Council Post: Handling PR In A Crisis Situation: 12 Expert Tips

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Forbes Agency Council COUNCIL POST

POST WRITTEN BY
Expert Panel, Forbes Agency Council

Successful PR, media strategy, creative and advertising executives from Forbes Agency Council share trends and tips

When a company makes a misstep, it's up to the PR team to do damage control. With constant news coverage and the penchant for modern society to fixate on small things, it's a vain hope that the media or fans will overlook an offensive detail. Handling this pressure and dealing with the fallout to make sure the company has a future at the end of this issue falls on the PR team primarily.

With so much responsibility resting on their shoulders, how can they seek to right the PR ship and handle the emerging crisis as it develops? Twelve professionals from Forbes Agency Council delve into how a team can successfully put out “fires” amid a public relations crisis.

Members share their top tips for effectively handling public relations during times of crisis.PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS.

1. Have A Clear Purpose

When you have a clear purpose, in times of crisis, that purpose can guide your actions and help build a narrative that's authentic to the business. Consumers' radar for inauthenticity is more highly attuned than ever, and you will be called out if your communications and actions aren't clearly aligned to the values you stand for and the DNA of your business. - Ed Rogers, BeenThereDoneThat

2. Don't Go Dark

The worst thing a company can do is ignore the crisis and hope it goes away. The way you react is nearly as important as the original issue -- and the world will be watching. Focus on what you're doing to correct the situation versus defending what went wrong. Show empathy

and determination to right the situation. People will respect you for owning up to it and offering a solution. - Matt Berry, Conversion Agile Marketing

3. Have A Plan And Be Transparent

Two factors distinguish those who right the ship and those who sink: preparation and transparency. Having a plan in place that lays out what each stakeholder should do in a crisis will empower your team to handle anything and put you ten steps ahead. If a crisis occurs, be as transparent as you can without jeopardizing your firm, staff or stakeholders. Unnecessary lies may look like a cover-up. - Nathan Miller, Miller Ink, Inc.

4. Create A Message Map

A crisis situation calls for a message map with a concise key message at its center and up to six supporting messages or proof points around it. The key message is a seven-second sound bite showing the company's concern for its customers or its key audiences. All the proof points support the key message. This gives everyone in an organization a "song sheet" so everyone can sing together in harmony. - Nancy Marshall, Marshall Communications

5. Take The Wheel And Steer

My company is experienced working with clients dealing with navigating a media crisis. This includes issues that garnered national attention. My advice is to take the wheel. Develop a plan for handling the situation and have a designated source communicate with the media on what steps you are taking to resolve the problem. Also, issue a statement -- otherwise your side of the story won't be told. - Alex Membrillo, Cardinal Digital Marketing

6. Address It Honestly And Move On

Address the concern or issue immediately, empathetically and honestly, but then move on, especially if the complaint is false. It's not good to get stuck in a negative mindset because of a bad experience or to let it affect you as a leader. - JC Hite, Hite Digital

7. Monitor From The Get-Go

Having a great monitoring system in place -- ideally, before the crisis -- will ensure that you are across what your consumers and the media are saying about your company and the situation at hand. Social media monitoring, along with print and broadcast, is imperative as it enables you to craft your PR response and change course if necessary. - Adrian Falk, Believe Advertising & PR

8. Stay In The Moment

Be where you are, right now. If it's a crisis, address it swiftly, honestly and with simple answers. Then move on. Staying too long at the party benefits no one, and while some like to revisit horror stories, our news cycle likes to move along at a rapid pace. Let the river take you in its flow. Go to the next good thing by following a crisis with good news -- how your

company helps those in need. - Lynne Golodner, Your People LLC

9. Have Your Leader Step In

When such a crisis hits a company, there is only one way out of it and that's when the leader of the company steps in and speaks about the issue. Make a video addressing the entire issue if the news is true, ask for forgiveness and tell people how you plan on overcoming the issue. If it's fake, come out with real facts and handle the party responsible for it and ask for a public apology from the press. - Vishal Jain, Sunshy Group Of Companies

10. Get Everyone On The Same Page

Righting the PR ship means getting everyone in the company on the same page before, during and after a crisis. This means making sure that PR already has a seat at the executive table even before a crisis begins. It also means having a well-thought-out crisis communications plan that the entire executive team has already approved. Being prepared for any crisis is the best first step you can take. - Jessica Hawthorne-Castro, Hawthorne LLC

11. Decide A Direction And Stick With It

One of the largest issues with PR is that people often make a decision and they end up walking it back. What that means is that they take a position and they end up making changes and getting a lot of bad press. The message at the moment is critical to the success of the message. - Catherine Seeds, Ketner Group Communications

12. Focus On Your Strengths

It's easy to get defensive when your company's reputation is at stake for the wrong reasons. Rather than pulling up and rehashing the details around the negative points, be sure to focus on the strengths of your company and what you are doing right. The story will naturally shift if the hook is no longer there. - Jon James, Ignited Results

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