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Tarred with someone else's brush

Craig McGuire - 17 Aug 2006 11:00

Even though a crisis might not be your fault, it still may require you to respond.

Sometimes wars break out, cows go mad, and things just go plain wrong. When disaster strikes, on any scale, it can affect people far beyond the origin of the event.

Consider the ongoing war in Iraq. Some favor it, some are fervently against it. But, political beliefs notwithstanding, most agree that it's no fun to have to pay \$3 a gallon for gas.

Before he was an SVP and crisis counselor at Manning Selvage & Lee, Larry Shushan spent more than a decade in Chevron's PR department. At the PR helm for Chevron during the first Persian Gulf War that forced US refiners to increase gas and diesel prices, Shushan knows all about being besieged by hundreds of calls from reporters, state attorneys general, and customers, all outraged by perceived gouging.

"This crisis was [very] similar to the current oil price run-up in terms of the way geopolitical forces affect an entire industry's business," Shushan says.

Shushan's advice is to be different. With a strategy built around differentiation, Chevron went out and communicated aggressively, starting with a news conference led by then-CEO Ken Derr and continuing with live appearances on national radio and television by senior management.

Results included a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that helped explain and amplify the economic realities at work, and favorable attention for Chevron versus other energy companies that were not as forthcoming.

But differentiating yourself from competitors is just part of it. During any industry crisis, it's vital to be active and quick.

Prior to joining The Integer Group as an account director, Sharyl Sauer was the executive director of industry communications for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). On December 23, 2003, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or "mad cow disease," may have been discovered in one US cattle herd, but it affected an entire \$50 billion industry made up of more than 1 million businesses operating in all 50 states. While losses from the incident eventually topped \$4.5 billion, it could have been worse.

"From a PR position, BSE was about the perceived safety of the US beef supply," Sauer says. "The NCBA had to communicate that the US supply was safe and that federal monitoring and regulatory systems had worked to prevent the disease from entering the human food supply."

In such situations, Sauer prescribes prompt reaction and transparency. She says you must be

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readily available with spokespersons for interviews and offer accurate information to consumers, media, producers, and other stakeholders.

"Generally, take the stance that it would be impossible to over-communicate," says Sauer.

During the 2001 anthrax scare, caused by incidences of spores detected in US mail, Barry Epstein, president/ CEO of his eponymous Boca Raton, FL, firm, had a client who made a mailing to South America. Caught up in the hysteria, one recipient suspected it contained the deadly substance.

Regardless of the fact that when the suspect letter was examined by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta it tested negative, the damage was already done.

"I was inundated with calls from media throughout South America and locally in South Florida," Epstein says. "We set up a separate hotline phone number and message, and [were] on-site to answer media inquiries. We were able to defuse the situation effectively by not stonewalling and inviting media in to view the mail-room operations."

Guidelines should be established with the CEO, including talking points for the media, Epstein says. The PR point person needs unfettered access to senior management and the C-suite needs to know that person's role, especially when it comes to routing media inquiries.

And, just because someone stands close to the flames does not make them a firefighter. PR pros should not speak for senior management without authorization and should never speculate. The PR team should have a crisis plan in place and designate a response team that can be immediately activated and knows exactly what to do. It can be hard to persuade senior executives to commit to planning for a crisis that may not emanate from your company, but it's vital to persuade them that by being in the same area of business, their company may still find itself in the spotlight.

Technique Tips

Do

Find out what happened and quickly pass along vital information to key leaders internally

Understand your stakeholders' concerns and quickly provide the facts they need

Develop a crisis response strategy before you need it

Don't

Speculate and start communicating without a solid grasp of what happened and why

Be a hero. Save the spotlight for senior management

Stonewall. Disseminating information early and often is critical

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