

Crisis Management PR

How to avoid, avert and alleviate reputational disasters.



A crisis for a business can take several forms, but many fit a simple model: something bad happens, someone shares the story, people talk about it, the reputation of the company or brand runs the risk of decline. If PR and branding are about laying the foundations for a company's values and continually building and maintaining its reputation, then crisis management is about making sure that the hard work doesn't get irreparably compromised.

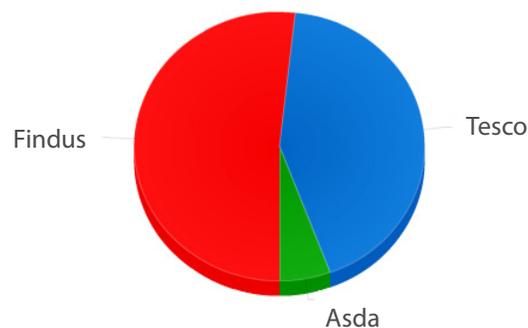
Since the management of a situation could make or break the brand and revenues of the company, it's no wonder that for a communications professional, the time spent responding to a crisis is likely to be among the most stressful. This whitepaper will highlight some of the good and bad ways to behave when disaster strikes. So what can we learn from the most high profile scandal of the year so far?

In recent weeks, the horsemeat scandal has dominated the news, and the 'industry-wide' nature of the issue has ensured that it's a talking point that has kept people interested. Ready-meal brands and supermarkets alike have fast fallen into disrepute when horsemeat was found in their produce. The way that a crisis can have a swift effect on revenue is apparent from this case, with frozen burger sales reported to be down as much as 43%, and 13% fewer supermarket shoppers stocking up on frozen meals.

Using Cision software, we found around 1.3 million mentions of horsemeat made in total across Twitter, Facebook and other social media channels during February. We honed in on three companies affected by the story, and found that they were mentioned in around 10% of the total social media mentions about horsemeat.

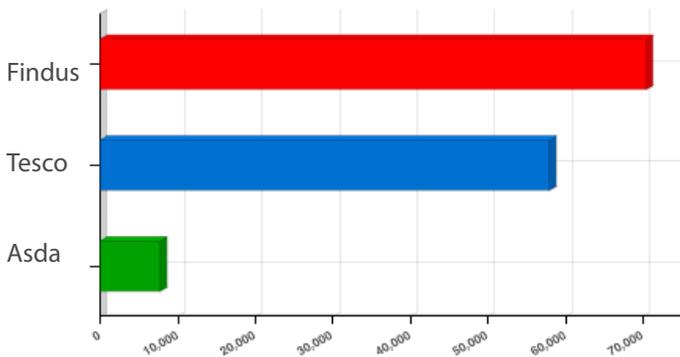
For some companies, the high profile nature of the scandal is something they've been able to use to their advantage, with well-timed advertisements from those who have long focused on promoting the wholesome content of their produce.

Brands with a watertight supply chain, or those who have confidently been claiming that 100% British beef is used in their produce, are in a position to use the situation to their advantage by emerging unscathed while using the high level of public interest to draw extra attention to their long standing campaigns. This is a great example of the long haul PR strategy coming good: when consumers feel they've been let down by so many providers and are looking for a new brand to trust, years of simple, subtle yet clear and consistent messages by hard-working PR teams have never seemed like a better idea.



Social media mentions about horsemeat of three affected companies by ratio.
Source: CisionPoint / Cision Social Media

For PR and communications professionals like you, staying on top of what people are saying about the brand you manage and making the right contribution to their conversations is of prime importance at all times, and in the case of staying prepared for a disaster it is crucial.



Number of social media mentions received about horsement by three affected companies. Source: CisionPoint / Cision Social Media

So what are the most important things to bear in mind at the crucial hour? Here are a few tips that will help you to respond and react quickly and smartly, with a little help from some useful time-saving tools:

Get organised

In order to respond in an effective and timely way to a crisis, your communications team will need to be a well-oiled machine. Agree on a process for risk assessment by determining which events will be treated as potential catalysts for a crisis and how likely they are to occur. Decide on the people with the right skills, knowledge and decision-making power to be called on to form a small crisis management team.

If disaster should strike, the priority should be to ensure that internal communications are not neglected before you start speaking to anyone outside of the organisation. If relevant, explain to employees, clients and other stakeholders what is being done to handle the problem and what you hope to achieve. Most importantly, make sure that anyone who may need to handle phone calls from clients or the media is up to speed.

In a busy office full of frantic people who are trying to multi-task, emails can easily be missed and it can be tricky to ensure that there's only one person dealing with each enquiry.

To avoid duplication, an easy-to-use CRM-style tool is essential. For a PR team of several people, a CRM module built into a PR software platform can aid workflow by making it easy to create and delegate specific tasks, split out responsibilities and ensure that the same communication is not accidentally dealt with twice.

Instant reaction

If you receive a comment from an unhappy customer, user or stakeholder you'll need to acknowledge it and respond quickly, perhaps with an apology.

A social media engagement console is the most efficient way to monitor and respond to everything that is being said and shared about your company or brand online. The real test is how quickly and effectively you react. In many cases you'll need to respond to individual comments in a public context, taking care not to alienate anyone and to stay consistent with your other messages. If you're talking to customers, don't forget to put your 'corporate hat' aside. It's more likely that the dissatisfied party will be prepared to adjust their viewpoint in the public context of social media if they receive a response that seems to come from a person rather than a faceless corporation. Offer a personal response wherever possible, rather than just a bland holding statement.

“Prepare a short snappy quote that summarises your position accurately”

Choosing to say nothing is a bad way to handle a crisis, but saying the wrong thing is worse. You'll need to agree on an accurate summary of the position you're taking quickly, especially in situations of broad public interest or industry-wide significance, when you may not have long before being approached by the media.

As you prepare to speak out, bear in mind that even if you elaborate on an issue, the journalist or reporter will be looking for a snappy sound-bite. Make sure you've got a concise quote ready that correctly represents the company's position, preferably one which could easily be shared on Twitter.

Be clear, honest and open; it's crucial that your messaging is straightforward for your customers to understand. Any lack of clarity however innocent may be misinterpreted as dishonesty by unhappy customers. Your statement must be clear and watertight, so that if you're asked to elaborate you can do so without seeming evasive or contradictory.

When it comes to communicating with customers and stakeholders, you'll need a powerful distribution tool to share your press release via email, social media or online newsrooms with SEO. Speed is crucial in making sure that your story is read by the right people while it is still relevant, and by using a platform that enables different types of distribution all at once, you'll save time and increase your chances of reaching people via the channel that they use most. By making it easy for others to share your content on sites such as Facebook, you'll be able to get your message in front of an even larger audience.

“If a crisis is affecting your competitors, monitor their coverage to find out what's gone wrong, and learn from it”

Stay up to speed

Even if the brand you're responsible for hasn't been compromised, an industry-wide crisis provides a great opportunity for valuable market research. What's gone down well with customers? What's rubbed them up the wrong way? All this information could be very useful if you ever find yourself in a similar position.

Consider whether the crisis that's affecting competitors could begin to affect your brand in the onslaught of complaints. To prepare a statement 'just in case', think about the USPs, ensuring that they are all relevant to the product, incident or issue that's under discussion.

If you think you can use a competitor's disaster to the company's overall advantage, you may want to put together a campaign that highlights strengths in light of the situation. This kind of opportunism requires a great deal of caution, especially if you are encouraging people to discuss your brand on social media. Once a hashtag or discussion point volunteered by you is out there it can't be taken back, and could backfire if you haven't done your research into your overall reputation

before you start. To make sure you're making the right decision, you could use a monitoring tool to take a look at the overall sentiment of your most recent mentions. This information should continually be fed into your risk planning and should inform whether or not it's a good time for a campaign.

After the event

Often the most demoralising aspect to the aftermath of a crisis is having to find quantifiable answers to questions like "how much damage did this actually do?", and "how can we handle the situation better next time?". You could track the damage to reputation by reporting on factors such as your share of voice in the media, and ratio of positive to negative tweets both 6 months before the crisis, and 6 months after. Using reporting tools, you'll be able to link your coverage to how the crisis has affected the business in real terms. Tracking share prices and sales in the year after the event, compared with the previous year could be a good way to validate your findings.

When you examine the results, don't forget to take other factors into account, which could be unrelated to the crisis itself. For instance, would you expect a lull in positive buzz around the brand you manage at a certain time of year?

Ultimately, as with any other campaign, you'll need to consider whether your crisis management strategy has achieved ROI. To do this, you'll need to decide whether your strategy is directly responsible for improvements such as regain of market share and reputation upturn, and to what extent it provided mitigation of the situation. Through this kind of analysis, you'll be able to present key findings that can be used to decide how to refine your crisis management next time around, should the worst happen again.

Effective resolution of a crisis involves great people who can make the right call, at the right time. Having the right systems in place for assessing the damage and monitoring progress is key to enabling communications professionals to perform efficiently.

To find out about how Cision can help you with your crisis management strategy, call us on 0800 358 3110 or email us at info.uk@cision.com.