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## CRISIS MANAGEMENT

# Uber & Apple Caught in the Crossfire: What to Do When Ensnared in a Crisis Not of Your Making

One of the best-known PR lessons for brands is that it's a good idea to have a crisis plan in place since no organization is immune to a crisis situation, as PR pros have argued repeatedly in these pages. But what can and should brands do when they find themselves in the crosshairs of someone else's crisis or in a crisis not directly related to them?

An obvious example is the recent case in Kalamazoo, MI, where **Jason Brian Dalton** allegedly killed six people and in-

jured two others in incidents on Feb. 20. **Uber** became involved in the story when it was learned that Dalton drove for the company. In fact, it is alleged he handled fares before and after the killings.

Although it remained silent for a time on the incident, Uber eventually said, "We are horrified and heartbroken at

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## LEADERSHIP

# How PR Pros Can Turn Smart CEOs Into Dynamic Communicators

Corporate directors and shareholders assess performance primarily on business and financial results. They also have an obligation to evaluate leaders, particularly chief executives, on their ability to inspire organizations to achieve great feats, such as rallying people to make game-changing products or to deliver superb customer experiences. Leadership communication is as vital to organizational success as smart people, technology advantage and strong capital funding.

Savvy communication professionals invest time thinking about the toughest business challenges their leaders face, from outmaneuvering competitors to addressing operational vulnerabilities. They must think that way to add value to the

enterprise. C-suite executives and operational leaders value communication strategies that drive business outcomes and provide solutions to problems.

And if we are really doing our jobs, we must consider things that can go wrong as well as right for our companies or clients' organizations. More awards are given in our industry for breakthrough marketplace programs than for helping brands avert damaging situations. But crisis mitigation or prevention through early risk detection is critical, too. Ask any CEO who's experienced an enterprise-threatening event.

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# Tips for Enhancing Leadership Communications

Here are some insights from a recent global study by **FleishmanHillard**, *The Authenticity Gap*, which can help you drive those business-focused strategies:

- ▶ Many different stakeholders and sources shape expectations, and they vary dramatically by geography and industry. To be relevant and authentic, leaders must stay in touch with rapidly shifting expectations of customers, employees and other stakeholders.
- ▶ The way management behaves and a company's relationship with society overall may matter as much as the quality and utility of a company's products and services.
- ▶ Our *expectations* for management to do the right thing are on the rise, but our *experience* is on the decline. In this age of growing mistrust of institutions, organizational leaders become de facto chief credibility officers. They must appreciate the often-difficult challenge of sustaining trusted relationships by behaving authentically with stakeholders. (Is there a reason for PR to exist without relationship-building at its core?)

Leaders are expected to be dynamic communicators because of the iconic stages on which they perform. But they need not be naturally gifted, just thoughtful about what they say and how they say it. Coaching from skilled communicators can ensure leaders communicate frequently, sincerely, unambiguously, positively (but with balance), memorably and contextually. In today's hyperconnected world, leaders' words can travel far beyond intended context to other audiences, sometimes with unintended consequences. But the more authentic and credible leaders are, the more benefit of the doubt their comments may receive even when misperceived.

Let's examine three ways that leaders can extend their influence and clear the way for the organizations they lead to achieve greater success:

## 1. Set the example for a customer-focused organization.

Even if customer focus is the domain of teams serving specific customers, leaders can exhort everyone in the enterprise to play a role in improved customer experiences. That requires constant example, by storytelling and frequent communication ranging from town halls to leadership skills training to thematic tweets. Well-respected companies prove this daily with their coordinated, collaborative activity all directed at their customers.

Communicators can drive these customer-first behavioral models, while encouraging CEOs and other leaders to visit the real world of retail stores, factory floors, assembly lines and customer locations to hear and share mission-relevant stories. Important in all this is frequent leadership messaging and big-picture context to employees across the enterprise about the important work they do.

Owned communication channels have made easier the internal information-sharing processes. But leaders must still

be visible, in good times and bad, in person or webcasted, keeping people focused on the goals, values and ultimate "we matter" purpose of the organization.

## 2. Stay in front of enterprise risks.

Nothing can disrupt a company like an unanticipated or mishandled problem marked by risks that have been ignored or underappreciated until one day the problem explodes. It could be a product safety flaw or deficiency, litigation, a data security breach, shareholder activism or festering customer dissatisfaction. Others may be longer-term risks, like a competitor gaining an advantage through some form of category disruption.

Leaders cannot emphasize risk identification enough. They must take time periodically from driving the business to huddle with their leadership teams and share worst potential nightmares. Once those potential risks are vetted, the communications team and other functional leaders can conduct exercises to build readiness and test reaction speed. (Where companies often fail in real situations is in their reaction time.) Public safety organizations do these drills routinely, and more companies should, too. Today, crisis-scenario simulations can be conducted globally and virtually through private platforms connecting key players who will be called upon in a real situation.

## Identify brand opportunity and enterprise risk by enhancing business intelligence systems.

We all know that it is not about big data or little data, but directional data—and well-examined insights that help focus corporate resources and actions that really matter. Communication and marketing executives often are at the wellhead of myriad sources of data. A common concern of global companies is geopolitical risk: terrorism, unfair or corrupt trade practices, onerous regulations, hostility expressed by exclusion or boycotts in unfriendly markets, etc.

Through their internal and external public affairs networks, companies and also NGOs must keep their intelligence antennae on constant alert for warning signs of either future trouble or opportunity. The communications team can design and operate a virtual situation room to monitor both the organization's intelligence sources and current events in real time, analyzing patterns in everything from social media chatter to what frontline company employees are seeing (sales associates) or hearing (customer service centers) that deserve stronger corporate attention.

Executives will inspire us not by simply communicating what they want accomplished, but also why it matters. They truly lead when we help them convey their principles, their passion and our shared purpose. ■

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