

Crisis – what crisis?

Louise Beeson suggests ten top tips to minimise the damage a bad story can make to a firm's reputation.



By Louise Beeson

As those firms that found themselves in the spotlight during the recent 'spate' of allegedly fraudulent partner sackings, not to mention the 'hackgate' saga can attest, all publicity isn't always good publicity. A snowballing issue requires careful handling to minimise the reputational damage. Here are ten top communications tips they might have borne in mind:-

1 TAKE CONTROL ASAP

Facts are often in short supply at the outset of a crisis but a quick response is essential to avoid appearing paralysed. Don't forget the power of a holding statement. That can be infinitely preferable to a vacuum, defensive 'no-comment' or worse giving robust denials which you subsequently have to row back from. Admitting those areas you can't control is ok if you seek understanding for the reasons they are not controllable.

2 ESTABLISH AN INTERNAL WORKING PARTY

Issues are usually complex. They will often have an HR, compliance, legal or management dimension. Don't necessarily accept the word of a single partner trying to brush something under the carpet. Ensure the communications team has a seat at the table in the resolution of an issue as well as its presentation.

3 SCRIPTS

Make sure your script is plausible and think

through how best to deploy it for different stakeholders at each stage. It may be wise to brief all staff if a sensitive media article or twitter rumours are brewing, with a reactive partner-led approach to client queries being sufficient. Later you may decide to write proactively to all clients or set up a webpage dedicated to explaining your position. Update and adjust your script as the issue develops to satisfy today's voracious 24/7 media and to be seen to be making progress.

4 NOMINATE YOUR PUBLIC FACE CAREFULLY

Your chosen spokesperson can be very telling – a female press officer during a sex discrimination case can be valuable for example; fielding the head of comms suggests an issue is really serious. Ensure the firm has an effective policy on who is permitted to speak to the media and that this is adhered to. Save your managing partner for the appropriate moment or a 'lessons learned' interview after the event.

5 CHECK YOUR INSURANCE POLICY

Most PR people will counsel that honesty and transparency is the best policy in a problem situation and key to regaining trust, but lawyers will warn to beware legal liability issues. Try to find an acceptable middle way – expressing regret is sometimes a useful alternative to a stark 'we ballsed up' apology. Adopting a humble tone rather than an arrogant attitude often goes a long way.

6 ESTABLISH LINES OF COMMUNICATION WITH OTHER AFFECTED PARTIES

Whether regulators, the police, another firm connected somehow to the matter or a former employee. This needn't mean collusion but giving a heads-up to expect a tricky journalist call or being up to the minute on what they are saying can be very helpful.

7 BEWARE GROUP-THINK

You may consider you're doing a great job but others may see it differently without full recourse to the facts. Even the most experienced communicators should take outside advice. Define the adviser's role clearly however. Are they front line or behind the scenes, to fight the fire or plan the road ahead? This will very much depend on the issue at hand and in-house capabilities. Beware the ambulance chasing PR firm who charges emergency rates for a vague brief!

8 EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Crisis planning is a valid exercise but it is, of course, rare that a company has ever rehearsed for the crisis that actually happens. Novel situations and surprise twists are par for the course. It's most important therefore to have the right infrastructure and processes in place which will enable you to respond.

9 PERCEPTION IS ALL

A cliché but true. It is often how you are seen to handle a crisis that counts as much as the actual dealing with the original problem or transgression. So grapple well if you want to engender the respect and confidence of internal and outside observers.

10 LESSONS LEARNED

Finally, again without necessarily admitting liability, it's possible to acknowledge that rehabilitation after a crisis requires a reinvention of standards, policies, procedures and investment in an area to improve things for the future. Don't forget to show this virtuous circle after the heat of the battle subsides to protect your firm's longer term reputation.

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