

A 3-Step Plan for Handling Any PR Crisis

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Crisis PR is one of those areas of business that you absolutely have to get right the first time around. That's because crisis PR is a response to a problem – and in many cases, a severe problem. So if you approach it with the wrong strategy, not only will you immediately make things worse, but you'll also harden the position of your detractors and may even attract unnecessary media attention.

This can quickly spiral out of control and destroy your company. But if you approach it with the right strategy, you can calmly and unemotionally respond in a way that doesn't add fuel to the fire, and may even help your company in the long run.

The key is to have a plan, and that's exactly what we're going to outline here.

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Determine impact

Not all PR issues are created equal, so before taking action, you need to determine the impact it will actually have on your business. Is the issue you're facing truly a PR crisis that's likely to gather more media attention and adversely impact your business, or just one irrational person with an ax to

grind?

I'll be the first person to tell you that while it can feel good to respond to those irrational people and put them in their place, it's almost always counterproductive. So how do you differentiate between a legitimate PR crisis and a bruised ego? There are a lot of variables to evaluate here.

The first and most important is this: Did your company do something that other rational people could perceive as significantly wrong? If the answer is yes, then you have the potential for a PR crisis that you need to address. But don't assume you're safe just because the answer seems to be no.

Social media has demonstrated that customers, employees and strangers alike are more than willing to lie about your company. And today, businesses of all types are faced with mob-like cancel culture that presents a legitimate threat that you need to be prepared for.

So even if your company did nothing wrong, you still need to evaluate the damage that could be done to your company. A single influencer with a substantial following of loyal fans can unleash a PR crisis with a single tweet, and even less-influential people can cause massive damage if their complaints – justified or not – gain enough momentum. In the words of Roger Branigin, "I never argue with a man who buys ink by the barrel."

I know, it shouldn't be that way, and I don't like it any more than you do, but this is the world we live in. A legitimate PR crisis is generally straightforward; you have no choice but to respond to it. An unfounded PR crisis, however, can be a delicate balancing act. You have to decide if responding will solve the crisis or draw more attention to it.

Strategize

If you've decided that your best course of action is to respond publicly, you need to have a plan. Acting impulsively will only lead to poor, emotionally driven choices. This can happen to the best of us. We're human, and when we feel attacked, our first response is often to hit back. Having a plan is critical because it helps you avoid these kinds of emotional reactions.

The first thing you'll need to do is identify which media outlets are likely to be interested in the story. Next, sort them by which ones you already have relationships with, and then by which ones will likely be sympathetic or antagonistic towards your business.

This gives you a roadmap to start getting your story out as quickly as possible. There are two paths you can take here, and depending on your circumstances, you could choose one or both:

Overwhelming positivity. One path is to drown out negative publicity with a tsunami of positive publicity. This tends to work better when you're being unfairly attacked, because it takes away the momentum of the person or people attacking your company. And since you haven't done anything wrong, media outlets are more likely to feature your company.

Full accountability. The other path is to tell your side of the story. This is essential when your company has done something wrong because people expect you to take accountability. And you should want to anyway because it's the right thing to do.

Once you choose your path, you need to develop talking points. It's easy to get this part wrong, as your emotions will be heightened. Nevertheless, it's important to outline exactly what you need to say to resolve the situation and stick to

that. If a reporter tries to take the conversation to topics outside of your talking points, you need to steer them back –sometimes by gently redirecting, other times by more forcefully calling them out.

If your company did something wrong, your talking points should revolve around what happened, its impact on those affected and what you're doing to resolve the problem and make sure it doesn't happen again.

If your company did nothing wrong, your talking points should revolve around what you do and the value you bring to those you serve. If you choose to address the attacks on you, do so in a purely factual manner to avoid escalating the situation.

Execute on your plan

With your plan in hand, it's time to start taking action. You'll have to move fast and aggressively here; momentum often determines the outcome of a PR crisis.

If you manage to get your message out in the media before a negative story gains momentum, you may be able to kill the proverbial monster before it becomes large enough to hurt you. The idea is to go big enough to overwhelm the media cycle and keep it up long enough for people to lose interest in the negative story.

You should leverage every channel available, from national news all the way down to small blogs. The more coverage the better – especially when you consider that media coverage tends to lead to more media coverage. Start with the media outlets you already have good relationships with to land some quick wins, and then move on to cold pitches to media outlets likely to be sympathetic. After you've exhausted these, you can begin pitching everyone else. But remember to move faster and more aggressively than you would ordinarily.

Related: The Mistakes That Make a PR Crisis Even Worse

You'll also need to leverage SEO to help control the search results for your brand – both business and personal. This is something you should handle proactively before you have a problem anyway, and it means carefully crafting headlines where you're able to and building links to key articles to ensure they outrank other negative content.

Social media is another area that will need your attention. It's wise to lock down reviews where possible and keep a close eye on comments on your posts, deleting irrelevant and antagonistic ones where you can. But keep posting useful and engaging content throughout the crisis. It looks worse if you go into hiding.

Not all crises can be avoided, but using the steps outlined above, most can be either blunted or converted into a blessing in disguise.

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