
RULES OF THE ROAD

These guidelines to crisis management were outlined by Harlan Teller, Executive Managing Director, Hill and Knowlton, the world's second largest PR company, on their website (www.hillandknowlton.com/top10.htm). They provide an insight into the strategies organisations use to deal with problems which can damage their reputation.

Rule 1

Take responsibility

This is not the same as accepting blame. The fact of the matter is, if your name is on a toaster, for example, it doesn't matter whether the company that made the connections for it caused the toaster to blow up. Your name is on the product, so you're responsible. Your brand equity is wrapped up in the logo and people want to know what you're going to do about it. And people want you to accept responsibility, whether you're actually to blame for it or not. There is a difference. The public wants companies to step up to bat and accept responsibility.

Rule 2

Recognize the difference between bad publicity and a crisis and calibrate your response accordingly

If you have a bad or embarrassing story in the paper, even if it is about an incident that is somewhat embarrassing, it doesn't mean that it's a full-blown crisis. It could very well be bad publicity that will blow over. You can make it worse by overreacting and creating your own publicity, giving a dying story new life. So recognize the difference and get some help in recognizing that difference.

Rule 3

Use research to determine how to respond

This is directly related to my last point. One of the most effective things that we do is use polling to understand what consumers are thinking about a particular crisis situation and what they think the company ought to do. A lot of times we've used research data to plan a response. And a lot of times we'll find that what the company thinks is a crisis is indeed only bad publicity and you get to that conclusion by doing research.

Rule 4

Recruit and use third parties to speak on your behalf

Third parties are becoming critically important. Given the landscape that shows lack of trust on the part of large institutions like big business, it is very important to have other people, hopefully friends, saying the things you want to say about yourself. They are more credible than you are.

Rule 5

Treat the media as conduits, not enemies

Again, they've got a job to do. You can do one of two things. You can hunker in the bunker and let them use other sources, hostile third parties, people with axes to grind, bones to pick, people who have an interest in giving you trouble – or you can deal forthrightly with the media yourself. We advise the latter.

Rule 6

Assume you'll be sued

It doesn't make any difference what you do, how you act, whether you accept blame, take blame, take responsibility or don't take responsibility, you are going to be sued. So the issue will then become, how did you behave and what was your conduct all about? We have been in situations where the way a company handled the crisis and how it behaved enabled that company to avoid punitive damages in a lawsuit. So, again, openness in communications can actually help you in the litigation process. But assume you're going to be sued, and don't act on the basis that somehow you can avoid it.

Rule 7

Watch the web as closely as the traditional media

40 million people out there could be chatting away about your situation, spreading information or misinformation. So you must have an internet monitoring service in place to make sure that you're seeing not only what the traditional media is saying, but also what's going on in chat rooms and on the web.

Rule 8

Demonstrate concern, care and empathy

You want to be sympathetic. You want to empathize. People will not listen to your rational arguments about what happened and why it happened until you get past the emotionalism of the moment. And the way you get by the emotionalism of the moment is to empathize with the people who have been affected.

Rule 9

Take the first 24 hours very, very seriously

I was involved with a client that did all the right things, but the perception of that company and how it managed the crisis was shaped in the first 24 hours. During that critical time period, they were defensive. They alleged that an investigation against the company was politically motivated. They used an outside attorney to be their spokesperson as opposed to speaking on their behalf and for all the good that the company did following that first 24 hours, its reputation was already damaged and the perception of how it handled that crisis was framed by what was done and said in the first 24 hours.

Rule 10

Begin your crisis management program right now by doing the things you need to do to build your reputational assets

Corporate reputation does matter in a time of crisis.