicken crisis was generating 321 media inquiries and over 1,000 media stories in a seven-day period. It is estimated that 80 percent of UK adults were exposed to the story. What the public didn't know was that there was no immediate solution to the supply chain problem. By heading straight to the social media channels that were feasting on the misfortune (instead of issuing a dry corporate mea culpa) KFC was able to generate goodwill with lighthearted but genuine messaging. Even angry customers couldn't help but admire the famous **'FCK' bucket**.

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What did KFC get wrong? Chicken, unfortunately. What did they get right? Communications that hit exactly the right notes from a source that people trusted.



STEP 3

Empower your team to make sensible decisions

Breaking news might have a human face, whether it's the source of a gaffe or a whistleblower, but evolving news has a trackable data footprint in the form of keywords, hashtags, shares and even emojis. Put the responsibility on your people to track the story and their efforts will be subjective. Trust analytics and you'll have an objective view. The sweet spot is when you can gather and filter objective data and allow your people to exercise their subjective judgment on what to do next.

Empowering your people

SIGNAL-BASED ALERTING

The Pareto Principle certainly applies here, in the sense that 80% of the viral vitality behind a story will be generated by the influential 20% who guide and augment its progress. If you can identify the top-ranking sources who have taken control, you are better poised to nip a burgeoning crisis in the bud, or create a firebreak between hot spots and untouched audiences. The key concern is to monitor the signals in real time.

PRIORITISE MEDIA INTAKE

A single crisis might generate hundreds of articles, but there is a clear distinction to be made between those that deliver impact (ie. from thought-leaders) and those that add to the background noise with regurgitated commentary. Your team will not have the time to filter and triage, especially when a quick response is required. The tools within your media monitoring platform, however, can swiftly expose the influencers with the editorial weight to tip the balance in your favor or out of your grasp. Often, those within your sector will be the most urgent to address, given that industry experts will be quoted and interviewed by more general publications as the story progresses.

HUMAN-CURATED BRIEFING

As a story gathers momentum, coverage and conversations multiply across a range of publications and platforms. To give Senior Executives a balcony view of where crowd sentiment is heading, human-curated briefings are effective in synthesizing different narratives and points of view in an executive-ready format. Again, it's an exercise in cutting through the noise and distinguishing cut-through comment and criticism from chatter.



STEP 4

Craft the perfect response, or know when to stay silent

The essence of Signalling Theory in Behavioural Science is that what is communicated is not necessarily the same as what is understood. A controversial Tweet by a tech CEO, for example, might be intended to show off unique insight, but is interpreted as a sign of erratic behaviour instead. That matters because even beyond the facts of a crisis, there is the personal interpretation and interplay of prejudice to consider. The so-called court of public opinion has taken no oath to pass rational judgement. Cynical as it may seem, there's an opportunity for brands to manipulate public opinion regardless of the facts as a result.

Unlocking emotional intelligence

TRACKING EMOTIONS

Tracking will measure how many people are sharing a story, but no conclusions should be drawn until the emotional context of those mentions is measured. If people are simply amused, as they were with the Tesla and Apple launches – Apple’s new FaceID feature and the Tesla Cybertruck - the right tone of voice in response can leverage ridicule into something more palatable. If they’re angry or confused, however, there may be a bigger challenge ahead to restore trust – and an altogether different response required.

CRAFT YOUR MESSAGE

The KFC example shows how crafting the right message with the appropriate tone can not only assuage involved audiences, but also engage a new audience that wasn’t even aware of the original crisis. It’s a delicate balance, however, and social media management teams in particular should hold fire until a unified communications strategy has been defined.

KNOW WHEN TO BE QUIET

Can a crisis simply “blow over”? Certainly, brands might be fortunate enough to see the legs fall from under a growing crisis simply because more important events assume the spotlight. But even if there’s no breaking news to distract mainstream media sources or social media, sometimes the most prudent strategy is silence, at least until a more measured response is ready. A case in point might be the Monica Lewinsky scandal, where public opinion essentially took umbrage with President Clinton’s explanation rather than the scandal itself.



Case study: When Nestlé should have taken a break

One can only imagine the panic at Nestlé HQ in 2010 when PR team first discovered a video from Greenpeace that pointed an accusatory finger at the world's largest food and drink company for using palm oil in the products and destroying rainforests that were a natural habitat for endangered orangutans.

What would have stung the most was Greenpeace's re-engineering of the Kit Kat tagline, one of the most famous in advertising history, in gruesome fashion. Not surprisingly, the video went immediately viral. The damage limitation response by Nestlé was not to address the accusation, but to demand the removal of the video on copyright grounds.

That was sufficient to tip a controversy into a full-blown crisis. Greenpeace republished the video on Vimeo, where it attracted 78,500 views in a matter of hours, and eventually reposted it on YouTube, where it received a further 180,000 views. In turn, the story (Nestlé's reaction, not palm oil) was picked up by mainstream media in a flood of negative publicity, and appalled social media





users stormed the Nestlé Facebook page and took to Twitter, turning the **#KitKat** hashtag into a rallying point for outrage.

By going immediately on the offensive and trying to stifle debate rather than engage with critics, Nestlé succeeded in confirming the audience's worst suspicions. The most regrettable aspect was that the crisis could have been avoided altogether. Greenpeace later revealed that they had first raised the issue with Nestlé in 2008. The global food and drink giant did not even reply.

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What can PR professionals learn from the Kit Kat debacle?

Rather than engaging directly with a well-respected environmental group as a big brand (or taking a break and wait for the dust to settle), Nestlé lashed out too quickly, harshly, and ultimately coming across as a corporate bully. The result: a tone deaf response that echoed loudly around the world.

STEP 5

Post-crisis “post-mort”

Based on the principle that to make one mistake is unfortunate, to make it again looks like carelessness, any crisis should be treated as an opportunity for learning. One might even go so far as to say that a “good” crisis can even galvanise and improve a PR team, keep it on its toes, and identify workflows that need redesign.

In that sense, a crisis is only a disaster when nothing changes after the event. Assumptions and habits need to be challenged and responsibility taken. Blame, on the other hand, is largely unhelpful. In the immediate aftermath, emotions may be running too high to carry out a post-mortem, but it’s important to review what happened while metaphorical wounds are still fresh. Indeed, a post-crisis review is often crucial in delivering the closure everyone needs to move on and resume activity.

Empowering your people

DEBRIEF WITH YOUR TEAM

Create a safe space for both constructive criticism and praise, with the focus on the future. Any report should record what went wrong or right, with action points for each to outline how the team can work faster and more effectively should the same scenario unravel again.

UPDATE CRISIS WORKFLOW

A PR crisis will have revealed one of two things. Either your team was caught out by not having any crisis management plan whatsoever, in which case the priority is to make one, or the existing plan buckled in places under stress. Identify these weak points and put measures in place to improve inhouse workflows. Ensure that there is an owner for each action point, with a specific deadline for completion.

TAKE A BREATHER

Let's not underestimate the personal toll a PR crisis can take on the mental health and morale of your team. Your brand has enough people working together to nourish its wellbeing. Your individual team members, on the other hand, may be feeling isolated and overwhelmed. As an authentic "people business" the priority should be to take care of them too.





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