



10 Reasons Why Your Crisis Communications Plans
are Outdated by Eric Dezenhall

Most crisis communications strategies are based on old formulas and predictable stimuli. But technological and political evolution has required sharp crisis managers to readjust their thinking. In damage control, as in warfare throughout the ages, the weapons arrayed against corporate interests have advanced beyond the tactics required to defend against them. Here are the 10 most important reasons your crisis management models are probably out of date.

1 MIXING CORPORATE MISSIONS

Remember when the business of business was business? Increasingly, companies of all sizes are involving themselves in a variety of 'social responsibility' initiatives. Whether the initiative is focused on environmental, health, or social issues, it's a new dynamic for crisis managers who must try to balance the sometimes contradictory goals of 'social responsibility' and providing high investor returns through free market principles.

2 SCIENCE REDEFINED

Companies often turn to science to validate the value or safety of a product. Just find someone in a white lab coat to proclaim your product safe and voila, it's safe. No more. Scientists today are coming under increased scrutiny and those funded by industry sources can expect to get a hard time for it. Industry-funded research is now quickly and almost universally considered tainted. On the other side of the same coin, almost anyone who claims expertise in science can have such expertise conferred upon them by friendly activists and institutions that have nothing to do with science but have targeted your interests.

3 THE MUSCLE OF MONEY

It used to be corporations had PR resources, legal counsel and lobbying muscle that far outweighed the opposition. But during the past several decades, advocacy groups, non-profit groups and other organizations have built huge financial and legal resources, making them more competitive and formidable. One estimate shows the top 10 environmental non-governmental organizations have combined revenues exceeding \$10 billion. It's no longer realistic to think you can win a financial war of attrition with the opposition, so new tactics have to be developed.

4 MEDIA LIGHTWEIGHTS

As an industry, the news business is getting really tough with no end in sight. Once the financial loss leaders at television networks, newsrooms today are facing growing profit pressures. News is a labor-intensive industry and we're seeing more and more young reporters with less experience—who are cheaper to hire—covering more stories with less research and more errors. This trend in journalism, combined with the nearly ubiquitous camera cell phones and hand-held video cams, means corporations face exposure to all manner of misanthropes and maladroits who can make trouble for you.

5 THE WALL STREET SHAKEDOWN

Activists don't just picket offices with signs anymore. They are increasingly using capital as leverage to get their way with industries they don't like. A good illustration of this is animal rights activists, who recently started targeting Wall Street traders and bankers with a number of intimidation tactics designed to make them distance themselves from firms conducting research involving animals. With companies pledged to deliver profits to shareholders, look for this trend to grow.

6 PAJAMA-CLAD BLOGGERS

The news media ain't what it used to be and we're not just talking about the proliferation of young reporters working for lower pay than their predecessors. On-line media, Internet blogs, website to share video and other new media are flexing their muscles alongside the networks and big city newspapers. Perry White is now a pajama-clad blogger—a "citizen journalist"—and some have breathtaking impact. Remember Dan Rather?

He had a comfortable job as anchor of the CBS Evening News until the Internet media exposed the phony documents used in a 2004 story about George W. Bush's military service.

7 COMEDY V. NEWS

Network news audiences are steadily declining and aging and the same goes for many national and large metropolitan newspapers. So where are people going for their news? More people, particular younger consumers, get their "news" from Jay Leno, David Letterman and other late-night comics. Cable comedy shows like "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" are also rapidly growing in popularity. Getting your side of the story into this kind of narrative is tough; if a corporate executive is uneasy staring down a network reporter, you should see what happens on the set with Jon Stewart. This requires a whole different mindset demanding a more self-deprecating approach and the ability to laugh at oneself.

8 CO-OPTING YOUR BRAND

Corporations understand the value of branding and so do today's activists. That's why a group of people who oppose, say, artificial hormones used in dairy cows, won't promote their message by railing against hypodermic needles and harmless compounds with several dozen letters in their name. These days, smart activists will make their case by taking hold of a venerable brand symbol, like Starbucks, which used to use milk from such cows until they were targeted by self-proclaimed health advocates. Powerful brands take years to cultivate and activists love to piggy-back on that because you've already paid for it. It's also a great fundraiser for these groups by providing a Goliath for David to slay.

9 WANING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

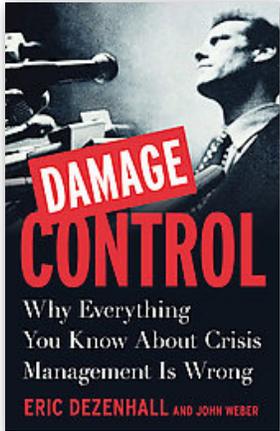
Common sense suggests the creators of this intellectual property are protected from infringement, but it's not as simple or easy as you might think. Copying music, film, software, books and intellectual works is easy, quick and dirt cheap, and the perpetrators stand a pretty good chance of getting away with it. If Napoleon Dynamite boosts the latest software from Microsoft, most people would regard it as a victimless crime, so don't expect a whole lot of sympathy if your products are pirated. Corporations are facing new pressure to share their knowledge at a reduced rate of return and navigating the waters of altruism is tricky business.

10 LEAKING LIKE A SIEVE

A lot of corporate crises are caused from outside forces but many more come from within and they can be just as devastating. Disgruntled former employees seeking 15 minutes of fame and digital busybodies posting sensitive information in Internet chat rooms can create all sorts of uncomfortable threats and dealing with them requires a new approach to internal communications.

The evolution of technology and communications techniques has led to this stage so far and there's no telling when it will go over time. The key to beating back these attacks means crisis managers will have to be more nimble and creative in combating these new risks. 📱





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