

# Crisis management: how to deal with a PR disaster

Banana skins line every business' path. PR expert Dr. Bill Nichols reveals how to handle the ensuing mess

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It's almost re-assuring. Crises happen to the big boys, don't they? From the Exxon Valdez to BP in the Gulf of Mexico. How about Johnson & Johnson/Tylenol, where cyanide was added to some capsules, killing seven people and costing Johnson & Johnson \$100m in recalled batches. Or Coca-Cola's disastrous re-launch of its Dasani water, which was pulled from the UK when it was revealed the product was just treated tap water, having already been marketed as 'bottled spunk'. And then there was Perrier, which in 1990 recalled 160 million bottles of water as some had been contaminated by toxic substance benzene.

Actually, crises – or 'PR blunders' - or blow up everywhere: warehouse fire wipes out three months' stock; shiny new CRM system dumps all warranty records; local 'food-and-safety' officer brings a visible case based on a temporary staff-member's incompetence; or business broadband cuts off an independent hotel for 72 hours in peak booking season. All are real cases.

Shrewd SME-owners will empathise in anticipation of the business losses experienced – doubtless exacerbated by a large bucket of 'bad PR'. But hold those fatalistic shrugs. You can handle this stuff – really.

## Risk mapping

First, if you've never done it, convene all your key staff. Get them to map out the risks – excluding of course those uninsurable 'acts of God' and war – and plot the possibilities. Identify in each case: what and how something might go wrong; its effects on the overall business; and your best response. This 'cool reflection' step alone

puts you ahead. Try it with your largest customer on one phone, the local paper on another and a fireman shouting at you. Note incidentally, how much crisis media coverage is devoted to companies' alleged failures to anticipate.

### Who wants to know – and how?

Crisis rumours have always spread quickly. They got faster with all-day local radio and rolling 24-hour TV news channels. Today, online and social media run near real time. To paraphrase: it's like watching yourself not be able to think. So, second, map out now all likely interested parties (stakeholders in the jargon), back up your records and identify how you would engage them. For example, your hotel's lost broadband and its clever e-commerce booking system, but you should still have third-party access to re-route from web to phones and text messaging. Similarly, your warehouse is ashes but be the first to tell. Have someone calling/texting all your customers immediately. And contact the local newspaper yourself with your version and ask for their help. Note: there's always another way to communicate and research shows clearly that a crisis well- and quickly-handled offers the silver-lining of a customer satisfaction and loyalty bonus.

### What do I say?

Finally companies in crisis often get into communications contortions. On one side, understandably they fear to acknowledge, or apologise for, the full scope of crisis, perhaps compounded by legal concerns. On the other, they will make undeliverable commitments just to re-assure people. Actually the truth is a great starting point. And until you do know the truth, whatever the pressure, don't guess or provide empty comments. Better by far to promise a clear update in three hours' time than to guess wrongly now. Good crisis teams work step-by-step. They clearly refer backwards and forwards at each stage. That way they build confidence, trust and credibility.

And finally a special word to owners of small and growing businesses. Have an agreed process that will allow your firm's crisis response to action without you. If the best plan has to wait 12 hours (even 12 minutes) before you can be tracked down, it's probably worthless. Crises are everywhere and they wait for no-one.

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