5 Steps to Handling a Crisis Like a Boss

I’ve read countless textbooks about crisis management, but I’m usually left disappointed at the lack of common sense. Here’s what you need to know.

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It’s wonderful when everything in your business runs smoothly. You know those days — sales targets get smashed, you win new business and an IT upgrade actually finishes on time. But, we often learn more about ourselves and our businesses in times of trouble. I sincerely hope your crisis never happens. But if it does, here are my tips for handling a crisis like a boss.

1. Plan ahead.

Make a list of the five most likely things that could go wrong — and at least a couple of *unlikely* things — that would cause your business big problems. If you own a pizza restaurant, it could be an infestation of rats, a rude waiter upsetting customers or a rival pizza restaurant opening on the next block. Take the emotion out of things by imagining that you’re giving advice to a friend, then plan how you should respond to each problem. Pick the spokespeople who can communicate with customers, the media and any investors you may have.

2. Lead on empathy.

A simple and sincere apology will often calm even the angriest

of customers. However, a word of warning: It’s crucial that the apology comes from you, the boss, not via a carefully worded statement on your company’s website or Twitter feed. Apart from being the right thing to do as a human being, it shows that you understand the customer’s pain, anger or disappointment. It can also help stop the story from escalating on social media or in the media. Also, if possible, publicly commit to find out what happened and promise that it won’t happen again.

The United Airlines incident in 2017 – when a passenger was dragged off an overbooked flight after refusing to give up his seat – is a an example of how *not t*o apologize. A video of the incident showing the passenger’s bloodied face took just hours to go viral. United’s initial statement about the incident, which apologised for “having to re-accommodate” passengers was tone deaf and made matters worse. He wasn’t “re-accommodated” – he was dragged from his seat and off the plane in a traumatic and humiliating incident that became a global news story. The apology looked particularly bad on a CNN split-screen alongside the video footage.

The apology read as if it was written by a lawyer, not a contrite business leader. CEO Oscar Munoz issued a video apology four days later, which was far too late.

3. Don’t be too risk-averse.

In my experience, PRs are often too defensive when it comes to how their client deals with the media, especially in a crisis. They play it ultra-safe and encourage the client not to say anything remotely clear, interesting or honest, in case it affects the reputation or profits of the business. The irony is that the public are crying out for leadership and honesty from politicians and business. Take responsibility for what has gone wrong and act.

4. Take action.

Provide a helpline or other form of support for affected customers if necessary. That way, no matter how unexpected or disrupted the situation, you already have the procedures and personnel to respond. Make realistic promises that you can keep, find out what went wrong, publish any review into events afterwards and stick to lessons learned.

Being too cautious can worsen a crisis because you will come across as indecisive. The risk-averse syndrome is at its worst when lawyers call the shots during a corporate crisis. Of course, risks must be considered and mitigated, but they shouldn’t be the tail wagging the dog.

5. Keep calm.

Even the most experienced and resilient can become like a deer in the headlights. It’s understandable to feel overwhelmed by the pace of events, the media feeding frenzy. The fear, anger and uncertainty can feel all-consuming. I appreciate that you must react promptly to a crisis, but that doesn’t mean you should rush. As I half-jokingly say to my clients, take decisions in a brisk but unhurried manner.

A rushed statement about the crisis, in which you may get facts wrong or make rash promises, will make matters worse. Remember the old saying about marrying in haste and repenting at leisure? Take a walk around your block or go for a coffee. That 15 to20 minutes of thinking time could give you some distance from the situation and help you work out how best to deal with it.

Bear in mind that within a couple of days or weeks, a new crisis will knock your company off the front pages. Memories of the event will fade. And if you’ve handled it well, your reputation may even emerge strengthened, rather than weakened.

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